

Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan, his life and times*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, pp. xxiii + 326

Morris Rossabi, *Voyager from Xanadu, Rabban Sauma and the First Journey from China to the West*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010, pp. xiii + 219

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These two books are re-editions. The first one, on Khubilai Khan, celebrates the twentieth anniversary of the first publication; the second, telling the story of the journey of Rabban Sauma in the West, was first published in 1992. Both are now supplied with new prefaces. Rossabi's two books are the works of an expert, but also easy to read.

For Khubilai Khan, the author gives a complete record of his life, with a wide description of his times. The first chapter is consecrated to the "Early Mongols"; the last one (ch. 8) to the decline of an emperor. It is only in ch. 5 that Khubilai becomes the emperor of China.

What had the new emperor done before that? At the end of ch. 1, we learn that "Güyük's success in expanding the Empire (toward the West) did not lessen the tensions among the descendants of Chinggis Kan" (p. 18) Thanks to his mother's political acumen, Möngke was elected Khagan in 1251, after the death of Guyüg. Contestations of the election gave way to harsh conflicts among the Mongols; Möngke was successful in crashing all his rivals and opponents, while Khubilai fought very hard in the expeditions into the "Chinese domain" to extend Mongol rule.

When, in ch. 2, we see Khubilai emerging as a great military and political leader, attention must be paid to the fact that his appanage was North-China, a territory populated with sedentary peasants and permeated with the so-called Confucian culture, as well as Taoist and Buddhist philosophies and religions.

Möngke died in 1258. His young brother Hülegü rushed from the Middle East to Mongolia to take part in the Khurilai (assembly for the election of the next Great Khan). It was only in 1260, after bitter infightings among the Mongol chiefs, that Khubilai was given the title of Great Khan, an election contested for sometime.

From then on, it seems that West and East went their separate ways. When, in 1264, Khubilai decided to convene a Khurilai to judge his fierce but now defeated brother and rival Arigh Böke, the leaders of the principal Khanates (Persia, Russia and Central Asia) found excuses to be absent. Although they paid homage to Khubilai as Great Khan, an "aura of illegitimacy continues to surround him." (p. 62)

The Great Khan became the Emperor of China, after the ultimate defeat of the Sung dynasty (ch. 4). Khubilai "eventually acknowledged that he could not control Central Asia." (p. 110) It was perhaps a clash of cultures: Khaidu would contend that Khubilai (his cousin) had betrayed and abandoned the traditional virtues of nomadic life (p. 104). At the end, "Khubilai encountered

enormous difficulties in seeking to impose his own rule over either the steppe lands and the oases” in modern Xinjiang (p.112). Khubilai’s expeditions against Japan failed, but he subjugated Korea. He then concentrated his efforts on ruling China. As for the other parts of the “Mongol Domains”, many were in fact “virtually autonomous.” (p. 115)

Rossabi summarizes the accomplishments of Khubilai saying: “He sought to govern, not simply exploit, the largest and more populous empire in the history of the world until that time... [But his] dream of unifying and administering the known world” (p. 231) never materialized, and his successors abandoned it.

Although the conquest of China was a considerable achievement, Khubilai should not be remembered only as the founder of the Yuan dynasty in China, but also as, albeit contested, Great Khan of the Mongols.

The second book, on the first journey from China to the West, may confirm the impression that Eurasia, Central Asia and the Middle-East were strategically important and extremely difficult to govern. The map on p. 10 is nearly the same than the one on page 111 in the biography of Khubilai. It shows the borders of the Ilkhanate Persia (or Empire), the Chaghadaï Khanate (or Empire, or Domain of Khaidu), the territory of the Golden Horde, and the vast Empire of the Great Khan.

Belonging to the Önggüd ethnic group, who largely accepted Chinggis’ supremacy, Bar Sauma was born of a Nestorian family, and this explains in great part his motivation to undertake such a long and perilous journey. His faith and the characteristics of the Nestorian Church are succinctly and usefully summarized by Rossabi.

In 1260, enters Markos (p. 34), “a talented and devout Nestorian”, also of Önggüd Turkish extraction, born in 1245, and a student of Bar Sauma, who as a monk had gained a high reputation. He convinced his master to go west and visit Jerusalem. 1260 was also a tempestuous time because of struggles for the election of a new Great Khan.

Khubilai Khan, in his summer capital known to European as Xanadu (p. 39), approved of the journey due to a mixture of religious and political motives. The date of departure must have been between 1275 and 1278. The two official pilgrims probably reached the city of Tüs in 1280. In all these regions, Nestorians and Muslims were not in good terms. Bar Sauma and Markos resumed their monastic life near the seat of the Nestorian Metropolitan Mar Denha. After his death Markos was elected Catholicus, and took the name of Mar Yaballah.

The end of ch. 2 could be the end of the journey, the two heroes living peacefully in their adopted country. But Rabban (not anymore “Bar”) Sauma was given a new mission by the Ilkhan. The focus shifts from China to the intricate relations between European powers, Muslims and Mongols, themselves dangerously divided. Europe was also far from being a political unity.

Arghun, the Ilkhan, gave letters and oral messages to Rabban Sauma in 1286 to invite the Pope, the Byzantine Emperor, and the Kings of France and England, to foster an alliance against the Mamelukes in order to force them out of Syria and the Holy Land, thus satisfying European

ambitions and securing his own territory. Rabban Sauma did reach Rome, and met the king of France in Paris and the King of England in Bordeaux. He also visited many churches and venerated relics.

Rabban Sauma was back in Persia in 1288, where he informed Arghun of the result of the political mission. In 1290, threat from the Golden Horde obliged Arghun to postpone *sine die* his plan of a coalition with the West, which was never put again on the table after his death in 1291.

For the rest of his life, Rabban Sauma “was extremely happy... particularly with the opportunity to devote himself fully to his religious life” (p. 176) in Persia.

The Syriac translation of his original reports, discovered in 1887, shows the work of an editor more interested in theology than politics. It reveals much of an intense historical period covering so many peoples, lands, and governments from China to Europe, including all the Khanates and other populations in between.