

Diplomatic Communication between the popes and the Khan until 1270s

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1. Three phases of papal-Mongol relations

Salimbene of Parma (1221-ca. 1290), a Franciscan chronicler, tells us in his chronicle about the invasion of the Tartars. For Salimbene, it was the fifth and last invasion into Italy of various ethnic groups after those of the Vandals, Huns, Goths, and Langobards. It is true that the Mongols did not reach the peninsula of Italy, but they came as far as the Adriatic Sea, so fear of the Tartars would have penetrated deep into Italy. Salimbene points out three events in papal-Mongol relations. The first is rumors of the Tartars at the time of the pontificate of Gregory IX (ca. 1240), the second, the dispatch of John of Plano Carpini by Pope Innocent IV (1245), and the third, the mission of Gerard and his Franciscan colleagues (1278).¹ This perception of Salimbene about the papal-Mongol relations is remarkable. Each of the three events represents three phases of the papal reaction in the face of the Mongols: the rumors, the diplomatic policy, and the religious mission.

The Mongol invasion to Europe occurred in the 1240s. The Mongol army under the command of Batu, son of Jochi and grandson of Chinggis Khan, approached Eastern Europe after conquering certain Russian principalities, including the Principality of Kiev. The Mongol army split into two, one part of it invading eastern Poland at the end of 1240. This army defeated the allied forces of the Poles and the Germans led by Henry II the Pious, Duke of Silesia, at the Battle of Liegnitz in April 1241 and then joined Batu's other army in Hungary. Meanwhile, Batu defeated King Béla IV of Hungary in the Battle of Móhi, causing the latter to flee.

The earliest preserved document of Gregory IX on the crusade against the Mongols is a letter to Béla and Bishop of Vác (April 16, 1241). Three days after, Gregory ordered the abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Heiligenkreuz near Vienna to proclaim an anti-Mongol crusade. Gregory IX declared a similar bull to the mendicant orders in Germany and the Dominicans in Vienna and others.² We also find information about the papal disposition in proclaiming a crusade in the chronicle of the Abbey of Heiligenkreuz and the Franciscan chronicles of Erfurt.³ There is,

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¹ Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, hrsg. von Giuseppe Scalia, Bari 1966 (Scrittori d'Italia, 232), Bd. 1, S. 299-302; *Cronica fratris Salimbene de Adam ordinis Minorum*, hrsg. von Oswaldus Holder-Egger, Hannover 1905-1913 (Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptorum, 32), S. 209-210: *Et nota, quod tempore pape Gregorii noni primo insonuerunt rumores de Tattaris. Secundo papa Innocentius quartus fratrem Iohannem de Plano-Carpi misit ad eos. Tertio papa Iohannes XXI. Iterum misit ad eos sex fratres Minores.*

however, no evidence that any armed action was actually taken against the Mongols.

After the death of Gregory IX (August 1241) and the only-two-week-long pontificate of Celestine IV followed by a year and a half of vacancy, Innocent IV (1243-1245) ascended the apostolic throne. When Pope Innocent IV held the First Council of Lyon in 1245—the year following the fall of Jerusalem caused by the Khwarezmians—he encouraged the attendees to use all available means to defend Europe.⁴ To this end, the pope had sent in advance, in the spring of 1245, at least three embassies to the Mongols: the Franciscans went to the court of the Great Khan, and the Dominicans went to Persia. The dispatch of these embassies was, however, not so much of missionary character as diplomatic with the aim of protecting Europe against the threat of the Mongols.

The Franciscan friars, John of Plano Carpini and Lawrence of Portugal, joined at Breslau by another Franciscan, Benedict of Poland, passed Eastern Europe and Kiev and met Batu at a Volga riverfront site to deliver a papal letter. In this letter, the pope encouraged Batu to abandon violence against the Christians.⁵ Batu told them to go to Karakorum, where a new Great Khan would be elected. The papal embassy arrived at the summer court of the Great Khan near Karakorum in July 1246. Güyüg, the eldest son of Ögödei and grandson of Chinggis Khan, who took over the khanate in August 1246, met the Franciscans and gave them a letter of response, though with an authoritative tone, in November.⁶ John returned to Lyon in the autumn of 1247, and his *History of the Mongols* is very valuable as a report of the situation of the Mongol Empire at the time.⁷

Other diplomatic channels emerged between Western Europe and the Mongols. For example,

² *Regesta diplomatica nec non epistolaria Bohemiae et Moraviae*, pars 1, hrsg. von Karel Jaromír Erben, Pragae 1855, Nr. 1043, S. 489-490; *MGH Epp*, 1, 822, S. 722-723; *Codex diplomaticus et epistolaris regni Bohemiae*, hrsg. von J. Šebánek, S. Dušková, Pragae 1962, IV/1, 311, pp. 501-502; *Les registres de Grégoire IX*, hrsg. von Lucien Auvray, Paris 1896-1955, Nr. 6073-6075. On the bull to Vienna, see Christoph T. Maier, *Preaching the Crusades. Mendicant Friars and the Cross in the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge 1998, S. 60. Peter Jackson, “The Crusade Against the Mongols (1241),” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991), S. 1-18.

³ *Continuatio Sancti Gregorii Secunda*, ed. D. W. Wattenbach, in *MGH SS*, 9, Hannover 1851, pp. 640-641: *Quod malum cum percepisset papa Gregorius, tactus dolore et volens succurrere sanctae ecclesiae tibi tibi, sed non deficient, misit legatos suos predicare et dare crucem in remissionem omnium peccatorum. Quod multi cum gaudio suscipientes, reges, duces, episcopi, comites, nobiles et ignobiles, senes cum iunioribus, partabant vindictam facere in filios diffidente; Chronica minor auctore minorita Erphordensi*, hrsg. von O. Holder-Egger, *MGH SS*, 24, Hannover 1879, S. 199: *Contra illos [i.e., the Mongols] Gregorius papa fecit crucem predicari.*

⁴ Canon II-4 of the First Council of Lyon. Antonio García y García et al., eds., *The General Councils of Latin Christendom. From Constantinople IV to Pavia-Siena (869-1424)*, Turnhout 2013 (Conciliorum oecumenicorum generaliumque decreta, II/1), p. 240.

⁵ Karl-Ernst Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen der Päpste zu islamischen und mongolischen Herrschern im 13. Jahrhundert anhand ihres Briefwechsels*, Vaticanstadt 1981 (Studi e testi, 291), Nr. 21.

⁶ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 22.

King Louis IX of France also dispatched emissaries. When Louis stayed at Nicosia in Cyprus to advance toward Egypt at the head of the so-called Seventh Crusade, he accepted an envoy from the Mongol army resident in Persia and entrusted a letter to the Great Khan Güyüg to three Dominican friars, including Andrew of Longjumeau. The Dominican party departed from Nicosia in January 1249 and was accepted by Oghul Qaimish, principal wife of Güyüg Khan and regent after the death of her husband in 1248, before returning to Caesarea in Palestine with a letter from the regent to Louis IX in April 1251. The letter was to demand the submission of the French king to her. Another example is the journey of William of Rubruck, who was a member of the Franciscan mission and famous for his travel account.⁸ This party departed from Palestine in 1253 with letters from Louis IX and Pope Innocent IV. They traveled via Constantinople and the Crimea and, after meeting Batu in Sarai, the mission had an audience with the Great Khan Möngke near Karakorum. They headed back in 1254 with a letter to Louis IX and arrived at Tripoli in the summer of the following year. This letter also urged the king and his people to submit to the Great Khan.

2. The curia and the Il-khans

It was Qubilai, grandson of Chinggis Khan and brother of Möngke and Hülegü, who won the struggle for succession after the death of Möngke Khan in 1259. Qubilai became the Great Khan, but he was actually a ruler of the Yuan Dynasty, a Mongol kingdom in China. At that time, the Golden Horde became an independent kingdom. Hülegü went to Persia by order of Möngke, destroyed the Abbasid Empire in 1258, and established the Il-khanate, a Mongol state in Persia. Qubilai did not have enough strength to negotiate with the European world because he devoted his full efforts to conquering China—he attempted to conquer Japan in 1274 and 1281 in vain. As a result, it was not Qubilai or Yuan but the Il-khans who maintained a relationship with the Western states in the midst of conflicts with the Islamic powers.

Change of situation

In this situation, the relationship between the West and the Mongols began to change. It is true that around 1260 Pope Alexander IV (1254-1261) issued letters throughout Latin Christendom expressing a fear of disaster at the hands of the Mongols (*Tartari*), which was bursting forth as if from the hidden confines of hell⁹; but after the Il-khanid state lost Syria because of the defeat

⁷ Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, “Ystoria Mongalorum”, in: *Storia dei Mongoli*, hrsg. von Enrico Menestò et al., Spoleto 1989 (Biblioteca del “Centro per il collegamento degli studi medievali e umanistici nell’Università di Perugia”, 1).

⁸ William of Rubruck, “Itinerarium,” in: *Sinica Franciscana*, hrsg. von Anastasius van den Wyngaert, Bd. 1, *Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV*, Quaracchi-Firenze 1929, S. 145-332.

at the Battle of 'Ain Jālūt against the Mamluks (September 1260), Hülegü pretended to be sympathetic towards Christianity, seeking the possibility of an alliance with the Western powers. In his letter to Louis IX, he designated himself as “kindly exalter of the Christian faith.”¹⁰ Such a pretense was an excellent excuse to make the Westerners rely on him. According to an Armenian chronicler, Vardan Arewelc‘i (d. 1271), Hülegü told him at the court that he had been a Christian since birth and through his mother Sorqaqtani Beki.¹¹ Hülegü never seems, however, to have become a Christian.¹² Hülegü’s pretense to be pro-Christian can be explained in that he intended to rally support from the Latin Westerners.

Abaqa

The second Il-khan of Persia, Abaqa (1234-1282, r. 1265-1282), was in a state of war with the army of the Mamluk sultan Baybars (r. 1260-1277), who was launching attacks against the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum.¹³ In this situation, Abaqa began to dispatch envoys continuously to the European states, looking for an alliance. In the context of the rise of the Mamluk Sultanate, the

⁹ *Regesta pontificum romanorum inde ab a. post Christum natum MCXCVIII ad a. MCCCIV*, hrsg. von August Potthast, Berlin 1874-1875, Nr. 17964 (17 November 1260); Thomas Rymer, *Foedera, conventiones, literae, et cujuscunque generis acta publica*, 3rd edn., Hagae Comitum 1740, tom. I, pars II, S. 60-61. English translation in *Crusade and Christendom: Annotated Documents in Translation from Innocent III to the Fall of Acre, 1187-1291*, hrsg. von Jessalynn Bird, Edward Peters und James M. Powell, Philadelphia 2013, S. 319-323.

¹⁰ Paul Meyvaert, “An Unknown Letter from Hülegü, Il-Khan of Persia, to King Louis IX of France,” *Viator* 11 (1980), S. 253; vgl. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, S. 174.

¹¹ Robert W. Thomson, “The Historical Compilation of Vardan Arewelc‘i,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989), S. 220: *One day he made a great open space and removed far away all the army. With two men only he spoke with us for a long time. From his birth and through his mother, he said, he was a Christian. Although a nurse brought up the child, when he reached maturity he [still] loved his own mother; cf. Jackson, The Mongols and the West, p. 176. I note here another episode referring to Hülegü’s pro-Christian attitude. An Armenian chronicler Grigor Aknerc‘i writes about Hülegü’s religion policy. Robert P. Blake und Richard N. Frye, “History of the Nation of the Archers, by Grigor of Akanc,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 12/3-4 (1949), S. 343: *He loved the Christian folk more than the infidels. He liked the Christians so much that he took pigs for the one-yearly tribute from the Armenians—100,000 shoats, and he sent two thousand pigs to every Arab city, . . . Every Arab man, were he great or small, who did not eat the flesh of swine was decapitated.* Another English version in: *Grigor Aknerts‘i’s History of the Nation of Archers*, online translation by Robert Bedrosian, 2003, Kap. 12: *He loved the Christians more than the foreigners. He liked the Christians so much that he took as one-yearly tax from the Armenians one hundred thousand swine and sent two thousand[s] of them to each Tachik city with the order that the Tachiks be swineherds and that every Saturday they wash the pigs with soap and, aside from their daily feeding, give them almonds and dates morning and evening. Those Tachik men great and small who did not eat pork were decapitated.**

¹² According to another of Vardan’s sentence. Thomson, “The Historical Compilation,” S. 222.

¹³ Baybars marched from Syria and raided the Mongol-dominated Seljuk Sultanate of Rum in Anatolia, and then attacked the Mongols in the Battle of Elbistan in April 15, 1277.

Il-khans seem to have abandoned hegemonic policy such as unilaterally demanding submission of the Westerners to them. Instead, the Il-khans began to treat them as equal negotiating partners. In late 1266 or early 1267, the Il-khan sent envoys with letters to the West and they reached Pope Clement IV (1265-1268) and King James I of Aragon (1213-1276). Abaqa suggested in a letter to the pope, now lost, that the Western armies should join with his and Michael VIII Palaiologos' (r. 1258-1282) armies in order to attack the Mamluks from both sides. Clemens IV dispatched a letter with an Aragonese envoy, James Alarich of Perpignan, to Abaqa.¹⁴ This letter shows a papal attitude towards the Mongols both religious and diplomatic. In it, Clement expressed his joy that Abaqa had turned toward Christianity, and then reported that the kings of France and Navarre with a number of nobles and soldiers had taken the cross. In response to this papal letter, Abaqa wrote another letter in 1268 and dispatched it with James Alarich and two of his own envoys, namely the custodian of the Church at his court, Salomon *arkaoun* (*erke'un*, indicating a Christian living in Asia) and a certain Nekpei. We can read that the focus of Abaqa's interest was, as ever, a joint campaign against the Muslims, although he makes an appeal that he is defending the Christians and churches.¹⁵ On the side of the West, Prince Edward of England was looking for a way to fight Sultan Baybars to conquer Syria and so dispatched an embassy to Abaqa in 1271. The latter, however, could not send troops at the request of Edward because Abaqa was then focusing on the war against the Golden Horde.

As for Abaqa's relationship with Christianity, he took Maria Palaiologina (Despina *Ḳātūn*), illegitimate daughter of the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, as one of his wives, and this marriage must have created a close relationship between the Il-khanate and the Byzantine Empire.

After a silence of six years, in 1274, Abaqa sent an embassy to Pope Gregory X (and Edward I of England). For six years, there survives no evidence of correspondence between popes and the Il-khan, although it was not the case of Aragon, France, or England.¹⁶ The envoys—David of Ashby, a Dominican who was once sent to Hülegü on behalf of the king of Jerusalem and Cyprus and stayed many years among the Mongols, and the notary and interpreter Ricardus—appeared at the Second Council of Lyon.¹⁷ Through the spokesman Ricardus, Abaqa expressed his intention to protect the Christians, following the will of his father Hülegü, and communicated the wish

¹⁴ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, no. 42; *Epistole et dictamina Clementis pape quarti*, hrsg. von Matthias Thumser (http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/fmi/arbeitsbereiche/ab_thumser/pdf/clemens.pdf), Nr. 375, S. 235-236. An outline of the lost letter of Abaqa can be reconstructed from this papal letter.

¹⁵ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 43; Eugène Tisserant, "Une lettre de l'Ilkhan de Perse Abaga, adressée en 1268 au Pape Clément IV," *Le Muséon* 59 (1946), S. 556.

¹⁶ J. A. Boyle, "The Il-Khans of Persia and the Princes of Europe," *Central Asiatic Journal* 20 (1976), S. 25-40 (now in: *The Spiritual Expansion of Medieval Latin Christendom: The Asian Missions*, hrsg. von James D. Ryan, Farnham 2013 [The Expansion of Latin Europe, 1000-1500, 11], S. 251-266); Laurence Lockhart, "The Relations between Edward I and Edward II of England and the Mongol Il-Khans of Persia," *Iran* 6 (1968), S. 23-24.

of the late Hülegü to form an alliance with the Franks and Abaqa's own wish to ally with the Catholics. His representatives claimed that Hülegü's Nestorian chief wife Doquz Khatun was a daughter of the legendary Indian king Johannes, namely, of Prester John. They also claimed that Hülegü revealed to David of Ashby his wish to accept Christianity.¹⁸ It is certain that the groundwork for communicating with the Westerners and the papacy had already been laid in the Il-khanate. For example, there existed a certain number of Christians, Nestorian or Catholic, in and around the court of the Il-khan. Not to mention Hülegü's Nestorian wife Doquz, some Nestorian Christians like the above-said Salomon *arkaoun* as well as the Westerners David of Ashby and Ricardus belonged to the Il-khan's entourage. It is meaningful that when Pope Clement IV received a letter written in Mongolian in 1267 there was no one in the curia who could read it,¹⁹ while there was a scribe (*scriba*) who translated Mongolian into Latin at the court of Abaqa.²⁰ The notary and interpreter Ricardus very likely served as this writer.²¹ Abaqa's favorable attitude towards the Christians, however, should not be exaggerated and it must have been just an excellent excuse for him to elicit cooperation from the popes. Abaqa is said to have inclined, in fact, towards his ancestral shamanism and Buddhism.²²

In March 1275, Pope Gregory X delivered a brief reply to the Il-khan. It stated that after the pope had read aloud the letter from the Il-khan and had an interview with the Mongol envoys, he prayed to God for the Il-khan to accept the correct faith. It added that he would, if the situation allowed, send envoys to the Il-khan before the crusader troops arrived in the Holy Land and that they would respond to the proposal of an alliance and talk about other religious matters.²³ In such communication by letters and envoys, we can see the efforts of Abaqa Khan to extract cooperation from the Western powers by appealing for the protection of the Christians. We can also read the papal intention not to mention on his own initiative or commit to a potential military alliance to the extent possible but to emphasize religious messages. In the eyes of contemporary observers as well—if we believe the description in the *Flores historiarum*—Mongol envoys attended the Council not because of faith, but to conclude an alliance with the Christians.²⁴ Here, we can see a difference in the intentions between the popes and the Il-khans.

A military alliance became even harder to achieve because the crusade plan fell through, due

¹⁷ Burkhard Roberg, "Die Tartaren auf dem 2. Konzil von Lyon 1274," *Annuarium Historiae Conciliorum* 5 (1973), S. 241-302.

¹⁸ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 44; Roberg, "Die Tartaren," S. 298-302.

¹⁹ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 42: *Sane licet litteras, quas exhibuit, nullus de hiis qui erant in nostra curia legere nobis scivit.*

²⁰ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 43: *scriba noster Latinus.* In this letter, Abaqa excuses the sending to the pope of a letter not translated into Latin but in Mongolian (see note 18 above).

²¹ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 44: *ego Ricardus notarius dicti domini regis et principis ac interpres Latinorum.*

²² Peter Jackson, "Abaqa," in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, London/Boston/Henley 1982, Bd. I/1, S. 63.

²³ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 45.

to the death of Pope Gregory X in January 1276. However, the Il-khan Abaqa did not give up the idea of an alliance with the West and again sent his envoys to the pope in 1276. Two envoys—probably not Georgians but Greeks²⁵—one of whom was a *miles*, Johannes Vassalli, and the other named Jacobus Vassalli delivered a letter from Abaqa to the then pope John XXI (1276-1277). After the death of Gregory X and the short pontificates of Innocent V and Hadrian V, John XXI assumed the papacy. Abaqa's letter assured the crusaders free passage in his territory and gave consideration to supplies necessary to them. It also emphasized that preparations for war were in order. The Mongol envoys even stated that the allegedly baptized Great Khan Qubilai, uncle of Abaqa, pleaded for a papal mission to be dispatched.²⁶ In fact, this news of Qubilai's baptism was not true. Abaqa supposedly expected to realize his wish by pleasing the Westerners. Pope John XXI chose the Franciscans as papal envoys, but their departure was postponed due to the death of the pope. In the spring of 1278, they were finally able to set out after a vacancy of half a year and the election of a new pope, Nicholas III (1277-1280).

Gerard and his colleagues

Gerard, a brother of Arlotto—the future minister general of the Order of Friars Minor from 1285 to 1286—was a student in Pisa with Salimbene in his youth, finished his studies at the Franciscan *studium generale* of Toulouse, and became a *lector* (master in theology).²⁷ He was also the author of *Brevity (Breviloquium)*, the introduction to Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*.²⁸ In 1264, Pope Urban IV sent him together with Bishop Nicholas of Crotona, and another Franciscan Rainer of Siena, as *apocrisarii* to Byzantine emperor Michael VIII in order to accomplish the Church union of the West and the East, in response to emperor's promise of a union.²⁹ Gerard had therefore been trained as papal envoy before his dispatch to the Il-khan Abaqa.

In addition to Gerard's experience of papal envoy, there were other desired qualities for the members of the papal delegation. The papal letter to Abaqa describes them as distinguished in

²⁴ *Flores historiarum*, hrsg. von Henry Richards Luard, Bd. 3, London 1890, S. 43: *Veneant etiam post Graecos sexdecim Tartari, qui Moalli [i.e., Mongols], cum littera regis sui, in concilio publicantes verbis pomposis potentiam Moallorum. Hi non pro fide, sed ut confoederationem haberent cum Christianis, venerunt.*

²⁵ Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, S. 168.

²⁶ We know the content of Abaqa's letter from that of Nicholas III. See Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 46.

²⁷ Salimbene, *Cronica*, hrsg. von Scalia, Bd. 1, S. 302 und 453; *Cronica fratris Salimbene*, hrsg. von Holder-Egger, S. 210 und 311.

²⁸ Gherardo da Prato, *Il breviliquium super libros sententiarum*, hrsg. von Marcellino da Civezza, Prato 1882.

²⁹ *Les registres d'Urban IV (1261-1264)*, ed. Jean Guiraud et al., Paris 1899-1958 (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 2^e série, 13), Nr. 848 (May 23, 1264); Martiniano Roncaglia, *Les Frères mineurs et l'Église grecque orthodoxe au XIII^e siècle (1231-1274)*, Le Caire 1954, p. 130.

religion, modest in honesty of life, decorous by clarity of morals, and gifted in knowledge of Holy Scripture.³⁰ Similar expressions appear in the letters to the Great Khan and to Gerard and his colleagues.³¹

Pope Nicholas III now sent five Franciscans—and perhaps not six as Salimbene says—to the Il-khan with great care. They were provided with horses and mules by the papal stable as if they were officials or servants of the papal curia. This arrangement is attested thanks to a curial list drawn up in May 1278, when the papal court was preparing to transfer from Rome to Viterbo. In fact, the court of Pope Nicholas III remained at Viterbo for four months, from late June to late October 1278.³² The papal *camera* drew up a list that assigned daily provisions to the members of the papal court, perhaps in the very month of May, prior to departure for Viterbo. This unusual type of document shows us that the papal court took due care to supply its officials and papal domestics with daily food, bread, wine, and forage and harness, through the four domestic suppliers, namely the kitchen (*coquina*), the bakery (*panetaria*), the cellar (*botellaria*), and the stable (*marestalla*) of the court even when the court was outside Rome.³³

In this list, after enumeration of the officials and servants (*familiares*) whom the fourth domestic supplier, the stable, supplies with forage and harness, we unexpectedly find a passage that refers to the Franciscan mission to the Tartars: “Likewise, out of bestiaries of the black stable, eleven, namely four rounceys (i.e., horses for mount) and seven mules, are provided to Friar Gerard and his colleagues of the Franciscan Order who are going overseas with the Tartars.”³⁴ Thus, they were provided with horses and mules by the papal stable as if they were officials or servants of the curia.

The travelers were also financed by the Florentine society of Pulci and Rambertini, to which the papal *camera* still owed 998 *librae* of Tours, 2 *solidi*, and 9 *denarii* even twelve years after

³⁰ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 46 (= *Les registres de Nicolas III*, Nr. 232; Potthast, Hrsg., *Regesta*, no. 21291): *viros religione conspicuos, honestate vite pudicos, morum claritate decoros et sacre scripture scientia preditos . . . duimus destinandos.*

³¹ *Acta romanorum pontificum . . .*, Nr. 24 (= *Les registres de Nicholas III*, Nr. 234: *vos, quos novimus viros religionis claritate fulgentes, morum honestate decoros, et diversarum virtutum titulis divinitus insignitos, ac litterali scientia multipliciter circumfultos propriam mentem convertimus.*

³² Potthast, Hrsg., *Regesta*, S. 1725-1736.

³³ A similar document was also drawn up in about 1306. This was, however, different from that of 1278, without the names of the individuals to whom daily provisions were to be supplied. Amato Pietro Frutaz, “La famiglia pontificia in un documento dell’inizio del sec. XIV,” in: *Palaeographica diplomatica et archivistica. Studi in onore di Giulio Battelli*, hrsg. von Scuola speciale per archivisti e bibliotecari dell’Università di Roma, Roma 1979, Bd. 2, S. 284-319.

³⁴ Friedrich Baethgen, “Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der päpstlichen Hof- und Finanzverwaltung unter Bonifaz VIII.,” *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 20 (1928-1929), S. 206: *Item sunt de bestiis marestalle nygre apud fratrem Gerardum et socios de ordine Minorum, qui vadunt ultra mare cum Tartaris, XI videlicet IIII roncini et VII muli et mule.*

the departure for Persia.³⁵ What was the goal of this emissary? Was it a politico-diplomatic or a religious one? The papal letters will reveal it.

Letters — Diplomatic or missionary?

At the point of their departure, Nicholas issued several letters: one to the Il-khan Abaqa, another to the Great Khan Qubilai, four privileges to five Franciscans about religious matters, and a letter addressed to all the Christians.³⁶

The papal letter to Abaqa (dated April 1, 1278)³⁷ first expresses the pleasure of the Roman Church at having received the envoys Johannes and Jacobus Vassalli the previous year, in the pontificate of Nicholas' predecessor, John XXI, and then mentions what the letter from Abaqa says. Nicholas makes reference to Abaqa's proposal to offer not only right of passage and necessary supplies to the army of Christians transferring to the Holy Land but also military aid. Interestingly, however, the pope is silent in response to this proposal. Instead, Nicholas responds favorably to the report that the Great Khan Qubilai, who was allegedly baptized, wanted him to dispatch a mission of the Roman Church. The pope then explains the significance of the five Franciscans' mission. Nicholas says that this mission should travel all the way to the court of the Great Khan Qubilai, if Abaqa considers it proper, and asks him to provide it with the necessary materials, even for the return to Europe. The pope also asks him to protect the Christians under his scepter.

Compared to the letter to the Il-khan Abaqa, the letter to the Great Khan Qubilai (dated April 4)³⁸ has a lengthy preamble. Pope Nicholas gives there a detailed account of the fundamentals of the Christian creed: original sin, the works of Jesus Christ and of the Virgin Mary, and the special position of Peter as Vicar of Christ, as well as the position of the Roman pontiff as Vicar of Christ and Peter.

The above two papal letters show that the pope did not take any further interest in an alliance

³⁵ Ernest Langlois, Hrsg., *Les registres de Nicolas IV*, Paris 1886-1905 (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 2^e série, 5), no. 7244 (January 8, 1290): *et in alia manu mercatoribus de societate Pulicum et Rimbertainorum de Florentia in dcccclxxxviii libris, ii solidis et viiii denariis turonensium parvorum, pro expensis quas fecerant pro quibusdam nuntiis quos felicitis recordationis Nicolaus papa, predecessor noster, destinavit ad Tartaros, tenebatur*. Vgl. Thomas Tanase, «Jusqu'aux limites du monde»: *la papauté et la mission franciscaine, de l'Asie de Marco Polo à l'Amérique de Christophe Colomb*, Rom 2013 (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 359), p. 312.

³⁶ For the last letter, see Johannes Hyacinthus Sbaralea, ed., *Bullarium franciscanum romanorum pontificum*, vol. 3, Rome 1765, p. 299; Potthast, Hrsg., *Regesta*, Nr. 21308. For the sources of other letters, see the following footnotes.

³⁷ Luppryan, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 46; *Les registres de Nicolas III (1277-1280)*, hrsg. von Jules Gay, Paris 1898-1938 (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 2^e série, 14), Nr. 232.

³⁸ Luppryan, *Die Beziehungen*, no. 47; *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 233.

with the Il-khanate but that he would negotiate with the Mongols in order to spread Christianity by means of Gerard's mission. This motive is also evident from the four supplementary letters for Gerard and his colleagues.³⁹ They refer not to politico-diplomatic negotiations but to purely religious matters: permission to give the words of God and to accept and baptize those who desire to convert, the first of whom would hopefully be the Il-khan Abaqa himself; permission to absolve those returning to the Catholic Church; license to hear confession, absolve the excommunicated or murderers, and confirm the validity of marriages; exhortation to celebrate divine offices and to bestow benediction on cemeteries, altars, and sacerdotal vestments; and permission to reconcile with non-Catholic prelates.

Several times, Nicholas III compares some people to angels in his letters. They are limited to the apostles or disciples of Christ, our envoys of 1278, and a few papal legates. As far as I have investigated, the papal legates compared to angels are two bishops: one is Latinus, bishop of Ostia and the other Philip, bishop of Fermo.

However, there is a difference in the analogy between the case of the papal diplomatic legates and that of the envoys of 1278. In the former case, the pope sent a legate "like as an angel of peace" (*tamquam pacis angelum destinare*),⁴⁰ while in the latter "like as angels of salvation" (*tamquam salutis angelos destinare*). A letter to Gerard and his companies reads:

Vos igitur ad partes easdem de fratrum nostrorum consilio tamquam salutis angelos ad

³⁹ A letter dated April 1: *Bullarium*, hrsg. von Sbaralea, Bd. 3, S. 289-291. A letter dated April 4: *ibid.*, pp. 296-297. Another dated April 4: *ibid.*, p. 297. A letter dated April 5: *ibid.* Each corresponds to *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 234 (*Regesta*, hrsg. von Potthast, Nr. 21292), 235, 236, 237.

⁴⁰ For Latinus, bishop of Ostia, see *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 132 (28 Aug., 1278): *venerabilem fratrem nostrum . . . Ostiensem et Vellethrensem episcopum apostolice sedis legatum ipsius ecclesie nobile membrum ad partes vestras providimus, de fratrum nostrorum consilio tanquam pacis angelum destinandum*; *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 348 (September 25, 1278): *Cum itaque pro statu pacifico partium earundem te, quem scimus pacis hujusmodi zelatorem, illuc cum plene legationis officio tanquam pacis angelum destinemus, . . .*; *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 604 (May 29, 1279): *venerabilem fratrem nostrum L[atatinum] Ostiensem et Vellethrensem episcopum, Apostolice Sedis legatum, ad partes illas propter hoc inter alia duximus tamquam pacis angelum destinandum*.

For Philip, bishop of Fermo, see *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 312 (September 22, 1278): *Nos itaque tam ingenti et periculosa necessitate premissorum attente pensata, te de cujus claris meritis et probata industria plenam in Domino fiduciam obtinemus, ad regnum ipsum tibi legationis officio plene commisso in eodem regno ac Polonie, Dalmatie, Croatiae, Rascie, Servie, Lodomerie, Galatie et Cumanie partibus illi conterminis, ut in eis evellas et destruas, dissipes et dispendas, edifies et plantes in nomine Domini sicut videris expedire, de fratrum nostrorum consilio velut pacis angelum destinamus*; *Les registres de Nicolas III*, hrsg. von Gay, Nr. 607 (December 9, 1279): *venerabilem fratrem nostrum Philippum episcopum Firmanum apostolice sedis legatum, de cujus industria, circumspectione provida et fidei puritate confidimus, ad partes illas, tanquam pacis angelum de fratrum nostrorum consilio duximus destinandum*.

*exercendum inibi opus dominicum juxta professae religionis officium prudenter accinctos, duximus destinandos, Devotioni vestrae praesentium tenore, ac in remissionem peccatorum omnium injungentes, quatenus sperantes in illo, qui suorum gressus dirigit in salutem, illuc fiducialiter accedatis.*⁴¹

A similar expression is used in Nicholas' letter to Qubilai, where the expression *tamquam salutis humani generis angelos* is used for the witnesses of the Christ's passion and resurrection whom Christ sent to all over the world in order to propagate the evangel and to baptize all human beings.⁴²

Both papal legates assumed by prelates and missionaries assumed by mendicant friars are dispatched far away on behalf of the pope who cannot be omnipresent due to human condition.⁴³ The expression *salutis angeli* in the letters to Gerard and his companies as well as that to Qubilai indicates, however, that the mission of 1278 to the Mongols was to aim at evangelization and conversion rather than politico-diplomatic negotiation.

Abaqa's attitude

Abaqa's attitude toward the letter and its couriers is not well documented, but there are a few clues to make a guess. One of them is the promise of safe conduct issued by Abaqa to Gerard's party in November 1279 and another is a letter to Pope Nicholas III drawn up the day before. It is likely that Abaqa did not permit them to travel to the Great Khan. In the safe-conduct guarantee in Mongolian, drawn up along the River Aras and given to General Samagar, Abaqa ordered that they be provided with post horses or victuals and not be harmed.⁴⁴ This arrangement was also a response to the request of the pope who could not provide them with all necessities.⁴⁵ Perhaps

⁴¹ *Acta romanorum pontificum . . .*, Nr. 24 (= *Les registres de Nicholas III*, Nr. 234).

⁴² Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 47, S. 238: *Pro humani ergo redemptione generis se hostiam exhibens, illud sue salutis hoste prostrato, de obprobrio servitutis eripuit ad gloriam libertatis celestis, sibi patrie ostium reserando. Et deinde, licet passus, mortuus et sepultus ut homo; die tertia tamen a mortuis divina virtute resurgens, ac testibus preordinatis a deo suam veram resurrectionem, per quam et nostram firmiter speramus et credimus, manifestans, ipsos ad predicandum evangelium omni creature ac baptizandum omnes gentes in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti in universum mundum, tamquam salutis humani generis angelos, destinavit.*

⁴³ Letter to Qublai: *Verum quia, humane conditionis renitente natura, uno eodemque tempore diversis locis presentialiter adesse nequimus, ne ullatenus negligere videamur absentes, ad eos viros discretos et providos transmittimus vice nostra.*

⁴⁴ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 48.

⁴⁵ Letter to Abaqa, Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 46: *Et nichilominus cum nos propter viarum pericula, longitudinem itineris et incertitudinem temporis, per quod eosdem in partibus illis oporteat immorari nequiverimus, eisdem in determinata et certa necessariorum sufficientia providere, quamdiu ipsos in partibus illis morari contigerit, provideas diligenter ac sufficienter eisdem in eundo, morando et redeundo ad nos de securo conductu et necessariis oportunis.* Similar expression is found also in the letter to the Great Khan. See Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 47.

it was thanks to this safe conduct that the party was able to return home safely, as Salimbene stated.⁴⁶ The other clue that permits us to guess Abaqa's attitude to the papal missionary is his letter to the pope issued in 1279. It says that the pope's letter reminded him that many Franks had held an assembly and that they had proposed to send an army and attack Babylon (here, this refers to the Mamluks in Egypt) from two sides with the Il-khan's army.⁴⁷ However, the pope's alleged proposal of a joint attack was, according to the papal letter to Abaqa, not true—on the contrary, it was Abaqa who proposed such a joint attack against the Saracens.⁴⁸ In the next part of his letter, Abaqa still requests from the pope a dispatch of the Christian army. Concerning religious matters, however, he mentions only his protection of the Christians in his territory and the Christian faith of his grandmother Sorqaqtani Beki (the royal dynasty of the Kereyid tribe and mother of Möngke, Qubilai, and Hülegü). In this letter, he kept silent on his own faith or conversion. Both his grandmother Sorqaqtani Beki and his stepmother Doquz Khatun (a wife of Hülegü) were Nestorian Christians. Despite this pro-Christian environment, Abaqa did not dare to convert.

It is therefore clear that the pope and the Il-khan were working toward different purposes. It would have been possible to promote cooperative relations insofar as neither side stood to lose from it but, in this case, there was no further progress. Some secular princes like James I of Aragon in 1268, Prince Edward of England in 1271, and perhaps Charles of Anjou showed their interest in military cooperation, but the popes did not. In time, the Il-khanate was taken over from Abaqa (r. 1265-1282) by Aḥmad Tegüder (r. 1282-1284) and then by Arghun (r. 1284-1291). In the meanwhile and afterwards, people occasionally came and went between Persia and Europe. Arghun dispatched a Nestorian monk Rabban Ṣawma with letters and gifts to the papal and other European courts (1287-1288). The first Franciscan pope Nicholas IV (1288-1292) sent to the Il-kanid and Yuan courts a Franciscan John of Montecorvino (1289) who became later the archbishop of Khanbaliq (Beijing) and the "highest archbishop" (*summus archiepiscopus*) of all those countries. However, the possibility of a military alliance was to vanish because of the fall of Acre in the Holy Land (1291).

⁴⁶ Salimbene, *Cronica*, hrsg. von Scalia, Bd. 1, S. 302; *Cronica fratris Salimbene*, hrsg. von Holder-Egger, S. 210: *Reversi sunt itaque fratres Minores a Tattaris valde sospites.*

⁴⁷ Text and French translation: Thomas Tanase, "Une lettre en latin inédite de l'Ilkhan Abaqa au pape Nicolas III: croisade ou mission?," in: *Les relations diplomatiques entre le monde musulman et l'Occident latin (XII^e–XVI^e siècle)*, hrsg. von Denise Aigle und Pascal Buresi, Rom 2008 (= *Oriente Moderno*, nuova serie 88), S. 333-347, hier S. 334-336.

⁴⁸ Lupprian, *Die Beziehungen*, Nr. 48, first paragraph (S. 234): *Sub tuo namque nomine presentate per eosdem nuntios eidem predecessori littere, sicut asseritur, continebant, quod si Christianum exercitum in terram sanctam transfretare contigerit, tu terram tuam et provisionem victualium ipsius exercitus Christiani necnon et personam tuam ac potentiam tui exercitus contra inimicos Christiane fidei, videlicet Sarracenos, devota promptitudine offerebas.*

* * *

After retracting the hegemonic policy, the Il-khans began to propose a joint campaign to the Western princes and popes from 1260s. On the other hand, after a phase of rumors and fear, the papal dispatches of envoys and letters to the Il-khans acquired a diplomatic and missionary aim. In the course of time, however, the tone of the papal letter became more evangelical. The aim of the delegation of Gerard and his colleagues was clearly to convert to Catholicism and baptize the Mongols, as is shown by not only the letters to Abaqa and Qubilai but also the letters to Gerard and his colleagues. The pope dispatched them as if they were “angels for the salvation” of human beings. The embassy of 1278 was a mission sent by the pope with special faculties. The choice of members seems to have been based on the experience of papal envoy, and not only religiousness or morality but also mastership of the Bible was required as a quality of the missionary. They were financed by the pope as couriers of papal letters to the Il-khans. Here, the collaboration of the papacy and the Franciscans offer a glimpse of the spirit of propagation of Christianity.