



A Franciscan Letter from the Crimea (1323)

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Abstract

The great western campaign of the Mongols (1236–1242) expanded the boundaries of the contemporary world. Hundreds of Europeans reached the territory of the Mongol Empire and after its disintegration, the territory of the successor states in the 13–14th centuries. Among the travellers, there were members of the Franciscan order. Their aims were to teach and provide spiritual services to the Christian people living in the Mongol Empire, as well as to convert the non-Christians.

This study is about a letter written by the Franciscans from Caffa (15 May 1323). In my opinion, this letter is important because it contains information on their real and alleged successes and failures. And it is also apparent why they could not convert masses of nomads to Christianity and their work did not leave many traces in the culture of people living there.

Key words: letter, Franciscans, missions, Mongols, failures

The starting point of my paper is a letter written by Franciscans from Caffa (today Feodosiya, in Crimea) on 15 May 1323. The letter was written by Franciscan friars who worked as missionaries at the territory of the Ulus Jochi (i.e. Golden Horde). The receiver was the sacred congregation of the Holy Cardinals of the holy Roman Church and the participants of the General Chapter of the Order of Friars Minor and the other member of the order.

The unique manuscript of the letter is in the University Library at Cambridge (Nero A. IX). It is written in an English hand of the first half of the 14th century.¹ The original, Latin version was published by Bihl and Moule in 1923. Moule published its English translation in 1921, and Hautala recently published its Russian translation with commentaries (Bihl and Moule 1923, 106–112; Moule 1921, 361–366; Хайтала 2014, 91–103).

Recently, Jackson wrote a detailed and good overview about the reasons of Western Christian missionaries' failures in the Mongol Empire in 13–14th centuries.² In fact, based on this letter, I will discuss Franciscans' real and alleged

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successes and failures and finally the causes of their failures according to the aspects enumerated by Jackson. Despite the Franciscans' reports of successes with propagandistic purposes, they could not convert masses of nomads to Christianity and their work did not leave lasting traces in the local culture.

The great Mongol campaign between 1236 and 1242 radically changed the situation in the south-Russian steppe in many aspects. The Mongols and the people conquered by them had become exposed to a variety of religious influences. Western Christian missionaries appeared in the south Russian steppe. The Dominican friars already had missions among the Cumans who lived in the steppe area between the Volga and the Lower-Danube. As a consequence of the large scale acts of conversion, the bishopric of the Cumans was established in Milcov in 1228. The localization of Milcov remains a debated problem because it disappeared after the Mongol invasion. According to the written sources, it was somewhere in today's Romania.³

The Franciscans probably were active on the south-Russian steppe before the Mongol Conquest,⁴ but during this period their activities were less considerable than the mission of the Dominicans. Franciscan missionaries became active only in the second half of the 13th century. The first Franciscan who travelled to the Mongols with missionary aim was William of Rubruck, but the Great Khan Möngke (r. 1251–1259) did not permit him to remain in his empire. The Franciscans were not depressed by Rubruck's failure, which is testified by the Hungarian provincial minister's letter from 1278. He reported to Pope Nicholas III (r. 1277–1280) that the Franciscans had achieved great success in converting a large number of nomads, but there is no bishop to ordain them. The pope ordered his Hungarian legate, Phillip of Fermo to investigate the situation of ex-bishopric and to make a report about it. Unfortunately, the bishopric was not re-established, but from the Hungarian provincial minister's letter we can conclude that there were ongoing Franciscan missionary activities with success in the territory of the Ulus Jochi for several years until 1278.

Eleven years later in 1287, a letter written by a Hungarian Franciscan (Ladislaus) from Caffa reveals that his Order had two custodies⁵ in the territory of the Ulus Jochi: Custody of Khazaria (Custodia Gazariae) including Crimea, Lower Danube and Lower Transnistria, and Custody of Saray (Custodia Sarayae), the eastern part of the Ulus Jochi, including the North Caucasus.⁶

In 1289, Pope Nicholas IV (r. 1288–1292), who had learned of the existence of numerous native Christians in the Mongol Empire, dispatched the Franciscan friar John of Montecorvino to the Far East. Montecorvino arrived

³ Altaner 1924; Ковач 2005; Makkai 1936; Pfeiffer 1913; Spinei 2008.

⁴ In 1240, a Hungarian bishop wrote a letter to Guillaume d'Auvergne. In this letter, we can read that the Tatars had the Mordvins as advance guard and they killed the Dominican and Franciscan friars sent by Hungarian king "per illos [Mordani – SzK] credo esse interfectos Praedicatores et Fratres Minores, et alios nuntios, quos miserat Rex Ungariae ad explorandum" (Luard 1882, 76).

⁵ A Franciscan custody is a subdivision of a province presided by a custos.

⁶ Golubovich 1913, 443–445.



in China, where Temür Khan (r. 1294–1307), the successor of Khubilai Khan (r. 1259–1294), made him welcome. Montecorvino built two churches in Khanbaliq (Peking) within a few years and baptized “several thousand people”. When the news about his missionary success arrived at the West Pope Clement V (r. 1305–1314) appointed Montecorvino Archbishop of Khanbaliq and sent seven Franciscan bishops to consecrate him. Only three reached China (Gerardus, Peregrinus of Castello and Andrew of Perugia). In 1309, they consecrated John of Montecorvino first archbishop of Khanbaliq and patriarch of the entire East (from southern Russia and Asia Minor to China).⁷ Pope John XXII (r. 1316–1334) divided the administration of the church in Asia between the Franciscans and Dominicans in 1318. The Franciscans retained the archbishopric of Khanbaliq while the Dominicans were assigned a new archbishopric see headquartered at Sultaniyeh in Persia.

From the 1320’s we have a list of the Franciscan and Dominican missionary bases (loca) in “Northern Tartary” (Vicaria Tartariae Aquilonaris). According to this list, the Franciscans had eighteen permanent monasteries (monasteria immobilia).⁸ The emphasis on “permanent” or “immobile” monasteries indicates the existence of moving missions, which are recorded in our letter too.

Let us return to the letter which contains some interesting information about the mission. According to the Franciscan writers, nearly a third part of the northern empire of the Tartars, (i.e. the Golden Horde) was Christianized but the missionaries were very few. As they followed the camps of the nomads, they had “so much work there is no time to taste food until the stars are shining”. As previously stated, the Franciscans had mobile convents besides the permanent ones.⁹ We can read a story of a certain German brother who achieved great success between pagans acquiring ninety-three idols and baptizing all the families and teaching them.¹⁰

The writers mention the martyrdom of their brothers and the tortures which they suffered among the pagans and Saracens. But they “often find an appearance of greater devotion among the pagans themselves than they do in many Christians”. They ask from the receivers to send more brothers to continuing the mission, since, after the complete conversion of the empire of the Tartars, “the Saracen power would be of no weight”. The Tartars hate the Saracens as Christians do, since the Saracens continually harm the Tartars. “And so they are always at war here one with another, with armies and

⁷ On the letters of Monte Corvino and Andrew of Perugia see Wyngaert 1929, 340–355, 373–377.

⁸ Golubovich 1913, 72.

⁹ According to brother Elemosina (1335): “Inter istos Tartaros pastores gregum, fratres Minores Sancti Francisci habent quinque loca mobilia in papilionibus filtro coopertis, et cum Tartaris moventur de loco ad locum, in curribus portantes loca et libro set utensilia” (Golubovich 1913, 125).

¹⁰ Bihl and Moule 1923, 107; Moule 1921, 361. According to Moule this German brother was Henricus Alemannus (Bihl and Moule 1923, 107) who baptized a certain Tharmagar, son of a Tatar commander and Estokis, lord of “Baschardia” with his wife and sons (Golubovich 1913, 73). The ninety-three pagan idols perhaps were ongons (Xaytana 2014, 97).



camps”.¹¹ The Franciscans follow these Tartar camps and preach for them. Some Franciscans teach with the help of an interpreter, but there are some Hungarian, German and English friars (*fratres quidam Hungari, aliqui etiam teutonici et Anglici*) who have learned very well the language of the local people. The writers of the letter add that the French and Italians (*Gallici vel Ytalici*) “scarcely ever learn the language well”.¹²

Furthermore, they report that from the alms they bought children who were for sale, and the boys are made clerks, and some of them are already brothers and they are very good converters as they know the language.¹³ This part of the letter is closed with the summary that all conditions are given for a successful mission and if enough helpers come they could achieve a rapid progress.¹⁴ After that, there is a short description of the territory and the diet of the local people.¹⁵

An interesting story can be read thereafter. The lately deceased emperor was a Christian, and he had three sons who were also Christians. However, two of them renounced the faith for taking the power, but the successor of their father had them killed. The third son, who remains Christian, is expected to be the next emperor. The lately deceased emperor is identified as Khan Tokta, who died in 1312.¹⁶ We do not know exactly whether he was Christian or not, but maybe he had sons who were Christians. For example, according to two papal bulls (from 1321 and 1322) Abusqa (*Abuscanus*) son of Cosogan or Catogan was

¹¹ We have information on the attempts to conclude a Christian–Mongol alliance against to the Islam world, but these diplomatic contacts were made between the Ilkhans and the popes or Western European sovereigns (Jackson 2005, 165–195). However, Özbek khan’s (1313–1341) conversion to the Islam was the decisive event in the Islamization of the Ulus Jochi (i.e. the Golden Horde). On the Islamization of the Ulus Jochi see DeWesse 1994.

¹² Bihl and Moule 1923, 109; Moule 1921, 362–363; Хайтаа 2014, 98.

¹³ Bihl and Moule 1923, 109; Moule 1921, 363; Хайтаа 2014, 98–99. John of Montecorvino acted in a similar way, he trained about forty boys, whom he had taught the Latin letters and the Latin Church rites (Wyngaert 1929, 347–348). According to the expenses of the Papal Treasury in 1318, two Tartar boys were in Avignon as novices (Schäfer 1911, 205, 657).

¹⁴ Bihl and Moule 1923, 109–110; Moule 1921, 363–364; Хайтаа 2014, 99.

¹⁵ For example that country “is a land of pastures and meadows, prolific of flesh and fish; only half cultivated”; there is not much corn-land; the country is very cold; the bread is well kneaded and prepared, mixed with eggs (Bihl and Moule 1923, 110, 108; Moule 1921, 364, 362; Хайтаа 2014, 99, 97). There are mentioned the local people’s clothing made of different materials (hemp, linen, fur and skins) together with the famous and valuable “Tartar clothes” (designated as *panni tartarici* in medieval inventories) and the money made of leather (Bihl and Moule 1923, 108; Moule 1921, 362–363; Хайтаа 2014, 97).

¹⁶ “autem inperator nuper defunctus obiit xristianus, relinquens post se eciam tres filios xristianos” (Bihl and Moule 1923, 111). The “lately deceased Emperor” could be Khan Tokta who was Christian according to this letter. However, on the religion of Tokta, we have other and contradictory information and opinions: remained faithful to the traditional religion of the Mongols and was a supporter of the cult of Eternal Blue Sky; he was Buddhist; he was converted to Islam in 1306/1307. On this question see Jackson 2005, 272–273; Хайтаа 2014, 88.



Christian.¹⁷ That Cosogan/Cotogan was identified with Khan Tokta or with his brother/half-brother, Qodugai.¹⁸ The Franciscan writers claimed that they had got a Decree of protection from the late emperor, which was confirmed by the then ruling, still pagan emperor, i.e. Özbek Khan. The Franciscans translated this decree from Mongol into Latin and sent it to the Lord Pope and to the general of the Order.¹⁹ There is no extant copy of the *yarliq* given by Tokta, but his successor, Özbek mentioned in his own *yarliq* from 1314 that the Franciscans had received privileges from his predecessors. The Latin translation of Özbek's *yarliq* survived and it is obvious that it was translated from Mongol language.²⁰ According to the letter, Tokta's two sons were killed by the emperor because they had participated in a conspiracy against the emperor²¹ and because they had left their faith. The Tatars "all hold the religion which their parents last held, and they reckon it a mark of fickleness to go back from it". Further "they tolerate all sects and faiths and religious men among them".²² The Franciscans writers mention here that the greatest difficulties in their progress were made not by pagans, but by the "schismatic and heretical Christians".²³

Hereafter the writers of the letter write again that they gave up twenty-two convents because of the paucity of brothers. Then they list some places where they still have convents: for example, one at the place of the martyrdom of St. Clement (Kheronesus); two convents in the city of Caffa, and some others in other cities. But cities are scarce in that empire because the people of the land generally live in felt tents.²⁴ At last, they ask their brothers again to help them.

¹⁷ In the letter from 1321: *Abusqa* ("...Abusciano nato clarae memoriae Cosogani regis in partibus Tartariae") is mentioned only as favourable to the Christianity (Baronius 1880, 140). According to the letter from 1322, *Abusqa* ("...Abusciano, nato clarae memoriae Cotogani regis in partibus Tartariae") was already baptized (Baronius 1880, 186).

¹⁸ On this see DeWeese 1994, 98–100; Хайтала 2014, 88–89.

¹⁹ "...domino pape transmisimus et ordini[s] generali simul cum tenore priuilegi protectiui pro nobis a pristino imperatore concessi et ab isto confirmati licet adhuc pagano, de verbo ad uerbum a tartarico in latinum diligenter translati" (Bihl and Moule 1923, 111; Moule 1921, 365; Хайтала 2014, 100).

²⁰ Bihl and Moule 1924, 65; Хайтала 2014a, 31–48.

²¹ On the role of Tokta's sons see Хайтала 2014, 88–89.

²² This is a good example, how the Western observers misunderstood religion pluralism with tolerance. On this see DeWeese 1994, 100–101; Jackson 2005, 173–174.

²³ "Maxime autem que in nostro profectu patimur impedimenta sunt a scismaticis et hereticis ibidem christianis" (Bihl and Moule 1923, 111; Moule 1921, 365; Хайтала 2014, 93, 100). According to Hautala, these schismatic and heretical Christians were Armenians with whom the Franciscans had conflicts (Хайтала 2014, 100).

²⁴ Bihl and Moule 1923, 111; Moule 1921, 365; Хайтала 2014, 93, 100. The collection of the British Library in London stored a detailed list of the Franciscan missionary bases (*loca*) in the East around 1320. This list mentions eighteen monasteries in "Northern Tartary" (*Vicaria Tartariae Aquilonaris*), but enumerates only seventeen: "In Tartaria Aquilonari fratres Minores habent monasteria immobilia 18, in civitatibus et villis infra scriptis, videlicet: in vicina iuxta danubium. In Mauro castro. In Cersona, ubi beatus Clemens fuit exulatus, et ibi fundavit lxx ecclesias... (...). In Cimbalo. In Barason. In Soldaia. In Capha duo loca. In Thana. In Cummageria duo loca. In Saray. In Sancto Johanne, ubi est sepulchrum Coktogani filii Imperatoris. In Ugek. In Delena (Selena?). In Yveria duo loca, ubi rex illius gentis, et multi de populo istis annis sunt conversi..." (Golubovich 1913, 72).



They refer to their privileges given by popes and they are very proud of the friendship of the emperor, i.e. Özbek Khan. Thanks to this friendship “there are now none who dare... to burn or to destroy the churches, stations, or bells, as they used to do”. According to the letter, the bells are hated by pagans,²⁵ but when they are converted they love them very much. At the end of the letter, the writers appeal again for the reinforcement that the work begun may not perish.

Finally the date of the letter: “Dated in the great city of Caffa, from which the fine Caffa sugar is named. A.D. Mcccxxiii on holy Pentecost (that is May the 15th), by the advice of all the Brothers and Latin Merchants”.²⁶ In my opinion, the mention of “zucarum Caphatinum”²⁷ in this context is a folk etymology. I did not find any data about the sugar from Caffa, so I believe the writers of the letter had in mind the “zuccherò caffetino” which takes its name from the palm-leaf basket (Arabic qaffat, quffat, قفق) in which it was packed.²⁸

In conclusion, the Franciscans had success among the nomads of the Ulus Jochi, even in the Mongol rulers’ family since the Mongols were indifferent to the religions. However, political factors had their role. The missionaries sometimes reported great achievements as in our letter, in which it is stated that nearly the third part of the Ulus Jochi is Christianized. After all, we have no information about the great mass of conversion apart from the reports of Franciscans. What were the reasons of their failure? There are some answers in our letter.

First: shortages in knowledge in local languages and sometimes lack of a good interpreter.²⁹ But the missionaries took measures to solve that problem. They bought children and taught them the faith, so they were more successful because they knew the language. The missionaries themselves also made efforts to learn the language. The Hungarian, German and English missionaries were more skilful at acquiring the lingua franca of the Ulus Jochi, which was the Kipchak. Evidence of their efforts is the Codex Cumanicus in the 13–14th centuries.

Second: problems with their numbers. “The harvest is great, but the labourers are few”. (Matthew, ix, 37) – Bishop of Zayton cited Matthew in his letter,³⁰ and this is a common refrain.

Third: the Christian missionaries distanced themselves from the clergy of other religions, and were unwilling to cooperate with other Christian Churches. We can read in our letter, that they had problems with “the schismatic and heretical Christians in the place”. That difficulty can be explained by the Universalist claims of Christianity. There is a good description of this issue in

²⁵ On the problems with the ringing of the bells see Sinor 1993, 113–114.

²⁶ Bihl and Moule 1923, 112; Moule 1921, 366; Хайтаа 2014, 94, 102.

²⁷ “...ciuitate magna Capha, vnde nunccupatur nobile zucurum Caphatinum” (Bihl and Moule 1923, 112; Хайтаа 2014, 94).

²⁸ Işin 2013, 21.

²⁹ The first missionaries among the Mongols had problems with the languages and the interpreters, too. See Rubruck, who complained about his dragoman “who was neither intelligent nor articulate” (Jackson and Morgan 1990, 101; Wyngaert 1929, 191).

³⁰ Wyngaert 1929, 366.



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the work of Marco Polo: "They confess indeed in Tartary that Christ is Lord, but say that he is a proud Lord because he will not be with other gods but will be God above all the others in the world".³¹

Fourth: The missionaries attached too much importance to the Christian members of rulers' family.

Finally, the fifth problem was the so-called cultural barrier. First of all, the missionaries misunderstood the Mongols' attitude to spirituality. And so, they left out of consideration that the khans supported other religions, too. For the Mongols, the support of the Heaven manifests and realizes in success and prosperity in this life. The Mongols considered the cooperation with the representatives of different religions as a help in the submission of the conquered, local people. The representatives of religion got privileges because "they were seen as allies in the day-to-day struggle with Nature and with hostile spirits".³² All of the yarliqs given to the representatives of religions contained that they had to preach for the khans.

These factors were serious problems for the missionaries. However, they did not achieve really great success in conversions; we are indebted to them for their reports, letters and narratives since we have a lot of useful information from them. Nevertheless, some of the Franciscan missionaries compiled one of the most precious Turkic monuments of the Middle Ages.

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³¹ Moule and Pelliot 1938, 21.

³² Jackson 2005, 272.



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