

The Great Khan: Observed and Imagined

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The Great Khan and his huge empire have attracted European attention both in fact and fiction. Indeed, there were several envoys sent to the empire in medieval times. These envoys recorded their journeys and those records, in turn, inspired various texts ranging from missionary records to fictional narratives, thus creating of the image of the exotic and mysterious court of the eastern empire. This is exemplified by one of the most widely known texts about the Great Kahn.¹ According to Prologue It is a fictitious travel record known today as *Mandeville's Travels*, which claims to be written for those who are eager to hear about the Holy Land. It devotes roughly four chapters to the Kahn and the Tartars (Chaps XXIII-XXVI). Its first draft, in French, was penned in about 1357 and then translated into several European languages including English. The tale purports to be a memoir of the English Knight: Sir John Mandeville. However, in truth, it is a compendium of ‘copied and pasted’ information taken from dozens of literary works. In fact, John Mandeville the narrator is most likely a literary device used to unify them all.²

So *Mandeville's Travels* was comprised of various sources and the section related to the Great Khan was mainly taken from a travel record by a Franciscan Friar.³ He was called Odoric of Pordenone (1286-1331) and Chaps XXVI-XXX of his work, referred to here as *Relatio*, are about the Kahn and his empire.⁴ This paper examines *Mandeville's Travels* and its source, Odoric's *Relatio*, to analyse the differences and similarities between the observed and imagined figures of

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¹ ‘*The Book of John Mandeville*’ with Related Texts, ed. and trans. by Iain Macleod Higgins (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), p. 129 (note 442). Higgins lists Odoric, who will be discussed later, and Marco Polo as the other two popular sources. Chapter divisions of *Mandeville's Travels* in this paper are based on *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. by M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

² The issue of the authorship of *Mandeville's Travels* has not yet met its final conclusion; however, recent studies tend to treat John Mandeville as a narrator, and not necessarily as the author. See e.g. Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the 'Book' of Sir John Mandeville (1371-1550)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 2-3; and Iain Macleod Higgins, ‘Mandeville’, in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. by A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), pp. 99-116 (pp. 99-101).

³ For the source of each part of *Mandeville's Travels* about the Khan, see Christiane Deluz, *Le ‘Livre’ de Jehan de Mandeville: une ‘géographie’ au XIV^e siècle*, Université Catholique de Louvain Publications de l’Institut d’Études Médiévales: Textes, Études, Congrès, 8 (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut d’Études Médiévales de l’Université Catholique de Louvain, 1988), pp. 477-80.

⁴ *Relatio* has many versions, and chapter divisions here are taken from: Odoricus Portu Naonis [Odoric of Pordenone], ‘*Relatio*’, in *Sinica Franciscana, I: Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi xiii et xiv*, ed. by Anastasius van den Wyngaert (Karachi-Florence: Bonaventurae, 1929), pp. 381-495.

the Great Khan.

Before starting the analysis, the historical context around the Great Khan is worth mentioning. For instance, the Mongols have been depicted in various ways over time. In 1240, the Great Khan and the Tartars were first known to medieval Europeans through their invasion of eastern Europe and were considered a great menace and a significant threat to Christendom, as, amongst others, Matthew Paris (*c.* 1200-59) describes.⁵ In fact, earlier envoys to the Tartars, such as John of Plano Carpini (*c.* 1182-1252), were writing about the apparent cruelty of the people and their rulers while the memory of the invasion was still fresh.

On the other hand, later in 1248, news reached Europe that some Mongolian rulers were Christians and that they were prepared to help European Christians fight the Saracens. This must have left the Europeans puzzled as to how to treat Mongolian people and, probably as a result, more neutral and objective records describing them as people rather than invaders emerged, as seen in William Rubruck's (*c.* 1215-65) work. After that, there is a gap of roughly half a century before the next major reference to the Mongolians known today can be spotted and these records include favourable descriptions of the Khan such as Marco Polo's (1254-1324).⁶

Odoric, the main source of *Mandeville's Travels* for the information on the Tartars, belongs to this later period, as well as one of its supplementary sources *La Flor des Estoires d'Orient* (1307) by Hayton of Armenia. The compiler was also able to access a variety of earlier records from the great encyclopaedia *Speculum historiale* (*c.* 1240-60) by Dominican Friar Vincent of Beauvais. Thus, the compiler of *Mandeville's Travels* had plentiful accounts to hand and this naturally influenced the depiction of the Khan in the subsequent narrative.

Considering some general tendencies regarding Odoric and *Mandeville's Travels*, the latter's descriptions about the Mongols are much more informative, more detailed, and are longer. Both Odoric and Mandeville recount what they 'saw' in the Great Khan's court, and both descriptions are factual in tone. They sometimes insert their own comments but most of the texts are a record of what they experienced. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two: whether or not the narrator has truly visited the land he describes. To elaborate, Odoric is in a sense confined to his own experience whereas the compiler of *Mandeville's Travels* is free to collate from various source material to suit the purpose. The compiler expands on Odoric's report, typically adding information from other sources such as those by Vincent and Hayton. The only mandate appears to be that the result still reads like a travelogue. Accordingly, through

⁵ They were for example described as barbarians associated with cannibalism and apocryphal imagery (Seymour Phillips, 'The Outer World of the European Middle Ages', in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. by Stuart B. Schwartz, Studies in Comparative Early Modern History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 23-63 (pp. 48-50)).

⁶ For European records of the Tartars, see *Genten Chusei Yoroppa Toho-Ki [Medieval European Descriptions of the Orient]*, ed. and trans. by Hideki Takada (Nagoya: Nagoya UP, 2019).

comparing the descriptions of Odoric and Mandeville we can understand the message of the compiler of *Mandeville's Travels*.

Broadly speaking, Mandeville's additions can be categorised into four patterns: chapter additions, enhancement of the authenticity of the author, emphasis on the wealth and marvelousness of the Mongolian court, and positive descriptions of the Khan. The first two are compositional and stylistic additions. They aim to enhance the quality and quantity of the information, and they bolster the authority of the work itself. The third and fourth categories are directly related to how the Khan is portrayed.

As to the chapter additions, there are lengthy extra episodes in *Mandeville's Travels* that are not in Odoric's *Relatio*. Such large sections are typically taken from other sources to enhance the information on the Khan and his empire. The most notable examples are as long as one chapter, occurring in Chaps XXIV and XXVI. The former deals with how the Mongolian ruler came to be called the Great Khan, followed by other episodes about the first Kahn—Genghis Khan—as well as introducing subsequent rulers, and ending with the belief system of the Tartars. The other chapter is about the people and customs of Tartary and how the coronation and funeral of the Khan were conducted. Both of these are to provide more information about the Khan and his empire and, according to Deluz, at least Hayton and Vincent as well as Odoric were sources.⁷

Contents-wise, these additions vary and include, for example, the wealth and religion of the Khan. However, while other additions are merely a sentence or a passage in length, these two examples are exceptionally long; hence, they are unique. As the text is a compilation, the compiler is likely to have tried to include the most diverse information available. This partly relates to the next category: to present the narrator as an authentic and reliable eyewitness.

The second type of addition seeks to establish the reality and trustworthiness of the tale. In other words, it reinforces the authenticity of the fictional narrator: John Mandeville. A typical example is when Odoric explains that he stayed with the Great Kahn for three years and attended many feasts after he described the resplendent feasts of the Khan (Chap. XXVI).⁸ This episode is transferred to Mandeville's military service to the Kahn during the war against the King of Manzi (Chap. XXII). This would be an impossible claim, in truth, as the Manzi was fallen more than a century ahead of Mandeville's departure from England as claimed in the text.

Moreover, although both Mandeville and Odoric thus say they stayed in the court, implying they knew it very well, Mandeville, the fictitious traveller, employs more words to ratify the trustworthiness of the text:

[S]um men wil not trow me but holden it for fable to tellen hem the nobless of his [The Great Khan's] persone and of his estate and of his court and of the gret multytude of folk

⁷ Deluz, pp. 478-80.

⁸ ‘Ego Fr. Odoricus ibi fui bene tribus annis in hac sua civitate, et multociens in istis suis festis presens fui’ (Odoricus, p. 474).

that he holt, natheles I schalle seye you a partye of him and of his folk, after that I haue seen the manere and the ordynance fulle many a tyme.

[. . .] I wot wel yif ony man hath ben in tho contrees beyonde, though he haue not ben in the place where the Grete Chane duelleth, he schalle here speke of him so meche merueylouse thing that he schalle not trowe it lightly. And treuly no more did I myself til I saugh it. And tho that han ben in tho contrees and in the Gret Canes housshold knownen wel that I seye soth.⁹

Here Mandeville repeatedly claims that his accounts are based on his real experience—however unrealistic it may look. All these assurances regarding the credibility of the text are not present in the corresponding part in Odoric's *Relatio*. Mandeville scatters a similar statement throughout the text, which must have been a method to secure the reliability of in fact a fictitious travel record.

The next type of addition emphasises the wealth of the Khan and his empire. This category falls along the lines of traditional images of the East. The region of the East and its rulers were known for producing numerous marvels including incredible wealth.¹⁰ They presented some kind of entertainment to the reader. There are various examples of this in *Mandeville's Travels*, and the Great Khan is described as one of them. Mandeville waxes lyrical on the Khan's palace, his throne and other royal seats, his crown, the tableware used in the court, and the clothes the courtiers wear. Some of these luxuries were already briefly introduced by Odoric but Mandeville almost always adds more details to emphasise the wealth, often even embellishing with descriptions borrowed from other texts. For example, in Chap. XXIII Mandeville mentions that the golden throne of the Khan was decorated with various gems. Odoric does not discuss the throne, preferring to describe the room in less detail (Chap. XXVI). In the same chapter, Mandeville also devotes space to a thorough account of banquets of the Khan, including a lavish description of the golden tableware, again decorated with gems. Thus, the narrator of *Mandeville's Travels* leans forward when reporting the richness of the court.

Such affluence is indeed one of the features of the traditional wonders of the East, which the Middle Ages had inherited from the classical period. The East had been regarded as being abundant with gold and gems; naturally, the kings and emperors there lived in luxurious palaces. Mandeville tries to impress the reader with this kind of image through, for example, introducing a golden vine stretching above the hall, over the tables in the Great Khan's palace (Chap. XXIII):

[A] vyne made of fyn gold, and it spredeth alle abouthe the halle. And it hath many clustres of grapes, somme white, somme grene, summe yallowe and somme rede and somme blake, alle of precious stones.¹¹

⁹ *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 159.

¹⁰ Cf. *Asia in the Making of Europe*, I: *The Century of Discovery*, bk 1, ed. by Donald F. Lach (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 6, 9, 28-29.

¹¹ *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 157.

The golden vine adorned with grapes that are gems is not mentioned by Odoric, and Mandeville probably took it from another work that details such a vine in an Indian King's palace.¹² This insertion serves to enhance the already sophisticated decoration of the palace, thus strengthening the alignment of the Khan with traditional eastern marvels.

In addition, Odoric explains that people would not be able to believe the magnificence of the Kahn and his court unless they could observe it in person. At the same time, he claims: 'De hoc tamen quod multas expensas facit, nemo mirari debet'.¹³ Odoric thus suggests the Khan's extravagance is not as surprising as it may, at first, seem. He owes the Khan's wealth to their monetary system: their currency consists of paper notes while simultaneously the whole treasury belongs to the ruler (Chap. XXX). Consequently, he does not need to set precious metals aside for coins but can spend plenty of them on himself at will.

Mandeville also refers to this episode but he does not particularly use it to sooth any astonishment the reader may experience on hearing about the splendour of the court. He writes: 'thei make no money nouther of gold nor of syluer, and therfore he may despende ynow and outrageously'.¹⁴ This means that, although *Mandeville's Travels* also posits that the monetary system in the country accounts for the wealth of the Khan, (unlike Odoric) the work does not try to minimise the impression of incredible wealth of the Khan. In short, whereas Odoric tends to be realistic and attempts to find a reasonable explanation for the situation, Mandeville tries to maintain it as an entertaining marvel.

The last category of additions involves positive descriptions of the Khan. *Mandeville's Travels*, generally speaking, assumes a generous attitude towards eastern people. While the work inevitably contains some critical comments on heathens and heretics, it still invites the West to reflect on itself through the prism of the East, resulting in a relativistic viewpoint.¹⁵ On top of that, in the case of the Khan, there were possibly vested interests in presenting the Khan as a reliable ally, to juxtapose with or even exceed Prester John, the legendary Christian ruler of the East. It has already been pointed out that European interest in the Mongols partly stemmed from the idea of making allies with them against Islam.¹⁶ To cite an instance, Hayton, whose writing the compiler of *Mandeville's Travels* consulted with, indeed proposes making allies with

¹² Deluz, p. 477; Malcolm Letts, *Sir John Mandeville: The Man and his Book* (London: Batchworth, 1949), pp. 67-68.

¹³ Odoricus, p. 482. The remark that the Kahn's wealth is incredible unless one sees it with one's own eyes might be the basis for Mandeville's claim (see the quotation for note 9) of being an eyewitness.

¹⁴ *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 172.

¹⁵ For the analysis, see e.g. Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The 'Travels' of Sir John Mandeville*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Higgins, *The Book of John Mandeville*, p. 138 (note 465). On the other hand, Uebel claims that the idea was already discarded in the thirteenth century (Michael Uebel, *Ecstatic Transformation: On the Uses of Alterity in the Middle Ages*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 12).

the Mongols in the last part of his writing. *Mandeville's Travels* relays accounts of encouraging Christians to reclaim the Holy Land (e.g. Prologue), which is an idea shared with Hayton. The two have thus similar purposes. All in all, it is assumed that the Great Kahn in *Mandeville's Travels* is portrayed favourably as prospective reinforcement against the Saracens.

For instance, there are laudable aspects of the Khan and the most notable of them involve his generosity in religion and his power. To begin with, Mandeville tends to make a connection between the Khan and Christianity. For example, towards the end of Chap XXIV—one of the chapter-long additions—Mandeville mentions episodes of the baptised Mango Khan who tried to deliver the Holy Land back into Christian hands.¹⁷

In addition, at the end of Chap. XXV Mandeville positioned the Kahn as the most powerful king of the world, followed by a mixture of feelings about his religion:

Vnder the firmament is not so gret a lord ne so myghty ne so riche as is the Grete Chane, nougnt Prestre Iohan that is Emperour of the High Ynde, ne the Sowdan of Babyloyne, ne the Emperour of Persye. Alle theise ne ben not in comparisoun to the Grete Chane nouther of myght ne of noblesse ne of ryaltee ne of ricchesse, for in alle theise he passeth alle erthely princes. Wherefore it is gret harm that he beleueth not feithfully in God. And natheles he wil gladly here speke of God.¹⁸

According to Mandeville, the Great Khan is the highest king of the world in terms of power, nobility, royalty, and wealth. After such compliments, Mandeville adds, with regret, that the Khan is not Christian, but then concludes that he is still willing to listen to the gospel. Although the Khan is a heathen and might not be the perfect friend to Europeans in that sense, there is still room for Christianity in him.

In another part (Chap. XXIV), Mandeville writes slightly contradictingly: ‘alle be it that thei be not cristned, yit natheles the emperour and alle the Tartaryenes beleeu'en in God inmortalle’.¹⁹ The historical truth is that the Tartars on the whole were not Christian, so there might be some confusion, but still all these small additions by the compiler of *Mandeville Travels* indicate that the Khan here is depicted as more praiseworthy in Christian eyes than in Odoric’s record.

The connection between the Great Khan and Prester John is another point of worth noting. As we saw in the quotation above, Prester John is frequently compared to the Kahn in *Mandeville Travels*. Odoric mentions that Prester John marries the Khan’s daughter ‘pro pacto’, but Mandeville extends this idea to say the Kahn marries Prester John’s daughter too as ‘theise ii. ben the grettest lordes vndir the firmament’.²⁰ So he tries harder to pair the two by describing mutual arrangement.

Also, when Mandeville passes through Prester John’s lands, he repeatedly mentions the

¹⁷ The source is Hayton (Deluz, p. 478), who proposed the idea of Mongols as being allies.

¹⁸ *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 177.

¹⁹ *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 166.

²⁰ Odoricus, p. 483; *Mandeville's Travels*, p. 196.

Great Khan's name as if he wants the reader to be reminded of the Khan. In contrast, Prester John himself is not a highly commendable figure in the tale, except in terms of his being pious Christians. Various marvels of the land are more in focus. Mandeville could have emphasised Prester John's military power and praised him more but, instead, he says, for example, that their mass is not conducted in the same way as European mass is, implying that their knowledge is imperfect (Chap. XXXII). As a result of all these manoeuvres, the impression left of the Kahn is likely to be stronger and more sympathetic than that of Prester John.

A letter purportedly written by Prester John was circulated in the twelfth century and it ignited a quest for his whereabouts. However, by the time *Mandeville's Travels* was compiled about two centuries had already passed with not very fruitful search for the legendary Christian Emperor of the East, aside from a few claims. By contrast, the Great Khan was easier to locate and even defeated the Saracens.²¹ The Khan was, of course, a pagan and could invade Europe again—especially considering his past expedition into eastern Europe. Still, when *Mandeville's Travels* was compiled, the Saracens, who had control of the Holy Land, were the more prominent enemy. Hence, Mandeville could position the Kahn as a superior ally in the East to Prester John.

In conclusion, this analysis suggests that Mandeville's Khan was modified from Odoric's according to fictional tradition and factual expectations of the time. In particular, there are four types of addition made to *Mandeville's Travels* with regard to the depiction of the Great Khan. These additions were, in turn, brought about by three reasons. The first was to heighten the credibility of descriptions that were, in fact, merely copied and gathered from various writings. This produced chapter-long additions providing more detailed information and placing emphasis on Mandeville's experience. The second was to depict the Khan and his court along the lines of traditional marvels of the East. This purpose included the enhancement of the marvellous nature of them. This was possibly for entertainment, as *Mandeville's Travels* is a secular work, while Odoric's *Relatio* is a record of the missionary's journey. The third was to commemorate the Khan for his connection to Christianity. The Kahn is depicted as both an eastern wonder and is a somewhat beneficial presence for Europeans themselves. It is a reflection of the overall tone of *Mandeville's Travels* portraying the East as not a mere marvel but a counterpart of the West. Yet in the case of the Kahn, the unique status as a possible ally in taking back the Holy Land was added.

As a consequence, the Great Khan depicted in *Mandeville's Travels* is similar in description to the Great Khan in Odoric's *Relatio* but is somewhat different in its descriptive nature. To elaborate, while the Khan described by Odoric is an exotic ruler as physically observed by Western eyes, the Khan described by Mandeville is presented along the lines of traditional

²¹ In fact, Genghis kahn was once believed to be Prester John. cf. David Morgan, 'Prester John and the Mongols', in *Prester John: The Mongols and the Ten Lost Tribes*, ed. by Charles F. Becketham and Bernard Hamilton (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996), pp.159-170.

characters as basically imagined by Western people. Here the Kahn is almost a legendary king with richness and laudable features. Furthermore, his connection to Christianity should be considered in light of fourteenth-century Europe.

To sum up, Mandeville's Khan can be regarded as the quintessence of European imagery of the time. Not only rich and powerful, as traditionally imagined about eastern rulers, the Khan has tinges of European hope that there is a Christian ally somewhere in the East. To accommodate a prospective comrade, intensification of the reliability and authenticity of the text was also attempted. These factors interfered with and led to differences in descriptions, and presented Mandeville's Khan as a conjectured figure of contemporary observation and imagination.