

# The Far East in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century

Wahoo Bible Church Historical Theology

July 3, 2022

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## INTRODUCTION: PREVIOUSLY IN THE FAR EAST

The last time we left the Christians of the Far East, they had established a church in China following the Nestorian tradition. You may recall that when Nestorius was condemned as a heretic, his followers were pushed east into Syria and the Sassanid (Persian) Empire. Settling there, they built churches and continued to practice Christianity.

Christianity spread to China during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. “Two monks were preaching Christianity in India in the 6th century before they smuggled silkworm eggs from China to the Byzantine Empire.



The first documentation of Christianity entering China was written on an 8th-century stone tablet known as the Nestorian Stele. It records that Christians reached the Tang dynasty capital Xi'an in 635.” (*Christianity in China*, Wikipedia)

Alopen was the leader of the Christian traders who established a church in Xi’an. They were given permission to both build the church and establish worship by the Emperor Taizong. He invited Christians to translate their books and add them to

his imperial library. Christianity thrived in China for 200 years until Wuzong Tang (Li Yan) came to power in 840AD. A Taoist, Wuzong campaigned against Buddhism and other competing religions. Churches were destroyed and properties stolen by the state. In 986, a monk from China made contact with Constantinople and there are Christian graves from later Chinese dynasties but in the purge, Christianity was all but eradicated.

Yet, while Christianity declined in China, it continued in the neighboring states and among the nomads. It was a small, but persistent presence in the Far East. Often, entire tribes would be Christian. Then sparked events in the 13<sup>th</sup> century that would make an impact on Christianity that would reach into modern times.

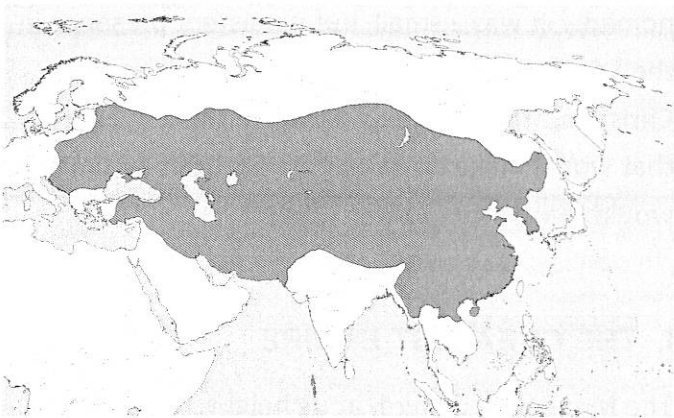
## I. THE GREATEST EMPIRE

The Mongolian Empire, at its height, ruled over more contiguous land than any other empire in history. The Mongolian Empire covered 9 million square miles. For comparison, the earth has 57 million square miles of land. At one point, the Mongols owned 1/6 of the world. The Roman Empire only covered 1.6 million square miles. True, the British Empire ruled over 13 million, but this land was not contiguous and primarily needed to be settled rather than conquered.

The Mongols were known for their swift mounted archers. Their tactics were ever growing to meet the new challenges they faced on the battlefield. They had an incredible ability to change the tide of

battle and pull victory from apparent loss. Many of their initial victories came because the enemy underestimated their swiftness and ability. Many tribes gave up without a fight because to fight the Mongols potentially meant that everyone in your tribe would be killed and your leaders beheaded.

The Mongols were experts at blitzkrieg. They struggled to conquer walled cities as they were not skilled at siege warfare. They learned quickly. They preferred fighting on the plains, but quickly adapted to mountains. Perhaps their favorite tactic was feigning retreat to draw a part of the enemy back, then turn and defeat them before advancing and conquering the remainder of the force.



## A. TEMUJIN

Temujin was born the son of a chief of a nomadic Mongol tribe. He was elected Khan (prince) of the Mongols in 1186 until he was challenged by his onetime friend, Jamukha who defeated Temujin in battle. Temujin was exiled to China. Not much is known about the next 10 years of his life, but apparently he made some resolutions because he once again moved up the ranks of power within the Mongol confederation.

He went against tradition by appointing people under based on merit rather than on lineage. This produced loyalty to him from among many ranks

and classes of people. In conquering a tribe or a nation, if they weren't all killed in brutal ways, they would join the Mongol army.

He conquered more and more territory attacking as far East as Georgia, though the furthest extent of his empire would not be achieved until his grandson Kublai Khan came to power. Temujin became known as "Genghis Khan" (universal ruler).

He died either from infection due to an arrow or a fall from his horse on August 25, 1227. He named his son, Ogedei, Khan in his place, but his other sons also received land and positions of honor.

In spite of all the warfare, the following generations brought in what was called the Pax Mongolia. In the Mongolian empire, hospitality was sacred. Genghis divided his army according to a decimal system (10s, 100s, 1000s, 10,000s). the soldiers elected their leaders (except for the 10,000s).

## B. OGEDEI

Ogedei developed a postal system, paper currency based on precious metals, a tax system for the entire empire, and built the capital city Karakorum. He instituted a civil service program and practiced religious tolerance. Most important for our subject, he married a Christian who became the mother of his successor, Kublai Khan.

**From Wikipedia:** Cum non solum was a letter written by Pope Innocent IV to the Mongols on March 13, 1245. In it, Pope Innocent appeals to the Mongols to desist from attacking Christians and other nations, and inquires as to the Mongols' future intentions. Innocent also expresses a desire for peace (possibly unaware that in the Mongol vocabulary, "peace" is a synonym for "subjection").

This message was carried by the Franciscan John of Plano Carpini, who successfully reached the Mongol capital of Karakorum, where he attended the election of the new Khan Güyük on August 24, 1246.

That year, Güyük replied, "You must say with a sincere heart: "We will be your subjects; we will give you our strength". You must in person come with your kings, all together, without exception, to render us service and pay us homage. Only then will we acknowledge your submission. And if you do not follow the order of God, and go against our orders, we will know you as our enemy."

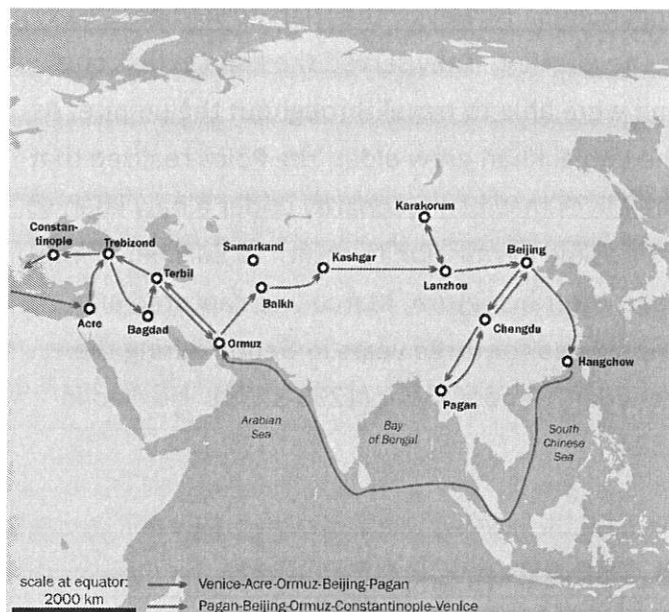
### C. KUBLAI

Kublai, though not the first choice of Khan, rose above his brothers and became Khan. He took the empire to its furthest extent reaching central Europe and conquering China. Kublai became more Chinese than Mongolian. He build 20,000 schools and developed the arts. He made paper currency the standard throughout the empire and connected trading posts to each of the 1400 post offices.

## II. THE POLOS

In 1298, a young Venetian man named Marco Polo wallowed in prison. While there he met fellow prisoner, Rustichello da Pisa, an author of romance stories. Reustichello wrote down the fanciful story of this Venetian traveler who had spent 24 years in Asia. "The Travels of Marco Polo" became the most popular and widely circulated book before the printing press. The original title was "The Book of the Marvels of the World."

So fanciful were the stories that many thought them false. On his deathbed, people pressed Marco to recant. He insisted that it was true and



said, "I did not tell half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed"

Marco was the son of a family of traders to Constantinople. His father, Maffeo, conducted a trading expedition to Kublai's court, leaving his pregnant wife in Venice, taking his brother, Nicolo, with him.

Kublai's mother was a Christian and he thought the Bible was the greatest book on morality. Kublai had heard of the pope and when the Polos returned to Europe, he asked for the pope to send 100 educated Christians and some oil from the lamp of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (now a Crusader kingdom). Kublai also sent an ambassador to the Pope, but this ambassador turned back partway through the journey. When Maffeo returned in 1269, he found that his wife had died and had left him a 17 year old son, Marco.

Three years after their return to Venice, Maffeo and Nicolo took Marco with them and returned to the court of the great khan. They did indeed take oil and 2 friars along with some Christian

documents. However, the friars turned back early in the journey. They served the khan in his court and were able to travel throughout the empire. As the Kublai Khan grew older, the Polos realized that their lives may be in jeopardy under a new khan so they asked permission to return to Europe. Three years after his return, Marco was captured and imprisoned for three years in Genoa during the Venetian/Genoese War (1296-1299). He died in 1324.

### **III. THE ADVANCE OF ROMAN CHRISTIANITY IN THE EAST**

#### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EVENTS**

1. The Mongols brought an end to the Golden Age of Islamic Rule.
2. "The Travels of Marco Polo" opened the age of exploration.
3. These events led to the second great awakening of the Eastern Asian Church.