



The Real Giovanni

The Mission of Friar Giovanni di Monte Corvino

Giovanni di Monte Corvino was born in 1247. He studied law and medicine before joining the Order of Friars Minor, a branch of the Order of Franciscans. Having been involved in 1272 with Girolamo Masci, the future Pope Nicholas IV, in unsuccessful negotiations to reunite the Roman and Greek Churches, he devoted the next fifteen years of his life to preaching the Christian message in the Near and Middle East.

The Golden Age of Islamic learning and culture was coming to an end. Fuelled in part by the Crusades, the open-mindedness of the early Middle Ages was gradually being replaced by suspicion and intolerance. Whereas, once, travellers had been able to exchange ideas as well as goods, new borders were being erected between the worlds of Christianity and Islam. A new age of bigotry and prejudice was being born.

Relations between the Churches were as fractious as ever. The monarchs of Europe were wrapped in their own affairs. Edward of England was staking his claim to overlordship of Scotland while Philippe of France was busy dreaming up schemes to extract additional taxes from his subjects. Though the trade disputes between Venice and Genoa had not yet degenerated into open war, these two powerful Italian city states pursued their rivalry with vigour. The Mamluk Sultan al-Ashraf was amassing his armies for an assault on the last Christian outpost in the Levant.

The Mongols had withdrawn from Europe but they had secured their empire with varying degrees of permanence in the Middle East and Asia. Presiding over it in the Chinese city of Khanbaliq, present day Beijing, was Genghis Khan's grandson Kublai, while Persia was ruled from Tabriz by the latter's grandnephew Arghun.

For all their reported brutality, many of the Mongol princes were, in this age of bigotry, remarkable for their tolerance in religious matters. Forty years earlier, the Great Khan Mangke had given voice to this quality when he remarked to the Flemish Franciscan Willem van Ruysbroeck that *as God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to men several paths*.

Arghun encouraged Christians and Jews in his regime and was known to favour establishment of a new religion based on all the others. The great Kublai Khan was particularly interested in Christianity and it was partly due to this interest that Marco Polo made his second, and extended, visit to China. In a letter to Clement IV, Kublai had begged the Pope to send emissaries to teach his people about the *new faith*.

Such was the political and religious climate when, in 1289, Giovanni di Monte Corvino was recalled to Rome by the new Pope.

Nicholas was at one with the crusading spirit and had indeed responded to the fall of Tripoli by launching a small fleet against the Muslims. Had he reacted differently to appeals from Arghun for an alliance against the Mamluks, it is possible the capture of Acre might have been avoided and the subsequent history of the Middle East might have been very different. As it was, Arghun's appeals to the West were met only with vague promises. Either Nicholas felt unable to trust him or was unable to rally sufficient support for the venture.

Arghun died in March 1291 and Acre fell to al-Ashraf in May of the same year.

Even if his crusading aspirations had come to nothing, Nicholas IV was nevertheless imbued with missionary zeal and, no doubt aware of the Great Khan's open-mindedness, he gave Giovanni di Monte Corvino a new commission, to spread the message of Christianity beyond the borders of the Levant to the Mongols of the Far East. Thus it was that Giovanni found himself in the spring of 1291 in Tabriz, and about to embark on the long journey through India to Kublai's court. As Giovanni himself wrote later from Khanbaliq - *I proceeded on my*

further journey and made my way to Cathay, the realm of the Emperor of the Tatars who is called the Grand Khan. To him I presented the letter of our Lord the Pope, and invited him to adopt the Catholic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, but he had grown too old in idolatry. However he bestows many kindnesses upon the Christians, and these two years past I am abiding with him.

But 'idolatry' was not Giovanni's only enemy in his mission. There was already a strong Christian presence in the country, that of the Nestorians who held different beliefs from mainstream Catholicism. Indeed, according to Friar Giovanni's letters, they *had grown so powerful in those parts that they will not allow a Christian of another ritual to have ever so small a chapel, or to publish any doctrine different from their own.*

Despite these difficulties and despite his isolation - in twelve years of ministry he received no news from Rome or from his Order - Giovanni built two churches in Khanbaliq and by 1304 had translated the Psalms of David and the New Testament into the Mongol language. He made many converts, among them, in 1294, the Mongol Prince Ongut Korguz., who, according to the historian Friedrich Heer, *was to become the mainstay of Catholic missions in Asia and China.*

In 1307, while Philippe of France was enacting his revenge on the Templars, Pope Clement V appointed Giovanni as Archbishop of Peking and consecrated seven new western bishops to serve him in adjoining provinces. Only three of these ever reached China.

Giovanni di Monte Corvino died in China in 1328.
