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Mission To Asia (MART: The Medieval Academy Reprints For Teaching)



Synopsis

The narratives by John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck of their journeys to Mongolia in the middle of the thirteenth century differ from the majority of works in this series. The authors were not canonized saints or beati, and their travels were not missionary journeys in the strict sense, but were more of the nature of political embassies. Nevertheless, they were servants of Christendom as few men have been. They give a first-hand authentic account of the first contact between Western Christendom and the Far East, and this at the moment when the whole oriental world from Korea to Hungary was being turned upside down and remade by one of the greatest catastrophes in the history of the world.

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Customer Reviews

Christopher Henry Dawson was a British historian and Catholic intellectual. He was the first Chauncey-Stillman Chair in Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard University.

The Mongol's meteoric conquest of Asia and China brought their vast armies into contact with the peripheral European states. Most of the Russian city states were easily destroyed however most Western Europeans failed realize the threat or to organize any defense. However, after the fall and destruction of Kiev in 1240-1, the rout of a Magyar army in Hungary, and the occupation of Hungary the Pope caused the Western Princes began belated attempts for defense against the potential

invasion. Europe had not faced an external threat of this proportion for hundreds of years: the Magyar's had been mostly pacified, the Vikings had stopped their wholesale raids, and the Muslim states' great expansion had slowed due too the presence of Crusader armies in the Middle East. News of the Mongol threat had reached the various leaders of the West - the Queen of Georgia the Prince of Galicia had all sent desperate appeals for aid. Fortunately for Europe, the death of Khan Ogedey in 1241 and the discord between the Mongol leaders in the West caused their armies to withdraw from Western Europe's borders. The first primary source in this volume is John of Plano Carpini's 'History of the Mongols.' John was a 65 year old massively fat Franciscan monk without ANY knowledge of oriental languages. His mission was to spy on the Mongols to see if they were as threatening and powerful as reported and to provide suggestions as to ways to defend against them. His mission was supported by Pope Innocent IV and he set out on the 5,000 miles journey in 1245. John of Plano Carpini met with the Great Khan Guyuk and this text outlines the characters and customs of the Mongols, the food they ate, the roles of men and women, descriptions of their armies, their history, religion, government, clothes, housing, and even accurate accounts of the genealogy of the royal family. The most fascinating part of his account is his description of how to wage war against them. If Christendom wishes to save itself, the army "should be organized in the same way as the Tartar army," it ought to "have scouts in every direction," and "the Christians should also beware of their usual tendency of over-expenditure, lest they be obliged to go home on account of lack of money and the Tartars destroy the whole earth." This Chronicle is easy to read and is the first real contact with the Mongols by the West. It is interspersed with hilarious statements of Western disgust with Mongol customs, "they do not wash their dishes," "they do not wash their clothes," and if a "virgin commits fornication with anyone, they kill BOTH the man and the woman." The second group of documents are Two Bulls of Pope Innocent IV Addressed to the Emperor of the Tartars. These explain the tenants of the Christian faith and beg the Mongols to be peaceful and to do not harm to the envoys. The third document is The Narrative of Benedict the Pole. This is a brief relation by John of Plano Carpini's Polish companion dictated by him to a prelate of Cologne upon his return from Asia. It paraphrases the two bulls and provides little to John of Plano Carpini's much longer and more detailed account. The fourth document is Guyuk Khan's Letter to Pope Innocent IV (1246). The Khan states that he does not understand the Pope's request for him to be peaceful since he has the Mongol God's favor which is the reason the Mongols have already conquered most of Asia. He demands that the Pope "say with a sincere ear" the he will submit and serve him. The Journey of William of Rubrick is the second main primary source and is even more interesting than John's due to the fact that William of Rubrick voluntarily set out in the

employ of the French king to convert the Mongols to Christianity. His account has the "fullest and most authentic information on the Mongol Empire in its pre-Chinese phase that we possess." Brother William's book is a straightforward account of his journey and his personal experiences in full detail. Brother William describes the endless drinking parties of Karakorum with men of every race and religion, the great disputations between representatives from the major religions, meetings with the Khan, arguments and alliances with Nestorian Christians who were lived all across Asia (even as far as China), difficulties with his constantly drunk interpreter, and revelations he had concerning the geographic errors of St. Isidore's Encyclopedia as he wandered across the vast expanses of the steppes. This is probably one of the most interesting and vivid Medieval accounts that I have ever read! The last document group includes The Letters of John of Monte Corvino, a Letter of Brother Peregrine Bishop of Zaytun, and a Letter of Andrew of Perugia. Although "inferior in literary and historical value" to John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck's narratives they are of great importance for the history of Christendom since they record the beginnings of the Catholic missionary activity in China. This collection of primary sources is superbly accompanied by Christopher Dawson's introduction. He outlines all necessary background information, the rise of the Mongols, the response of Christendom, the eventual alliances between the Mongols and the West against the Muslims in the Holy Land, different Christian sects (Nestorians etc), and analysis of the accounts and their authors. The only thing missing from this volume is a map. However, this does not at all detract from this astoundingly thorough and enlightening volume of a neglected area of Medieval history. A MUST BUY for the Medieval Historian!

This book is light in interpretations, heavy on reports imbedded in the historical era by the participants. Some references to places are difficult since, names, places, nations and peoples names change through time.

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