

The Khan in the West

The Reception of Mongol Political Power in the Texts and Images of Medieval Latin Europe

The expansion of the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth century represented a serious threat to Christian Europe. Yet fear of the Mongols did not prevent Western authorities, both political and religious, from establishing contact with them. On the contrary, the unification of a large part of Asia and Eastern Europe under the Mongol Empire created more stable conditions for travel and trade, thus offering unprecedented opportunities for cultural and commercial exchanges on a large scale between East and West.

Scholars have studied the relations between Western Europe and the Mongol Empire from various perspectives. Much focus has been placed on the diplomatic contact between the khanates and the papacy, as well as on Western commercial activity within the Mongol Empire.¹ These encounters resulted in an expansion of knowledge in Latin Christendom, with friars and merchants writing of their experiences in travel reports, letters, and treatises that gained popularity across Europe from the mid-thirteenth century.² The scholarly literature has approached

1 For the contact between the West and the Mongol Empire, see Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West: 1221-1410* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Roxann Prazniak, *Sudden Appearances: The Mongol Turn in Commerce, Belief, and Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019); Anne Dunlop, 'Mongol Eurasia in the Trecento Veneto', *Convivium*, 7 (2020), 114-35. On the Franciscan missions to the Mongol Empire, see Marcellino Da Civezza, *Storia universale delle missioni francescane* (Rome, Prato, and Florence: Tipografia Tiberina, 1857-95), I; Girolamo Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra Santa e dell'Oriente francescano* (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1906-27), I; 'Les Mongols et la paupeté: Documents nouveaux édités', ed., trans., and with commentary by Paul Pelliot, *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, 23 (1922/23), 3-30; 24 (1924), 225-335; 28 (1931/32), 3-84; Anastasius Van den Wyngaert, *Sinica franciscana* (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1929-42), I; Igor De Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971); Jean Richard, *La papauté et les missions d'Orient au Moyen Âge. XIII-XV^e siècle* (Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 1977); Luciano Petech, 'I Francescani nell'Asia Centrale e Orientale nel XIII e XIV secolo', in *Espansione del Francescanesimo tra Occidente e Oriente*

nel secolo XIII: Atti del VI convegno internazionale (Assisi, 12-14 October 1978) (Assisi: Porziuncola, 1979), pp. 213-40.

2 On these writings and their circulation within medieval Europe, see Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Mediaeval Notices of China*, 4 vols (London: Hakluyt Society, 1913-16); Leonardo Olschki, *Storia letteraria delle scoperte geografiche: Studi e ricerche* (Florence: Olschki, 1937); Leonardo Olschki, *Marco Polo's Precursors* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1943); Folker Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China: Die Entdeckung Ostasiens im Mittelalter* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1992); Michèle Guéret-Laferté, *Sur les routes de l'empire mongol: Ordre et rhétorique des relations de voyage au XIII^e et XIV^e siècles* (Paris: Champion, 1994); Johan Van Mechelen, 'Yuan', in *Handbook of Christianity in China*, ed. by Nicolas Standaert (Leiden: Brill, 2000), I, pp. 46-51; Christine Gadrat, 'Des nouvelles d'Orient: Les lettres des missionnaires et leur diffusion en Occident (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)', in *Passages: Déplacement des hommes, circulation des textes et identités dans l'Occident Médiéval. Actes du colloque de Bordeaux (2-3 February 2007)*, ed. by Joëlle Ducos et Patrick Henriët (Toulouse: Méridiennes, 2013), pp. 159-72; Marianne O'Doherty, *The Indies and the Medieval West: Thought, Report, Imagination*



◆ Fig. 1
Yuan Painter, *Portrait of Kublai Khan*, ca. 1294.
Taipei, National Palace
Museum (Photo:
© National Palace
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these written sources with the purpose of reconstructing the medieval ethnographic gaze on Eastern peoples.³

This paper aims to take further the approach just mentioned, namely considering the perception of the Mongol khans in Latin Europe, in both text and image. Among the medieval Western sources on the Mongols, this essay considers the *Ystoria Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* by John of Plano Carpini (written after his return in 1247),⁴ the *Itinerarium ad partes*

(Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); Alvisé Andreose, 'Viaggiatori e testi tra Europa ed estremo Oriente al tempo di Marco Polo', in *La strada per il Catai: Contatti tra Oriente e Occidente al tempo di Marco Polo*, ed. by Alvisé Andreose (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 2019), pp. 25-45.

3 Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Michele Bacci, 'Cult-Images and Religious Ethnology: The European Exploration

of Medieval Asia and the Discovery of New Iconic Religions', *Viator*, 36 (2005), 337-72; Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols of the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 110-1450* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Kim M. Phillips, *Before Orientalism: Asian Peoples and Cultures in European Travel Writing, 1245-1510* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Shirin Khanmohamadi, *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

4 John of Plano Carpini, *Storia dei mongoli*, ed. by Paolo Daffinà and others (Spoleto: Fondazione CISAM, 1989).

orientales by William of Rubruck (1255),⁵ *Le Devisement du monde* by Marco Polo (1298),⁶ and the *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum* by Odoric of Pordenone (1330–31).⁷ These authors witnessed public ceremonies and political rituals at the court of the khans. The Franciscan friar John of Plano Carpini was received by Batu at his headquarters on the Volga before being sent to Karakorum, where he witnessed Güyük's enthronement in August 1246. In 1253, the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck stopped at the camps of Čagatai, Sartaq, Batu, and Möngke. The following year, Möngke received him at his palace in Karakorum. Marco Polo spent seventeen years in the service of the Great Khan Kublai, becoming acquainted with him and his court. Finally, the Franciscan friar Odoric of Pordenone was received by the Great Khan Yesün Temür (r. 1323–28) at his court in Tatu.

This paper takes a threefold approach to the Western perception of Eastern sovereigns. First, focusing on Kublai Khan, it analyses the reception of his historical and legendary figure in Western medieval sources, both written and visual. Second, it underlines the ways in which Latin travellers described the khan's body as invested with political and even religious authority in the framework of the elaborate *mise-en-scène* of courtly ceremonies, political rituals, and diplomatic meetings. Third, it shows how the Eastern sovereign embodied a sense of cultural otherness from the point of view of Latin friars, both in terms of its outward appearance and of the cultural habits in which it was involved.

To undertake such an inquiry, I will moreover discuss a group of illuminations accompanying medieval travelogues. Foremost among these are two luxury manuscripts of *Le Devisement du monde* by Marco Polo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 2810, and Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264. The former is the famous travel anthology known as *Livre des merveilles*, commissioned around 1410 by John the Fearless, duke of Burgundy, who then gave it as a gift to his uncle Jean, duke of Berry. Its illuminations are attributed to the atelier of the Boucicaut Master.⁸ By contrast, in the case of the Bodleian manuscript, Marco's travelogue was added between 1400 and 1410, with illuminations executed by a certain Johannes and his London workshop.⁹ Also to be considered is Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. Lat. 1013, a manuscript of the so-called *Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose* (a vernacular version of the *Relatio* by Odoric of Pordenone) that was produced in Verona before 1368 for a mercantile milieu.¹⁰ It contains seventeenth drawings that, despite their poor quality, are of great iconographic interest.

5 William of Rubruck, *Viaggio in Mongolia*, ed. by Paolo Chiesa (Milan: Einaudi, 2011). For an English translation of the *Itinerarium* with an excellent commentary, see Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253–1255* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990).

6 Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du monde*, ed. by Philippe Ménard, 6 vols (Geneva: Droz, 2001–09). This is the French version (Fr), to which the illuminated manuscripts under discussion belong.

7 Odoric of Pordenone, *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, ed. by Annalisa Marchisio (Florence: SISMEL, 2016). For the Old French version, see *Le voyage en Asie d'Odoric de Pordenone traduit par Jean le Long: Itinéraire de la Pègregrinacion et*

du voyage (1351), ed. by Alvise Andreose and Philippe Ménard (Geneva: Droz, 2010).

8 Millard Meiss, *French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry: The Boucicaut Master* (London: Phaidon, 1968), p. 117.

9 Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490: A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), pp. 68–73.

10 Odoric of Pordenone, *Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose: Volgarizzamento italiano del secolo XIV dell'Itinerarium di Odorico da Pordenone*, ed. by Alvise Andreose (Padua: Centro Studi Antoniani, 2000), pp. 73–74. On Odoric of Pordenone, see Alvise Andreose, *La strada, la Cina, il cielo: Studi sulla Relatio di Odorico da Pordenone e sulla sua fortuna romana* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2012).

Latin Europe's Cultural Reception of Mongol Rulership

As one of the main figures of *Le Devisement du monde*, Kublai Khan was a character familiar to readers of Marco Polo and was formative in the Western imaginary of the East. Marco Polo spent seventeen years at the khan's service as a diplomat, becoming acquainted with him and his court.¹¹ He even devoted a section of his book to the sovereign, exalting his rise to power and his political strength, as well as speaking to his habits and physical appearance. Marco wrote that Kublai Khan was neither tall nor short but rather of average height; he was good-looking and well proportioned: his skin was white and red, his eyes grey, and his nose nicely shaped.¹² As described, the emperor's body is stereotyped and idealized. Indeed, the author missed the ethnographic characteristics of Mongol people accounted for in the texts of John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, such as the traditional Mongolian hairstyle and clothing¹³.

The well-known official portrait of Kublai attributed to the Nepalese artist Anige, now kept at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, provides a more naturalistic image of the Mongol emperor (Fig. 1). He is portrayed with a round face, almond-shaped eyes, and a sloping moustache while dressed in a Mongol-style hat and robe, with his hair tied in braids.¹⁴ The narrative choice on the part of Marco Polo (and his co-author, Rustichello da Pisa) not to portray Kublai Khan faithfully, but rather in a favourable light, can be explained in connection with the cultural expectations of his Western audience. More specifically, the description of Kublai should be contextualized within medieval physiognomic theory, according to which moral virtues were reflected in specific physical characteristics, such as medium height, dark eyes, and balanced proportions. Given that, for Western readers, these features were invested with a positive meaning, it is no coincidence that Marco attributed all of them to the khan.¹⁵ The divide between this idealized description and the naturalism of the portrait by the Yuan painter can therefore be interpreted in light of the different cultural patterns and habits of Latin and Mongol audiences, respectively.

Similarly, Marco Polo met his Western audience's expectations by calling upon, and in turn feeding, the stereotype of the East as a land of wonders. For example, the author emphasized the central role of hunting for Kublai Khan and his court, in which hunting trips and parties marked the passing of time.¹⁶ This narrative choice may be explained in light of the importance

11 On the figure of Kublai, see Leonardo Olschki, *L'Asia di Marco Polo: Introduzione alla lettura e allo studio del Milione* (Florence: Olschki, 1957), pp. 391-408.
 12 Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, ed. by Jean-Claude Faucon, Danielle Quéruel, and Monique Santucci (Geneva: Droz, 2004), pp. 68-69.
 13 *Storia dei Mongoli*, pp. 232-34; *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 36-38.
 14 Antoon Mostaert, 'À propos de quelques portraits d'empereur mongols', *Asia Major*, 4 (1927), 147-56; Maxwell K. Hearn, *Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), p. 66; Anning Jing, 'The Portraits of Khubilai and Chabi by Anige (1245-1306), a Nepali Artist at the Yuan Court', *Artibus Asiae*, 54 (1994), 40-86; *Chinese Cultural*

Art Treasures: National Palace Museum Illustrated Handbook (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1966), p. 90.

15 Debra Higgs Strickland, 'Artists, Audience, and Ambivalence in Marco Polo's *Divisament dou monde*', *Viator*, 36 (2005), 493-529. On the meaning of the white and red skin according to physiognomic theory, see Michele Bacci, *The Many Faces of Christ: Portraying the Holy in the East and West, 300 to 1300* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), pp. 157-67; Michele Bacci and Caterina Bay, *Giunta Pisano e la tecnica pittorica del Duecento* (Florence: Edifir, 2021), p. 30.

16 Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du monde: Traversée de l'Afghanistan et entrée en Chine*, ed. by Jeanne-Marie Boivin, Laurence Harf-Lancner, and Laurence Mathey-Maille (Geneva: Droz, 2003), pp. 44-45; *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, pp. 68-69.

of hunting in courtly life in the West.¹⁷ Contributing to the perception of Kublai as an ideal sovereign according to Western canons, Marco portrayed Kublai's hunting trips as marvellous events involving a spectacular number of retinues and animals.

In the Mongol Empire, however, hunting did not function merely as a ritual that anchored courtly self-representation. Rather, due to the nomadic roots of its people, it was a distinct identity marker born of necessity. It should be stressed that one of the few official portraits of Kublai Khan, namely the hanging scroll executed by the celebrated court painter Liu Guandao around 1280 (Fig. 2), depicts him hunting.¹⁸ The painting, preserved at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, shows the khan and his empress riding horseback on the steppe. One member of their small retinue of Mongol and black attendants carries a muzzled cheetah on the back of his horse. This alludes to a hunting technique that, according to Marco Polo, Kublai himself practised in the park of his palace in Shangdu: upon spotting wild game, the khan released the animal.¹⁹ One of the French masters who illuminated the so-called *Livre des merveilles* represented this passage faithfully, with a cheetah perched behind Kublai Khan on horseback (Fig. 3).

Indeed, the manuscripts of *Le Devisement du monde* present several illuminations of Kublai Khan hunting. One of them is of particular interest here (Fig. 4). Belonging to the previously mentioned Bodleian manuscript, it illustrates a spectacular scene at Khanbaliq, where Kublai Khan and his entourage hunted annually, from December to February, with the help of five thousand dogs.²⁰ The illumination shows Kublai on horseback, flanked by a large entourage of horsemen and foot soldiers. They look on while the fleet of dogs attacks wild animals, an iconographic detail worthy of attention. Since hunting with dogs was rather common in medieval Europe, representations of this subject in illuminated manuscripts draw from an established and widespread repertoire of motifs.²¹ The visual treatment of the hunt in the Bodleian manuscript can be compared with contemporary illuminations of the same subject in copies of the well-known *Livre de chasse* by Gaston Fébus, count of Foix.²² Therefore, in depicting Kublai Khan's hunt, the illuminator of *Le Devisement* worked from the canon of forms with which he was familiar.

Among the many characteristics of Kublai Khan, Marco Polo provides a particularly indulgent description of his polygamy, specifying that he was married to four women.²³ One of the French illuminators who painted the so-called *Livre des merveilles* portrayed the Mongol empresses as elegant French ladies, richly dressed in the fashions of the day, with white skin,

On these passages of *Le Devisement du monde*, see Olschki, *L'Asia di Marco Polo*, pp. 407-08; Debra Higgs Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction in the *Devisement du monde*', in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 34-35; Philippe Ménard, *Marco Polo: Voyage sur la route de la soie* (Paris: Glénat, 2019), pp. 112-17.

17 Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', p. 34.

18 Jing, 'The Portraits', p. 73; Hearn, *Splendors*, pp. 66-67; Ménard, *Marco Polo*, pp. 112-13.

19 *Le Devisement du monde: Traversée de l'Afghanistan et entrée en Chine*, pp. 44-45.

20 *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, p. 86. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264, fol. 240^v.

21 This iconography is attested in the manuscripts of the *Livres de chasse* kept in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (compare MS Fr. 619, fol. 57^r, fol. 62^r, fol. 64^r, fol. 66^r, fol. 74^r, fol. 75^r, fol. 76^r, fol. 79^r, fol. 82^r, fol. 83^r, fol. 86^r, fol. 89^r, fol. 90^r; MS Fr. 616, fol. 68^r, fol. 73^r, fol. 77^r, fol. 85^r, fol. 85^v, fol. 87^r, fol. 89^r, fol. 94^r, fol. 96^v).

22 Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', p. 35; Baudoin Van den Abeele, *Texte et image dans les manuscrits de chasse médiévaux* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2013), pp. 81-88.

23 *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, pp. 68-69. On this passage, see Olschki, *L'Asia di Marco Polo*, pp. 397-98; Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', pp. 29-31.



◆ Fig. 2
Liu Guandao, *Kublai Khan hunting*, 1280.
Taipei, National Palace Museum
(Photo: © Taipei, National Palace Museum).



◆ Fig. 3
Kublai Khan hunting, ca. 1410. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. Fr. 2810, f. 31^v (Photo: © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France).

◆ Fig. 4
Kublai Khan hunting, from the *Devisement du monde*, ca. 1400-1410. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodley 264, f. 240^v (Photo: © Oxford, Bodleian Library).





◆ Fig. 5
Yuan Painter, *Portrait of Chabi*, ca. 1294.
Taipei, National Palace Museum (© Taipei,
National Palace Museum).

blonde hair, and precious golden crowns.²⁴ All in all, the French illuminator depicted a courtly and chivalrous scene, appealing to his viewers' visual culture.²⁵

The official portrait of Chabi, one of Kublai Khan's wives, probably executed as a pendant to that of Kublai and kept with it today at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, provides a more precise notion of how Mongol noblewomen presented themselves in portraiture (Fig. 5).²⁶ Notably, Chabi wears the most distinctive mark of female nobility, namely a tall, conical headpiece called a *kuku* or *boqta*.²⁷ This traditional accessory became particularly elaborate under the Yuan dynasty, as Chabi's portrait shows: her *kuku* is decorated with a floral pattern, adorned with pearls, and plumed.²⁸ More generally, the *kuku* was an article of dress that captured the attention of Latin travellers, who recalled it in their writings. John of Plano Carpini noted that this headgear differentiated women's fashion from that of their male counterparts.²⁹ Ten years later, William of Rubruck referenced the *boqta* using the Latin transliterated form *bocca*, describing it in great detail as a headdress typically worn by rich Mongol women. He even evoked a rather fascinating image of Mongol women on horseback: from a distance, each looked like a soldier, since her *boqta* could be mistaken for a helmet, and the feathers at its top for spears.³⁰

In the first half of the following century, Odoric of Pordenone remembered the *boqta* as a foot-shaped piece of headgear, richly embellished with feathers and pearls.³¹ This description, shared by other Latin travellers, was taken quite literally by one of the illuminators of the aforementioned *Livre des merveilles*, who painted a Mongol noblewoman with a human foot on her head (Fig. 6).³² Another image of the *boqta* can be found in the illuminated manuscript of the *Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose*, in which three Mongol women are shown seated beneath the khan's throne, wearing foot-shaped headpieces (Fig. 7).³³

The Mise-en-Scène of the Khan's Body

Most Latin travellers to the Mongol Empire were Franciscan and Dominican friars sent by popes and kings. As a fundamental part of their diplomatic missions, they were tasked with introducing the Mongol khans to the Christian faith, as well as with delivering to them diplomatic letters and messages from the West. These encounters often ended in misunderstandings, since the two parties did not share a common linguistic or cultural background.³⁴ Both on

24 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 2810, fol. 36^r. On the illumination, see Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', pp. 29-31.

25 Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', p. 57.

26 Jing, 'The Portraits', pp. 71-72; *Chinese Cultural Art Treasures*, p. 90; Ménard, *Marco Polo*, pp. 100-01.

27 The *boqta* might have influenced the *hennin*, the conical hat typically worn by European women in the late Middle Ages: see Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Il Medioevo fantastico: Antichità e esotismo nell'arte gotica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1993), p. 198.

28 Jing, 'The Portraits', p. 72.

29 *Storia dei Mongoli*, p. 234.

30 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 39-41.

31 *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, pp. 198-99.

32 This illumination shows one passage from the travelogue by Ricoldo da Montecroce, a Dominican friar to the court of the Mongol Il-Khan ruler Arghun; compare Ricoldo da Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en terre Sainte et au Proche-Orient*, ed. by René Kappler (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), pp. 84-87.

33 Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Urb. Lat. 1013, fol. 22^r.

34 This was particularly true in the cases of John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, and Odoric of Pordenone, since they integrated into the Mongol Empire much less than Marco Polo did.



◆ Fig. 6
Mongol women, one of whom wearing the boqta depicted as a foot-shaped headgear, ca. 1410. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. Fr. 2810, f. 276r (Photo: © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France).

◆ Fig. 7
A court ceremony at the Great Khan's palace (Mongol women wearing the boqta), ca. 1350-1375. Vatican City, Vatican Library, Ms. Urb. Lat. 1013, f. 22r (Photo: © Vatican City, Vatican Library).

the Latin and the Mongol sides, the difficulty of communicating with words was, in a certain sense, overcome by a nonverbal language, according to which objects, spaces, and bodies were invested with deep meaning. William of Rubruck was particularly insightful in interacting with the khans using this nonverbal code. By dressing up in liturgical vestments and displaying liturgical furnishings and holy books when first encountering Sartaq Khan, he created a *mise-en-scène* that impressed the ruler.³⁵

Likewise, since the khan's body directly mirrored the khan's power, the Mongol emperors were deeply invested in such nonverbal communication. The travellers remarked on how the khan's body was endowed with a political and even divine power. In particular, they were captivated by how the Mongols showed respect and reverence for their ruler by kneeling and bowing low in front of him.³⁶ This form of prostration (*kowtow*) was introduced by Genghis Khan and later passed from Mongol to Chinese ceremonial.³⁷

The most striking description of the *kowtow* was given by Marco Polo.³⁸ He recalls how, at the New Year's Eve celebrations, the nobles, astrologers, philosophers, physicians, and dignitaries knelt four times in front of Kublai Khan, thus performing en masse a veritable expression of their submission.³⁹ After showing admiration for the khan's body, they went on to adore the khan's name, incensing an altar upon which was placed a red tablet with the khan's name written on it.

Marco Polo stressed the ambiguity of the *kowtow* as an act of both political submission and religious devotion, a slippage that is efficaciously captured in the corresponding illumination of the so-called *Livre des merveilles* (Fig. 8).⁴⁰ The French illuminator does not depict Kublai but rather a golden idol, thus characterizing the *kowtow* as an idolatrous practice.⁴¹ Mongol nobles and dignitaries are depicted offering an animal sacrifice to the idol through the intermediation of a minister, who receives it with his hands covered as sign of reverence and humility. Given that animal sacrifice is rejected by Christians, who celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice instead, the illuminator suggests here the pagan nature of the *kowtow*.

Medieval travelogues abound with descriptions of the *kowtow* similar to that of Marco Polo, and these provide insight into how the Western friars might have reacted to, and even engaged with and in, such ceremonies. Indeed, to succeed in their diplomatic missions, the

35 The furnishings included an altar pillow, a cross, a thurible, a Bible, an illuminated psalter, and a missal. *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 74.

36 Odoric of Pordenone witnessed the *kowtow* during parties held in honour of Yesün Temür. He wrote that the Mongol nobles bowed in front of the khan three times. One of the ministers (*philosophi*) supervised such a mass demonstration of submission and devotion to the khan's body; see *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, pp. 208-09. The parties described by Odoric of Pordenone were identified thanks to a comparison with the contemporary Eastern sources; see Xiaolin Ma, 'Le feste del Gran Qa'an nei resoconti di Marco Polo e Odorico da Pordenone', in *La strada per il Catai*, pp. 120-23.

37 Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher: A French Artist at the Court of the Khans* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p. 49.

On the Eastern sources pertaining to the *kowtow*, see Christiane Deluz, 'La hiérarchie sociale dans l'empire mongol vue par les voyageurs occidentaux (XIII^e-XIV^e s.)', in *Remembrances et resveries: Hommage à Jean Batany*, ed. by Huguette Legros (Orléans: Paradigme, 2006), pp. 85-94.

38 *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, pp. 80-82; Deluz, 'La hiérarchie sociale', pp. 90-91.

39 On the Eastern sources concerning the New Year's Eve party, see Ma, 'Le feste del Gran Qa'an', pp. 119-20.

40 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 2810, fol. 40^r: On this illumination, see Strickland, 'Text, Image, and Contradiction', p. 41.

41 On the Christian perception of idolatry as opposed to true faith, see Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in the Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).



◆ Fig. 8
Noblemen worshipping an idol during the White-Feast,
ca. 1410. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France,
MS. Fr. 2810, fol. 40r (Photo: © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale
de France).

friars themselves had to perform the *kowtow* in front of the khan, particularly before entering the yurts.⁴² William of Rubruck, like Marco Polo, stressed the ambiguity of the *kowtow* as a gesture of political submission and religious veneration throughout his writings. On the occasion of his first diplomatic meeting with Sartaq – when he and his fellows wore liturgical vestments – they were asked to bow down three times.⁴³ In another encounter, William was asked to kneel before entering Batu's yurt, and since he usually addressed himself to God in such a position, he decided to pray rather than to address himself to the khan.⁴⁴ The friar overcame his discomfort only by considering the *kowtow* as a necessary step in the evangelization of the Mongols. Accordingly, he even stated before Möngke Khan that he bowed in front of him in order to serve God rather than to prove his submission.⁴⁵ In doing so, and through his actions and words more generally, William of Rubruck reframed the *kowtow* within a Christian value system, thus normalizing the cultural otherness, and even the idolatrous nature, of this political act of submission. When, on the octave of the Epiphany, William met Möngke Khan in the Nestorian church of his camp, he bowed first to the altar and then to the khan. He thereby expressed the hierarchy he espoused as a clerk of the Christian faith.⁴⁶

42 John of Plano Carpini called Qurumši 'Corenza'; on this identification, see Francis Woodman Cleaves, 'The Mongolian Names and Terms in the History of the Nation of the Arches by Grigor of Akanc', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 12 (1949), 433-35. Moreover, John of Plano Carpini had to show his

respect to Orda's son (see *Storia dei mongoli*, p. 308), Batu and Güyük (see *Storia dei mongoli*, pp. 311, 320).

43 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 74.

44 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 94-96.

45 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 154.

46 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 176.



◆ Fig. 9
 Hierarchical
 arrangement of the
 subjects around the
 Great Khan, 1400-
 1450. London, British
 Library, MS Harley
 3954, fol. 46r (Photo:
 © London, British
 Library).

Given the divine status William attributed to Möngke Khan, it is not surprising that he compared the emperor's palace in Karakorum to a church.⁴⁷ Its architectural structure echoed that of a basilica, consisting of a central nave and two side aisles separated by rows of pillars. In addition, the palace's south façade resembled the western façade of a church, with each of its three doors leading into an aisle. Möngke Khan's throne was located at the northern end of the hall. Following the comparison proposed by William of Rubruck, it should be remarked how the placement of the throne in Möngke Khan's palace corresponded to that of the apse, the most sacred space of a church. In the same way that a sacred image in the apse attracts the gaze of the faithful assembled in the church, Möngke Khan's seat was elevated, putting his body on display as an object of worship – in a certain sense, iconizing it. William described the palace in Karakorum as a temple for the adoration of the emperor. In particular, he stressed how the khan's body represented the focal point of a visual strategy aimed at enhancing the khan's authority.

The body of the khan, moreover, acted as an organizing principle, governing the space of the court and in particular the distribution of the subjects. William recalled how the men and women of the court positioned themselves around Möngke Khan according to their status: the more important they were, the closer to Möngke they had the privilege to sit. Similarly, men usually sat to Möngke Khan's right, and women to his left. One of his wives was seated just next to him, but on a lower level.⁴⁸ Möngke Khan's body was the centre of a microcosm reflecting the hierarchy of the Mongol Empire.

These proxemics find correspondences in other Western travelogues.⁴⁹ For example, Marco Polo describes banquets held in Kublai's palace in Khanbaliq, emphasizing how the participants were seated according to their hierarchical status. The khan's table was elevated, and the other tables were positioned closer and closer to the ground depending on the status of the guests: in order of importance, the first wife of the Great Khan, his sons, the nobles, his relatives' wives, and finally the nobles' wives.⁵⁰ Forty years later, Odoric of Pordenone remembered a similar arrangement of the subjects at Yesün Temür's palace in Tatu. The enthroned ruler was flanked by one of his wives (to the left) and his firstborn (to the right). Two additional wives were seated on a lower level to the left, while the lowest level was occupied by the other women belonging to the khan's family.⁵¹ In a manuscript of the *Libro delle nuove e strane e meravigliose cose* (Fig. 7),⁵² this description is accompanied by an illumination showing a raised throne shared by the khan and his firstborn and, on a lower level, three Mongol women, each one wearing a *boqta*.

Similar descriptions of the Mongol court as a space organized around the emperor's body circulated in Latin Europe and were conflated in the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, an imaginary travel report written in the middle of the fourteenth century after earlier sources. As is well known, this text circulated widely in medieval Europe, to such an extent that it is attested in several manuscripts written in various vernacular languages, some of them illuminated.⁵³ An English one (British Library, Harley MS 3954), dating to the first half of the fifteenth century,

47 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 212–15. See Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, pp. 47–48, 51–52.

48 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 214.

49 See Deluz, 'La hiérarchie'.

50 *Le Devisement du monde: L'empereur Khoubilai*, p. 76.

51 *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, pp. 198–99.

52 Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Urb. Lat. 1013, fol. 22^r.

53 Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371–1550)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

presents the travel account along with devotional texts for the laity. One of its full-page illuminations depicts a feast in honour of the Great Khan (Fig. 9).⁵⁴ The artist suggests the hierarchical disposition of the guests by distributing the figures of the emperor and his subjects on a six-tiered structure.

The hierarchical arrangement of the subjects around the khan was practised not only in the imperial palaces but also in the encampments and notably in the yurts, where it directly involved the Latin travellers in the context of diplomatic meetings. When John of Plano Carpini first entered Batu Khan's yurt, he was seated to his left, among the women. Later, when he returned after witnessing Güyük Khan's enthronement in Karakorum, his status had changed: he was considered privileged enough to sit to Batu's right. The khan shared a raised chair with one of his wives, while his brothers and sons sat on a bench, and the other subjects on the floor.⁵⁵ The ruler's body thus played a pivotal role in the organization of the space and the distribution of its inhabitants. Likewise, while in Čagatai Khan's yurt for a meeting, William of Rubruck witnessed the khan sharing a sort of bed with his wife,⁵⁶ and he reports having seen, on another occasion, Batu Khan sharing a raised chair with his wife, under which the men placed themselves to the right of the khan, and the women to his left. John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Marco Polo, and Odoric of Pordenone each relay visual strategies of staging around the khan's body, the objective of which was to emphasize, promote, and enhance the khan's authority.

Ethnographic Descriptions of the Khan's Body

Latin travellers perceived the emperor's body as invested with political and religious authority. But they also saw it as a bearer of difference, in terms of both physical appearance and cultural habits, such as those around consumption. Medieval travelogues contain numerous descriptions of Mongol khans heavily drinking and eating at feasts. First John of Plano Carpini,⁵⁷ and later William of Rubruck,⁵⁸ recalled several instances of intoxication at court. Marco Polo, of course, makes no mention of such behaviour: this would have contradicted his account of Kublai as an ideal sovereign.⁵⁹

Kumiss, an alcoholic beverage made from mare's milk, was commonly imbibed in both courtly and religious ceremonies.⁶⁰ The travelogue by William of Rubruck shows the extent to which drinking kumiss was embedded in the courtly ceremonies at Möngke Khan's palace in Karakorum.⁶¹ As already stressed, William compared the imperial palace to a temple devoted to the cult of the khan: Möngke Khan's throne was located at an elevated position on the northern end of the building. Opposite this, in the central nave near to the portal, was a golden fountain of kumiss, made by Guillaume Boucher, a Parisian goldsmith who, after being taken prisoner

54 John Mandeville, *Le Livre des merveilles du monde*, ed. by Christiane Deluz (Paris: CNRS, 2000), pp. 371–72. Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 215.

55 *Storia dei mongoli*, pp. 311–12.

56 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 52.

57 *Storia dei mongoli*, p. 312.

58 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 54, 76, 97, 154, 156, 160, 178, 210–13.

59 Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, p. 52. Olschki, *L'Asia di Marco Polo*, pp. 396–97.

60 Henry Serruys, *Kumiss Ceremonies and Horse Races: Three Mongolian Texts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974).

61 On the social function of drinking kumiss at court, see Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, pp. 52–56.

in Central Europe by the armies of Batu Khan, was active as a craftsman for the khan as well as for the Christian communities of Karakorum.⁶² The fountain of kumiss was certainly his most spectacular and technologically advanced creation. It consisted of a great silver tree with four lions at its roots, each of them spurting alcohol. The tree was surmounted by an angel holding a trumpet, an automaton that was activated when more drinks were needed. Among those present in the hall of the palace, Möngke Khan had the privilege of drinking first. This act was regulated by a solemn ritual. Sitting high on his imperial throne, the khan received the cup from the cupbearer, who ascended one of the two rows of steps leading to the throne, and then came down by the other side.

Ceremonies, banquets, and feasts at court were all accompanied by loud music.⁶³ As reported by Latin travelogues, this musical framework characterized the most impressive political rituals intended to exalt the khan's authority: the *kowtow* and the drinking of the first cup of kumiss. Odoric of Pordenone recalled that the musicians played loudly immediately following the *kowtow*, the mass demonstration of submission to the khan performed by his subjects.⁶⁴ Similarly, John of Plano Carpini stated that Batu would drink only when someone played for him.⁶⁵ Merging these accounts, Marco Polo noted how the banquets in Khanbaliq were enlivened by musicians who played their instruments every time the noblemen bowed down and every time Kublai Khan took a drink.⁶⁶

Similar descriptions find correspondence in an extraordinary illumination painted in Genoa in the third decade of the fourteenth century (Fig. 10).⁶⁷ It figures in British Library, Add. 27695, an item consisting of seven parchment leaves belonging to the so-called Cocharelli Codex, an illuminated manuscript named after a Genoese family of merchants. The Cocharelli family boasted wide commercial contacts in the Persian East and Cyprus, at that time an economic centre having strong ties with the Mongols.⁶⁸ The content and decoration of the manuscript mirror the breadth of these commercial and cultural relations.⁶⁹ The manuscript transmits a text on the historical events under Frederick II of Sicily, as well as a moral treatise consisting of seven chapters, each devoted to one of the deadly sins. The image of a Mongol khan eating and drinking while flanked by subjects and musicians was chosen to represent the Allegory of Gluttony. Such an iconographic choice may be explained in light of the Western perception of the Mongols as an extremely voracious people, as reported by John of Plano Carpini

62 On the function and the meaning of this work of art, see Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, pp. 63-106. On the status of kumiss in Mongolian culture, see Serruys, *Kumiss Ceremonies, Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 212-15. On this ceremony, see Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, p. 55.

63 This custom has been interpreted as evidence of the original magic and propitiatory implications of music in shamanic rituals of Central Asia.

See Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, p. 52.

64 *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, pp. 209-10.

65 *Storia dei mongoli*, p. 312.

66 *Le Devisement du monde. L'empereur Khoubilai*, pp. 77-78.

67 London, British Library, MS Add. 27695, fol. 13'. On this manuscript and the wide network of the Cocharelli family, see Francesca Fabbri, 'Il codice

Cocharelli tra Europa, Mediterraneo e Oriente', in *La pittura in Liguria: Il Medioevo, secoli XII-XIV*, ed. by Algeri Giuliana and Anna De Florianani (Genoa: De Ferrari, 2011), pp. 266-67; Francesca Fabbri, 'Vizi e virtù in due codici realizzati a Genova nel Trecento: Fra seduzioni d'Oriente e apporti toscani', *Rivista di storia della miniatura*, 17 (2013), 95-106; Anne Dunlop, 'Ornament and Vice: The Foreign, the Mobile, and the Cocharelli Fragments', in *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, ed. by Gürlü Necipoğlu and Alina Payne (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 228-37.

68 Fabbri, 'Il codice Cocharelli', p. 289.

69 As stressed in the study by Anne Dunlop, 'Ornament and Vice'.



◆ Fig. 10
A Mongol Khan as the Allegory of Gluttony,
ca. 1330-1340. London, British Library, Add. MS.
27695, f. 13r (Photo: © London, British Library)

and William of Rubruck alike.⁷⁰ According to a stereotype that circulated in Western medieval Europe, they even practised cannibalism.⁷¹

The naturalism of the illumination showing the Mongol khan is striking: the sovereign is represented with almond-shaped eyes, a forked beard, and a sloping moustache while seated cross-legged on a green pillow.⁷² Significantly, the khan raises a cup to his mouth and looks upon a rich banquet enlivened by musicians playing trumpets, drums, flutes, and violins – a narrative scene paralleling the loud banquets in honour of the khan that were described by Latin travellers. It should be stressed that the naturalism of the Genoese illumination is not an isolated case in medieval Italian art. Already in the first half of the twentieth century, a new chapter of historiography – one in which the exchanges between Latin Europe and the Mongol Empire came to be considered in relation to contemporary artistic production – commenced with the observation of the extraordinarily lifelike ‘Mongol types’ found in medieval art.⁷³ These types belong to a group of paintings executed by well-known Italian masters between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. They warrant brief summary here as a means of reconstructing a network of visual references before and after the execution of the Cocharelli Codex, which remains the only naturalistic Western image of a Mongol khan.

To accentuate the Wise Men’s origins in the East, the workshop of Giotto di Bondone included two Mongol squires in the fresco of the Adoration of the Magi in the north transept of the lower basilica of Assisi, a scene belonging to the narrative cycle of the Infancy of Christ.⁷⁴ Moreover, in the Stefaneschi Triptych, destined for the altar in the canons’ choir of Saint Peter in Rome, Giotto painted a Mongol rider among the pagan soldiers involved in the Crucifixion of Christ.⁷⁵ In the 1340s, in the transept chapel of Saint Francis in Siena, Ambrogio Lorenzetti completed a fresco of the Martyrdom of the Franciscans in Thane, in which he depicted a Mongol ruler and his soldiers overseeing the execution.⁷⁶ About thirty years later, in the chapter house of the basilica of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, Andrea Bonaiuti painted a Mongol type to evoke the evangelizing mission of the Church *ad Tartaros*, in particular in the scene of the *Ecclesia militans et triumphans*.⁷⁷ In the 1390s, Altichiero painted several ‘oriental’

70 Baltrušaitis, *Il Medioevo fantastico*, pp. 201-02; *Storia dei mongoli*, pp. 248-50; *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 28-29.

71 Strickland, *Saracens, Demons and Jews*, pp. 198-200 (see in particular p. 192, fig. 100).

72 William of Rubruck observed the khans sitting cross-legged in their yurts during diplomatic meetings.

73 Charles Diehl, ‘La peinture orientaliste en Italie au temps de la Renaissance’, *La Revue de l’Art*, 19 (1906), 5-16; Victor Goloubew, ‘Les races mongoles dans la peinture du Trecento’, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France* (1907), 239-45; Gustave Soulier, *Les influences orientales dans la peinture toscane* (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1924); George Edgell, ‘Le martyre du frère Pierre de Sienne et de ses compagnons à Tana, fresque d’Ambrogio Lorenzetti’, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 2 (1929), 307-11; Ivan V. Pouzyna, *La Chine, l’Italie et les débuts de la renaissance (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)* (Paris: Les Editions D’Art et D’Histoire, 1935); Hermann Goetz, ‘Oriental Types and Scenes in Renaissance and Baroque Painting’, *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 73 (1938), 50-62; Leonardo Olshchki, ‘Asiatic Exoticism in Italian Art of

the Early Renaissance’, *Art Bulletin*, 26 (1944), 95-106; Yukio Yashiro, ‘The “Oriental” Character In Italian Tre- And Quattrocento Paintings’, *East and West*, 3 (1955), 81-87.

74 Giuseppe Palumbo and Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, *Giotto e i giotteschi in Assisi* (Rome: Canesi, 1969), pp. 148-50, fig. 129.

75 Bram Kempers and Sible De Blaauw, ‘Jacopo Stefaneschi, Patron and Liturgist: A New Hypothesis Regarding the Date, Iconography, Authorship and Function of His Altarpiece for Old Saint Peter’s’, *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome*, 47 (1987), 83-113; Christine Smith and Joseph F. O’Connor, *Eyewitness to Old St. Peter’s: Maffeo Vegio’s ‘Remembering the Ancient History of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 272-84.

76 For the fresco in the context of the cultural, political, and commercial exchanges within Mongol Eurasia, see Prazniak, *Sudden Appearances*, pp. 79-102.

77 Margarete Dieck, *Die Spanische Kapelle in Florenz: Das trecenteske Bildprogramm des Kapitelsaals der*

types among the executioners of the martyrdoms frescoed in the oratory of Saint George in Padua, and in particular two Mongol types in the scenes of the Crucifixion and of the Adoration of the Kings.⁷⁸ Finally, in the first half of the following century, Pisanello featured a Mongol archer among the figures populating the scene of Saint George and the Princess, frescoed in the Pellegrini Chapel of the church of Sant'Anastasia in Verona.⁷⁹ Moreover, a drawing by Pisanello representing the same figure could be found in the so-called Codex Vallardi.⁸⁰ Although these figures were assigned naturalistic traits, they were nonetheless conceived as vague visual references to paganism or to the East more generally.

The Mongols' ostensibly heavy drinking and eating were not the only cultural habits that inspired awe among Latin travellers. Indeed, the khan's body was involved in sexual and marital customs that aroused wonder in the friars. They described polygamy as a practice generally in use among the Mongols, with the khans having many wives each.⁸¹ William of Rubruck recalled, with some measure of surprise, that Sartaq Khan's wives numbered six, and Batu Khan's as many as twenty-six.⁸² However, the most spectacular account of Mongol polygamy was relayed by Marco Polo. According to him, Kublai was not only married to four women but also had regular sexual relationships with young Mongolian girls, who were selected by the governess of his palace and sent in groups of six to his bedroom every three days.⁸³ This passage should be understood in the context of Marco's imaginative celebration of Kublai as a magnificent Eastern sovereign of immeasurable wealth whose sexual appetite was as boundless as his empire. Marco did not relate the appearance of these women and girls but rather presented them as passive subjects in this ritual, at once political and erotic.

On the contrary, William of Rubruck assigned greater attention to the physical appearance of one of Čagatai's wives, probably Yesülün Khatun. When he first met her in the yurt, in the presence of Čagatai, he was shocked by the sight of her, her face smeared with some sort of black ointment and her nose so small that it appeared to have been amputated.⁸⁴ Perceiving the empress's body according to Western canons of beauty, he emphasizes the dreadfulness of her appearance. William was well aware of the difference between Mongol and European canons in terms of feminine beauty. Indeed, in his *Itinerarium*, he wrote that the less nose a Mongol woman had, the more beautiful she was considered, and elsewhere he criticized the Mongol women who painted their faces black, thereby disfiguring themselves, in his estimation.⁸⁵ These judgements demonstrate how the body of the khan's wife elicited cultural shock in William of Rubruck.

Dominikaner von S. Maria Novella (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1997), pp. 114-20.

78 Luca Baggio, *Altichiero da Zevio nell'oratorio di San Giorgio: Il restauro degli affreschi* (Rome: De Luca, 1999), figs XVI and XXV.

79 On the Pellegrini Chapel programme, see Ulrike Bauer-Eberhardt, 'Per l'iconografia di San Giorgio e la principessa di Pisanello', in *Pisanello* ed. by Paola Marini (Milan: Electa, 1996), pp. 151-64.

80 Marini, *Pisanello*, pp. 248-49.

81 *Storia dei mongoli*, pp. 233, 250; *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 42-45.

82 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, pp. 20, 70.

83 *Le Devisement du monde. L'empereur Khoubilai*, pp. 68-69.

84 *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 52.

85 On the Mongol canons of beauty described by Rubruck, see *Viaggio in Mongolia*, p. 41; Jackson and Morgan, *The Mission of friar William of Rubruck*, p. 89 n. 3.

Conclusion

The Mongol Empire and its legendary sovereign, the khan, became part of the Western imaginary of the East thanks to the circulation of texts and images, resulting from the experiences of travellers and the invention of artists, respectively. An analysis of this written and visual material allows us to draw the following conclusions. First, such sources on the Mongol Empire were adapted to Western European cultural patterns and traditions. In particular, the figure of Kublai Khan, as shaped by Marco Polo's writings, appealed to his audience's expectations, evoking an idealized sovereign of extraordinary wealth and power who engaged in spectacular hunting trips and banquets as well as countless erotic relationships. As conveyed in text and image, even Kublai Khan's outward appearance, and similarly those of the Mongol empresses, responded to already established Western patterns, such as medieval physiognomic theory and certain iconographic types.

Second, Western travelogues attest to the function of the khan's body as a site of power. Merchants and friars reported the ways in which it was displayed to the public gaze within elaborate *mise-en-scènes*, involving the senses of both sight and sound and meant to exalt the khan's political and religious authority. Latin travellers recalled – and sometimes even practised – the *kowtow*, the most humiliating act of submission to the khan. They stressed the ambiguity of such a gesture as an act of both political submission and religious devotion, even remarking on their embarrassment in participating in this ceremony of worship directed towards the khan's body. Moreover, Latin travellers remembered how, often through proxemics, the body of the Mongol ruler shaped the space it inhabited – whether the imperial palace or the yurt. As a result of all these practices, Western sources compared the status of Khan to that of a god.

Finally, friars and merchants perceived the Mongol khans not only as men of power but also as foreigners. This perspective resulted in ethnographic descriptions of the khan's body that convey a sense of cultural otherness. This foreignness related both to physical features and to consumption habits, such as heavy drinking and eating, as well as marital and sexual customs.

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