

The Journey of Benedictus Polonus or a European Discovery of Asia before Marco Polo

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This article presents a brief reconstruction of the historic journey of Benedict the Pole and John of Pian de Carpine, the first known Europeans after A.D. 900 who completed a successful return journey east of Baghdad and gave surviving accounts of their travels. The article, which focuses mainly on the role of Benedict the Pole, is divided into five parts: the reasons and organization of the deputation sent to the Mongols by Pope Innocent IV from 1245-1248, the route travelled by the Papal envoys, the existing versions of the two surviving accounts of the mission, the role of Benedict the Pole as the secretary and translator to the papal legate Pian de Carpine, and the outcome of the journey as seen from the perspective of Europe-Asia contacts.

Keywords: 13th century Europe-Asia contacts, early Western accounts of Asia and the Mongol Empire, Benedictus Polonus, Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, European journeys to Asia before Marco Polo

Introduction

Already during the initial period of the formation of Polish statehood (from ca. 960), in the areas located in the Vistula and Odra basins, there existed a network of European trade routes, leading from east to west and north to south. The network included an ancient route which ran through Polish territory from the coast of the Baltic Sea to Italy and Greece, known as the Amber Road. The main branch of the northern route of the Silk Road intersected with this route of far-reaching trade. Although the pathway for caravans ended in the Genoese colony in the Crimea, in the thirteenth century its vital branch continued westward to Kiev, then to Krakow, Opole, Wroclaw and Magdeburg, and then to Spain, or to the ports of Lübeck or Antwerp.

Along with merchants, pilgrims, bishops, imperial officials, ordinary adventurers, and papal envoys, ideas and technological innovations travelled to the West and to the East. It was with such a mission that Benedict the Pole (Benedictus Polonus), most probably a Franciscan friar, went as an interpreter to John of Pian de Carpine (Giovanni da Pian del Carpine), the papal legate, from the Polish city of Wroclaw to the great Khan of Mongolia in the years 1245-1248. Thanks to this expedition, they managed to learn about the culture, religion and customs of the newly-developed Mongol Empire. They also made valuable geographical discoveries, filling in the blank spots on European maps.

The aim of this article is to present a brief outline of this historic journey, with the focus on Benedict's participation in the papal mission. It is also an attempt to portray the significance of the accounts and documents of the journey, which have survived to this day, as written testimonies of the early stages of globalization.

The Papal Mission

Before the journey of John of Pian de Carpine and Benedict the Pole, European knowledge about Central Asia was rather limited. Scarcity of information was only slightly reduced by stories brought by sailors, but even so, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, European comprehension of the lands located east of the Caspian Sea was still clouded by ignorance. The maps available at that time in Europe were created mostly by Arab travellers and gave some understanding about the southern coasts of Asia. However, almost all the lands beyond the Ural Mountains and the Himalayas were classified as *terra incognita*.

This European lack of awareness about Asia was put to the test in the years 1227-1242 as a result of Mongol invasions. Western civilisation was at that time deeply shaken by a power which, until then, it was hardly aware of. It is possible that the first alarming accounts reached the Papal Court in Lyon only after Batu Khan captured Kiev and conquered almost

all of Ruthenia in 1240.¹ After that, the Mongol army proceeded west and its onslaught of 1241 brought particularly tragic consequences – in February Krakow surrendered and soon afterwards, all Poland fell.² Afterward, the Mongols attacked Hungary and the Balkans, quickly reaching Vienna and the Adriatic coast. One by one, the seemingly powerful states of medieval Europe failed to defend themselves. Partly, it was due to their defences being weakened by wars with their neighbours, but even more so, the failure was caused by the lack of detailed, verified knowledge about the invaders' culture, customs, beliefs, and most of all, their war techniques and the tactics employed by their army.

The pope, Innocent IV, was determined to undertake extreme measures to find a “solution against the Tatars” (*remedium contra Tartaros*).³ He did not underestimate the danger signified by the Mongols, so dangerously proximate to Europe, and proposed sending a deputation to find out about the possibility of their potential conversion, but also to gather as much information as possible about them, in particular on their military power, administrative structure, resources, and most of all, their plans for Europe.

To realise this goal, in 1245, the pope began preparations to establish contacts with the Great Khan. In order to secure success, Innocent IV decided to send four deputations to the capital of the Mongols (two consisting of Dominicans and two of Franciscans), each of them at a different time and taking a different route.⁴ However, only one of the four arrived at the Mongol capital and returned safely, bringing back the desired information, and in a sense, proving the prevailing conviction that the vow of strict poverty, coupled with evangelistic aspirations, made the Franciscans (like Buddhist monks) well-suited to the challenges of travel along the Silk Road.

The only successful deputation⁵ was led by an experienced papal diplomat, John of Pian de Carpine, one of the disciples and companions of Saint Francis of Assisi. He was

¹ The term Ruthenia (also Kievan Rus) is used here for the first state of the Eastern Slavs. Its formation began in the ninth century. In 988, Grand Ruthenian Prince Vladimir adopted Christianity from Byzantium. Ruthenia encompassed the lands of modern western and central Ukraine (Kiev, Chernihiv, Volodymyr-Volynsky, Halych), Belarus (Polotsk) and part of the lands of north-western Russia (Ryazan, Volodymyr, and Novgorod) with the exit to the Baltic Sea, eastwards covering the territory from the then uncertain Polish frontier to the Volga and Caucasus. Never centralised, Ruthenia was governed by local princes ruling over their states. Volodymyr (modern Volodymyr-Volynsky) had been an important princely seat in Volhynia, whereas Halych on the Dniester River became a principality in the 12th century. The Mongol invasion of 1240–41 marked the onset of Galicia-Volhynia's decline, which continued until 1340.

² Its climax was the battle of Legnica (1241), where Polish knights supported by a handful of Teutonic Knights and Knights Templar clashed with the Mongols and suffered a terrible defeat. 7,000 knights and the Silesian prince Henry II the Pious died on the battlefield. As a result, the period of fragmentation of the centralized Polish state was significantly extended in duration.

³ Hubert Jedin and John Dolan, eds., *History of the Church*, vol. 4: *From the High Middle Ages to the Eve of the Reformation* (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), 394.

⁴ Jedin and Dolan, *History*, 394-395

⁵ Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 45-47.

accompanied by a Polish Franciscan friar of Wrocław, known as Benedict the Pole, whom he might have met earlier due to his involvement in creating and sustaining the Franciscan presence in Poland in its formative stages.⁶ Because of Pian de Carpine's association with Polish Franciscans, some historians suspect that he might have known at least basic Polish, as well as being positively disposed to Polish issues, and therefore, overwhelmed by the tragedy of the Tatar invasion, become a great advocate for defending Europe against the Tatars at the papal court. He might have therefore suggested to the pope that on the dangerous journey to the Mongol capital he should be accompanied by Fr. Benedict, who would act as a guide, secretary, translator and expert on matters of the language and customs of the Ruthenians,⁷ since there was a possibility that the papal envoys would communicate best with the Great Khan in the Ruthenian language,⁸ for at his court there were at that time many prisoners from Eastern Europe. According to some Polish historians, Benedict could have also known the language of the Mongols before the expedition.⁹

The pope's political goals were to stop the Mongols from invading Christian countries, to convert the Khan and his subjects to the Christian faith and, possibly, to make them his allies in the war against Muslims in the Holy Land. These tasks were given to the pope's legate, John of Pian de Carpine, and his secretary cum translator, Benedict the Pole. The pope obliged them also to watch most carefully everything they saw along the way, and especially to learn about the beliefs, customs, laws and the political and military systems of the Mongol state. He also instructed both the Franciscan friars to learn as much as possible about the Mongol's plans for further conquests.¹⁰

Endowed with the pope's instructions, the deputation set off on a completely unknown route to Mongolia, a country about which many astonishing and frightening stories circulated in medieval Europe, and also a country known neither to classical nor medieval geographers.

⁶ In 1228, John of Pian de Carpini became the provincial of the German province. He remained in the post until 1230. During these years, he sent Friars Minor to Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Denmark and Norway. He is said to have had a special focus on Poland, taking the post of the provincial of Saxony and Poland. Cf. Antoni Zwiercan, "Nowe spojrzenie na początki franciszkanów w Polsce," *Nasza Przyszłość. Studia z dziejów Kościoła i kultury katolickiej w Polsce* 63 (1985): 9-13.

⁷ Ruthenians – several eastern Slavic peoples (modern-day Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Carpatho-Rusyns). Their name is derived from Ruthenia, the name of the territory that they inhabited (see note 1).

⁸ Ruthenian language – official designation for the spoken and written language of the Ruthenians (see notes 7 & 1).

⁹ Cf. Joachim Lelewel, *Polska wieków średnich czyli Joachima Lelewela w dziejach narodowych polskich postrzeżenia*, vol. 4 (Poznań: Nakł. J.K. Żupańskiego, 1859), 426. It could have been possible through learning from the captives held by the Poles after the Battle of Raciborz (March 20, 1241).

¹⁰ Information given in the introductory part of *Historia Mongolarum quos nos Tartaros appellamus*, according to which the envoys were to learn about the resources and military forces of the Mongol rulers and try to recognize the interior of Asia in geographical terms. As such, it was to be a religious, political, diplomatic, espionage and discovery expedition under the auspices of the Papal States. Cf. C. Raymond Beazley, ed., *The Texts and Versions of John de Plano Carpini and William de Rubruquis, as Printed for the First Time by Hakluyt in 1598, Together with Some Shorter Pieces* (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1903), 74-75 and 107-108.

Therefore, out of necessity, they undertook the first geographical expedition which, merely by its nature, was revealing and bold. Following the existing trade routes, they journeyed from Wrocław through Kraków, Halych, Kiev, Serai on the Volga River, and further to the land of the Great Khan. With them they carried a letter from Innocent IV addressed to “the ruler and the people of Tartaria [for them] to learn the path of truth” (*regi et populo Tartarorum viam agnoscere veritatis*), dated March 13, 1245, containing, among others, the following passage:

We, therefore, desiring for all to live in unity and peace, as well as in the fear of God and led by the example of the Lord of Peace, warn you, plead with you and exhort you, so further attacks of this kind, and especially the persecution of Christians, in the future would desist completely. Moreover, there is no doubt that with so many and such prodigious transgressions you have provoked the wrath of the Divine majesty which, due to the malice of these sins, you would propitiate [only] by satisfying [it] with appropriate penance ...¹¹

The Journey¹²

An accurate geographical delineation of the Carpine-Benedict route to Mongolia, made by land for the first time by European travellers, is impossible.¹³ The main travel points and dates, however, are mentioned in their accounts. However, with the limited knowledge of world geography and almost complete lack of knowledge about Asia in their time, the travellers most probably had no clear idea about the path they took. Therefore, they could not specify the route in detail in their reports. We can only speculate that they followed the beaten paths known to local people or to guides. The roads leading to Karakorum, the capital of the Great Khan, could have been known only to the native peoples or to the Mongol post, travelling efficiently across the great Tatar Empire.

Making use of limited knowledge,¹⁴ the papal delegation set off on the journey from

¹¹ *Nos igitur, pacifici regis exemplo cunctos in unitate pacis sub Dei timore vivere cupientes, universitatem vestram monemus, rogamus et hortamur attente, quatinus ab impugnationibus huiusmodi et maxime Christianorum persecutionibus de cetero penitus desistentes, super tot et tantis offensis divine maiestatis iram, quam ipsarum exacerbatione vos non est dubium graviter provocarse, per condigne satisfactionem penitentiae complacitis* Cf. Lucas Wadding, *Annales Minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutum*, vol. 3 (Firenze: Quaracchi, 1931), 135-136.

¹² The narrative in this part of the article is based on the written accounts of Benedict the Pole (*Relatio Fratris Benedicti Poloni*) and John of Pian de Carpine (*Historia Mongolarum quos nos Tartaros appellamus*), the full texts of which are reprinted in Jerzy Strzelczyk, ed., *Spotkanie dwóch światów. Stolica Apostolska a świat mongolski w połowie XIII wieku. Relacje powstałe w związku z misją Jana di Piano de Carpiniego do Mogołów* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo ABOS, 1993), 116-175 and 224-228.

¹³ Partly, it is compared with the Eurasian Steppe route, and partly it is sometimes drawn in comparison to the route of Marco Polo.

¹⁴ Even though in the thirteenth century, Europeans already knew about the existence of a sea route through

Lyon on Monday, April 16, 1245, the second day of Easter.¹⁵ The journey was first broken at the court of the Czech king, Wenceslaus, de Carpine's personal friend, who endowed him with letters to several Polish princes, and also with supplies for the further journey. Unfortunately, the date and place of this event were not recorded. In Poland, de Carpine visited Prince Boleslaw's castle in Legnica, miraculously preserved from the Mongol invasion. Here also the papal delegation received supplies. From Legnica, the legate went to Wroclaw, where he was joined by Benedict the Pole, already appointed for the mission by Pope Innocent IV. Together, they left Wroclaw provided with money and food supplies, as well as writs of protection. Then, they came to Łęczycza, to the court of Prince Konrad Mazowiecki, where they were advised to stock up with gifts for the Mongol dignitaries which, as they were told, were to significantly facilitate the fulfilment of the task entrusted to them by the pope. From there they travelled to Krakow, and from there (sometime around Christmas of 1245) to Halych. Later, they broke the journey in Danilov, where, as de Carpine states, they "were near death from exhaustion" (*usque ad mortem fuimus infirmati*).¹⁶ From there, travelling by sleighs, they arrived in Kiev at the end of January 1246. They left Kiev on February 4, 1246 (*secundo die igitur post festum Purificationis*).¹⁷ The safe passage to Kiev, according to the narration of Benedict, the papal envoys owed to Prince Konrad Mazowiecki.¹⁸

In Kiev, they were received by the Mongol commander of the city, as well as by the local nobility. On their advice, they exchanged horses for Mongolian ones, more adapted to the conditions and climate. Next, they went down the River Dnieper to Kanev. Here, the Mongolian commander again changed their horses and directed them to the next town, where a man named Micheas "full of wickedness" (*omni malitia plenum*)¹⁹ was to be waiting for them. From Kanev on the Dnieper on February 19, 1246, they proceeded to the first Mongol military camp, where they arrived on February 23. There, they met with the camp leaders and explained that they were coming from the pope, the supreme ruler of Christians. They also

the Persian Gulf, from where ships of Indian spice merchants sailed to India, the Malay Islands and China, especially for the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe in ancient and medieval times, travelling by sea was a venture beyond strength and possibilities. At the same time, the land routes, through which merchants (mainly Persian) had imported Chinese silk from Central Asia since antiquity or exported European goods to Asia, attracted and fascinated many.

¹⁵ John of Pian de Carpine left Lyon in the company of a Franciscan brother, a Czech named Stefan. We have hardly any information about Brother Stefan, except for the mention in Benedict's account that he was walking with Carpine and Benedict as a companion and that they came to Kanev, where he had to remain because of an illness: ... *dicti duo fratres Iohannes et Benedictus, tercio fratre debilitato, cum equis et clientulis quos secum adduxerant ibidem relictis* Cf. A. Van Den Wyngaert, ed., *Relatio Fr. Benedicti Poloni, in Sinica Franciscana*, vol. 1, *Itinera et relationes fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Firenze: Quaracchi, 1929), 133-143.

¹⁶ Beazley, *The Texts*, 92.

¹⁷ Beazley, *The Texts*, 92.

¹⁸ *Qui mediante Conrado duce Polonorum pervenerunt Kioviam, civitatem Ruscie que nunc est sub Servitute Thartarorum*. Van Den Wyngaert, *Relatio*, 136.

¹⁹ Beazley, *The Texts*, 93. If not stated otherwise, all translations into English by the author.

explained the nature and purpose of their journey, and asked to be led to the Great Khan.

Changing horses two or three times each day, so most probably travelling nonstop from dawn until nightfall, the envoys reached Sarai on Good Friday, April 6, 1246. While there, with the help of local translators, they translated the papal letter into Ruthenian, Persian and Mongolian. They were also received by Batu Khan with all due respect. He listened very carefully to their each and every word (*audita legatione et de verbo ad verbum examinata*),²⁰ as Benedict noted in his diary. The next day, on April 7 – also according to the diary of the Polish Franciscan – they were told to prepare for the journey to Karakorum.

Most probably the following Tuesday, after Easter was over, the papal envoys departed on the journey to the Mongol capital. Accompanied by two guides, they went through the most difficult and dangerous part of the expedition, across the lands between the Volga and Syr Darya rivers, the Caspian Depression, crossing the steppes and unknown lands. Then, they entered the country of Kangittae,²¹ where the earth was dried out and deprived of water. Through this land they travelled until Ascension Day, which fell on May 17, 1246.

After crossing the Kangittae territory, the envoys entered the land which Benedict the Pole in his work calls *Turkya*.²² Passing through it, they saw several towns and rivers, for example, the town of Iankynt,²³ located on the banks of the Syr Darya River. After crossing *Turkya*, the two friars went through the areas of east Turkistan, Persia and a part of west Turkistan. This part of the journey lasted from May 17 until June 16, 1246. Afterwards, they reached the territory of Nigrorum Kythaorum,²⁴ and at the beginning of July, they finally reached the empire of the Mongols. Three weeks later (on July 22), after a 15-month journey, they arrived at the camp of Güyük, soon before his coronation on August 24, 1246.

The mighty ruler received them only on the third day after he was crowned, on August 27. Güyük, invited by the pope's letter to become a Christian, indicated that, first of all, the pope himself and all the princes of Europe would have to come and swear allegiance to him. Later, in the company of his secretary and several advisors, he discussed the pope's suggestions given in the letter and listened carefully to the envoys' explanations. A few days later, Güyük met the envoys once again, and then, on November 11, 1246, John of Pian de Carpine and Benedict the Pole were once again invited for a meeting, but this time only to the Great Khan's office, where a letter from Güyük, written in Persian as a reply to the pope,

²⁰ All fragments of the original text of the *Relatio*, from Van Den Wyngaert, *Relatio*, 135-143.

²¹ Kangittae (also Changle) – nomadic peoples living east of the Yaik River (now the River Ural); peoples of Comania (see note 41).

²² *Turkiya* – most probably Kwarazm/Chorasnia, the large oasis region on the Amu Darya River delta, land inhabited by Muslim peoples speaking Turkic languages.

²³ Iakynt – Jangikent/Jankent/Djankent on Syr-Darya; capital of Oghuz.

²⁴ Nigrorum Kythaorum – the Black Kythayans; a group of the Kythayan peoples mentioned in Chinese (from the 3rd century AD) and Turkic (from the 8th century AD) sources, belonging to the Mongol ethnic group; in the 10th century AD, Black Kythayans invaded northern China and established their own dynasty, the Liao (907-1125).

was translated into Latin and Arabic in the presence of the envoys, who both agreed that they clearly understood its meaning. Soon after that, they were told to get ready for their return, and on November 15, carrying the sealed letter of the Great Khan to the pope, they started on their journey back to Lyon.

The way back proved to be much more difficult than expected, due to the harsh winter conditions prevailing in Central Asia, so it took the envoys until June to reach Kiev. The main result of the mission, the Great Khan's reply to the pope, was delivered to him only after a full twelve months, in November 1247. Its general tone puts into question the diplomatic aspect of the mission undertaken by the two Franciscan friars; however, it also constitutes a large part of the European learning about the Mongols, reflected figuratively in Güyük's last words:

You yourself must come at the head of [all] your kings, without exception, to pledge to Us your services and allegiance. But if you would not follow God's command and disobey Our instructions, We would recognize you [all] as Our enemies. This is what We wish to tell you. If you act against that, who knows [what could happen] God [only] knows that.²⁵

Two Accounts of the Mission

All the information related above regarding the key points of the journey by the Amber route up to Kiev and the Silk Road land route through Central Asia, accompanied by many details and facts observed and registered by the papal envoys during their approximately two-year voyage to Karakorum and back, comes from the written accounts documenting their mission.²⁶

The two papal envoys returning from their journey reached Cologne on October 3, 1247, bringing two testimonies.²⁷ The main report of the mission, *Historia Mongalorum quos*

²⁵ *Tu igitur Papa venias cum Regibus tuis et potentibus ad nos et da nobis fortitudines tuas. Et si non venis et nostrum consilium non audieris, pro certo sciemus quod gratiam non vis nobiscum, postea autem quid futurum sit nescimus, solus Deus veritatem novit.* The Latin text of Güyük's letter to Pope Innocent IV, in Van Den Wyngaert, *Relatio*, 40.

²⁶ There is also a third work, *Historia Tartarorum*, based on the experiences of the same journey. It was written by C. de Bridia (we do not know his full first name), also a Franciscan friar (probably Polish or Czech). The manuscript of his work was completed on July 30, 1247. Some researchers assume that he participated in the mission up to the point where the Mongols from the Batu Khan's camp detained him, allowing only Benedict and de Carpine to proceed to Karakorum. After their return from Mongolia, the Franciscans reunited (April 25, 1247) and returned together. Another version says that de Bridia was not one of the papal envoys. The manuscript was discovered in 1957 in the United States (presently it is kept at the Yale University Library).

²⁷ According to Jerzy Strzelczyk, the date was verified in *Annales s. Pantaleonis Coloniensis*. Strzelczyk, *Spotkanie*, 85, f. 86.

nos Tartaros appellamus (History of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars), was submitted by John of Pian de Carpine, the head of the delegation, with an additional account by the translator and secretary of the papal legate, Benedict the Pole, *Relatio Fratris Benedicti Poloni* (The Account of Friar Benedict the Pole).

Historia Mongalorum survived in two versions. The shorter one was most probably written during the return journey, based mainly on observations made there and then, supported by what remained in the memories of the envoys. The second, extensive version, was almost certainly completed after their return, supplemented where necessary, and carefully revised.²⁸ Both versions of this text are comparatively well known and have been discussed more extensively in critical literature, in contrast to Benedict's *Relatio*.

The work, as its title accurately expresses, was indeed related by Benedict to a clergyman in Cologne, whose name we do not know.²⁹ The dictation, which took place when the two papal envoys were still on their way to Lyon in the autumn of 1247, is a well organised, synthetic report about the goals and experiences of the journey to the Mongol's capital. The manuscript has survived in two versions. The earlier, most probably the thirteenth century copy, remains at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris.³⁰ The later and less complete version, dating to the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century, is kept at the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Vienna.³¹ In the case of both manuscripts, they were attached as an introductory/opening part to de Carpine's *Historia Mongalorum* and both end with the Latin translation of the letter of the Great Khan Güyük to Pope Innocent IV. The letter, as it seems, was added to the account on Benedict's wish, as a vital document which he perhaps thought necessary to attach due the requirements of his post as the secretary of the papal mission, yet about this we can only speculate. Nonetheless, it seems that adding a copy of the letter of which he was obviously in possession to his *Relatio* was for Benedict the natural thing to do.

The text of Benedict's *Relatio* was first published by M. d'Avezac in 1838, together with *Historia Mongalorum*, and following the same pattern, also by W. W. Rockhill in 1900 (text quoted after d'Avezac), G. Pulleé in 1913, and a Franciscan friar, Anastasius Van Den Wyngaert, in 1929. Benedict's report was also translated into French (by M. d'Avezac, 1839), English (by W. W. Rockhill, 1900), Italian (by G. Pullé, 1929) and German (by F. Risch, 1930). Even though the eminent historian of geographical research C. Raymond Beazley did not include its text in his edition of *Historia Mongalorum*, he generously refers to *Relatio* in his editorial comments.

The lack of interest in Benedict's account is not only a world, but also a Polish

²⁸ For more information, see Strzelczyk, *Spotkanie*, 86-90, and Jerzy Strzelczyk, *Benedykt Polak. Z Europy do Azji przez Kazachstan (1245-1247)* (Warszawa: Oficyna Olszynka, 2008), 36-38.

²⁹ Jerzy Strzelczyk quotes the report of the actual dictation taking place in Cologne. Strzelczyk, *Spotkanie*, 85, f. 86.

³⁰ Colbert cote 2477; incipit: *Benedictus Polonus. De itinere fratrum Minorum ad Tartaros Anno Domini MCCCCLV*

³¹ Codex Lat. 512; incipit: *Relacio Fr. Benedicti Poloni*.

phenomenon. In a way, it can be explained by the fact that the only two copies ascribed directly to Benedict's dictation were prepared outside Poland and, due to constant political turmoil, were rather little known and then became forgotten. Another explanation is that there perhaps were other versions of *Relatio* held in the libraries of some monasteries or in private hands, though they were destroyed during the many wars which took place in this country. The fact remains, however, that for these, or some other unknown reasons, we can find very few direct references to Benedict's work in Polish historical sources. Moreover, the first published translation of *Relatio* into Polish, prepared by Andrzej Jochelson, appeared as late as in 1986 in a rather niche publication, *Kalendarz św. Antoniego* (the Calendar of St. Anthony).³²

Since *Relatio Fratris Benedicti Poloni*, as well as its author, remain in the shadow of *Historia Mongalorum*, shedding some light on both in the next part of this paper is worthwhile.

Benedict the Pole and His Role in Documenting the Journey

In thirteenth century Polish sources, Benedict the Pole appears only once – in a written account of 1252. From that source, we learn that five years after returning from the land of the Mongols, Benedict testified as a witness to a miracle in the canonization process of Bishop Stanislaw of Szczepanow. He is described there as “brother Benedict, of the order of Friars Minor, who went to the Tatars” (*fratrem Benedictum ordinis fratrum minorum, qui fuit apud Tartaros*).³³ On the basis of this information, we can almost be sure that he died after this event,³⁴ yet neither the date nor the place of his death or his resting place are known.

Benedict the Pole belonged to the Franciscan order in Wrocław, founded in 1236, and the fact that he was identified as “the Pole” (*Polonus*) is important because the Wrocław home of the Franciscan order belonged to the multinational Polish-Ruthenian-Czech province, and included brothers who came from Germany, Poland, and Czechia, as well as Italy and England. He was an educated man and, it seems, also a polyglot, which certainly might have influenced choosing him as the secretary and translator of the papal legate sent on such an important mission. According to one of the very few attempts to reconstruct his

³² The topic of Benedict the Pole became more popular in Polish academic literature in the last decades of the 20th century. Currently, it also appears from time to time as a travel curiosity, and is used to promote the New Silk Road initiative as well as the Franciscan order in Poland.

³³ August Bielowski, ed., *Monumenta Poloniae historica. Pomniki dziejów Polski*, vol. 4 (Lwów-Kraków: Akademia Umiejętności, 1884) 301.

³⁴ There is a manuscript of the legend kept at the Library of the Polish Academy of Art and Sciences (Bbb. I. 32. saec. XVIII, *Vitae sanctoru regni Poloniae olim Sarmatiae*) from the second half of the eighteenth century. On page 701, the lives of John of Pian de Carpine and Benedict the Pole are related. According to this account, both of them were to die a martyrs' death in the town of Armaloch (Persia) in the year 1248.

biography, he studied theology at the religious school in Magdeburg under the well-known theologian Simon from England. He listened to lectures in Latin, which he knew fluently, and also had the opportunity to learn German.³⁵ In the sphere of speculation, however, remain the circumstances in which Benedict learned the Ruthenian language, which, according to the surviving accounts of the expedition to Karakorum, he was able to use fluently in conversations with Ruthenians. According to one version, he could have been born somewhere on the Polish-Russian borderland, i.e., by birth he belonged to a community communicating freely in both languages. According to another, before joining the Franciscan order, he could have participated in expeditions of Wrocław merchants to Kiev (after all, as the accounts depict, it was with a group of such merchants that the papal legation travelled to Kiev, to continue from there unaccompanied to Mongolia). It is also possible that at some point, Benedict could have belonged to the Franciscan Ruthenian mission.³⁶

Another puzzling question relating to Benedict's linguistic abilities is whether or how he knew the language of the Mongols, which is mentioned several times in the journey accounts. At first, it seems he knew the language rather poorly, since to translate the letter of the Pope, originally written in Latin, into Ruthenian, Mongolian and Persian, they had to (according to de Carpine) bring a paid translator from Kiev, who, in the end, could not handle the translation. Only in the camp of Batu, as *Historia Mongalorum* reports, were the envoys assigned translators with whose help the papal letter was translated. However, the accounts also show that Benedict were able to communicate with the Mongols, for example, in the Batu camp, and talk with the Tatars with whom the two Franciscan friars travelled to Karakorum.³⁷ The envoys, for instance, had no trouble communicating during the audience at Batu's camp, where they explained in detail about the aim of their journey, and during their further travels, while led by native guides. According to *Relatio*:

Batu, after hearing the message and carefully considering each word, after five days, namely on Tuesday after Easter, sent them with his letter, along with the above-mentioned Tatars, the guides, to the homeland of the Tatars, to the son of the great emperor, whose son bears the name Güyük Khan (*Bati ergo audita legatione et de verbo ad verbum examinata, cum litteris suis una cum predictis Thartaris ductoribus eorum post V dies, scilicet tercia feria post pascha, misit eos ad filium magni Imperatoris, cuius filii nomen est Cuy[u]cchan, in terram nativatis Thartarorum*).

This short passage seems rather important when reflecting on the issue of Benedict's

³⁵ Franciszek M. Rosiński, "Benedykt Polak – największy polski podróżnik w średniowieczu," *Wrocławskie Studia Wschodnie* 15 (2011): 23.

³⁶ Rosiński, "Benedykt Polak," 23-24.

³⁷ Also, C. de Bridia mentions Benedict's conversations with Mongols. Cf. C. de Bridia, *Historia Tatarów* [*Historia Tartarorum*], in Strzelczyk, *Spotkanie*, 238, 241, 242, 244.

knowledge of the Mongolian language, since it would be difficult to imagine that in such a detailed account, created with the purpose of informing the pope about the talks and negotiations held by his envoys, there would be no mention about the presence of a translator (or translators),³⁸ as happens for instance in the passages relating the meetings with Güyük Khan.

The question of how Benedict could have known even the basics of the Mongolian language before the journey can be answered with quite high probability and relatively simply. In Wrocław (and also in Krakow), there was a tradition confirmed by written sources³⁹ of using Mongolian captives as the source of the knowledge necessary for missionary purposes in the East. It seems rather obvious that holding Mongol prisoners in captivity could create a great opportunity to learn their language, habits, and way of thinking and also to gain valuable first-hand information about their homeland. Since Wrocław was at that time the seat of two missionary orders – Franciscans and Dominicans, treating Mongolian prisoners as a commodity of great importance for preparing for missionary work could have been a fairly common practice there. One of the best nineteenth-century Polish historians, Joachim Lelewel, without any further explanation stated that “passing through Poland Pian de Carpine adopted (1245) as a companion and translator Benedict the Pole, a Franciscan brother fluent in both Ruthenian and Tartar languages...”⁴⁰

According to the introduction to *Relatio*:

In the year of our Lord 1245, brother of John of the Order of Friars Minor, by the name of de Piano Carpini, sent by the Pope to the Tatars ... when he came to Poland, he took [with him] in Wrocław ... a brother of the same Order, named Benedict, of Polish origin, to be his companion both in labour and duty, and a translator (*Anno domini MCCXL v frater Johannes de Ordine Minorum fratrum, dictus de Piano Carpini, domino Papa missus ad Tartaros cum alio fratre eiusdem Ordinis (...) profectus in Poloniam assumpsit in Wratislaviae tercium fratrem eiusdem Ordinis Benedictum nomine, Polonum genere, ut esset sibi socius laboris et huius sollicitudinis ac interpretis*).

Considering the scarcity of sources, the importance of all indications about Benedict the Pole in the reports submitted to the Pope is of great documentary merit. Therefore, we know that Benedict came from Poland and that he lived in a Franciscan monastery in Wrocław. Even though we do not know his date of birth, or the details of his monastic life and his formal education or the date of his death, we are still able to speculate quite a lot on the basis

³⁸ Such information would most probably be included, if not for the sake of accuracy, then to protect the reporter in case all or even some parts of the reported statements were proven to be false.

³⁹ Fr. Piotr Skarga refers to this practice in his *Lives of the Saints*. Piotr Skarga, *Żywoty Świątych*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Księży Jezuitów, 1934), 66-68 and 159-162.

⁴⁰ Lelewel, *Polska*, 426.

of auxiliary documents.

Besides his evident credentials, which caused his nomination as a secretary and translator of the difficult diplomatic mission, he was most probably also very well read in classical authors. For instance, his journey via the steppes of Comania⁴¹ triggered associations with Ovid's memories of Pont:

In Comania they discovered plenitude of wormwood. In the past, this land used to be called Pont. This is how Ovid remembers Pont: "Through desolate wastelands, miserable wormwoods" (*In Comania autem plurimum invenerunt absyntium. Nam hec terra olim dicebatur Pontus, sicut Ovidius de Ponto commemorat: 'Tristia per vastos horrent absynthya campos*).

Through this example of Benedict's manner of describing the journey, we can recognize not only his knowledge, but also the scope of his imagination. Wormwood was the only plant that the learned Franciscan named in his *Relatio* from a journey lasting about two years and thousands of miles travelled through different landscapes and climates. It can therefore be assumed that as he traversed the steppes of Comania, he perceived this plant just as the Latin poet suffering in exile, for whom wormwood was a symbol of grieving for his homeland. In addition, the enumeration of rivers that the Franciscan friars crossed, with an attempt to refer also to their classical names and including native names of the countries where possible, testifies not only to Benedict's knowledge of classical geographers but also to his linguistic sensitivity and scholarly inquisitiveness.

In the course of [this] journey they crossed the rivers called the Dnieper and Don ... on which day they came to Batu, finding him on the great river Ethil, which the Ruthenians call the Volga, which is considered to be Thanais (*In media via transierunt fluvios dictos Nepere et Don ... in quo die venerunt ad Bati, ipsum invenientes super magnum flumen Ethil quem Rusci vocant Volga, qui creditur esse Thanais*).⁴²

Consequently, we can conclude that Benedict observed the surrounding reality with great

⁴¹ Comania – most probably a reference to the territory including a shifting area north of the Black Sea and along the Volga River, which in the 13th century was inhabited by the Cumans (known also as Kipchak or Polovtsian).

⁴² According to Jerzy Strzelczyk, probably the most dedicated of modern-day Polish scholars analysing the role of Benedict the Pole in the papal mission, this small fragment of *Relatio* also proves Benedict's good understanding of classical geographers. The fact that he apparently confuses the name Thanais (ascribed traditionally to the Don) Strzelczyk reads as an indication of Benedict's awareness of the works of Isidore of Seville, in whose view Thanais was the river dividing Europe from Asia (Strzelczyk, *Benedykt Polak*, 59). Also, we can presume on the basis of this fragment that Benedict knew well the claims of Ptolemy and other classical geographers, who claimed that not far from its mouth the Volga merged with the River Don and with it entered the Azov Sea.

sensitivity, paying careful attention not only to details significant for the purpose of the papal deputation, but also recording experiences of a purely aesthetic nature. We can also presume that as an integral part of his work as the secretary to the papal envoy, he shared his observances as well as all the facts verified during the journey with the head of the deputation, influencing greatly the factual contents of de Carpine's *Historia Mongalorum*.

Most likely, Benedict was much more familiar than de Carpine with knowledge about the lands east of Europe through which the deputation travelled on its way to Karakorum. The Poles had had political and commercial contacts with the Ruthenian peoples since the time of Boleslaw the Brave (approx. 992-1025). Hence, their knowledge about the peoples neighbouring Kievan Rus⁴³ had to be good enough for Polish-Ruthenian dealings, which was probably the reason why the Polish princes made sure that the papal envoys were very well equipped with valuable presents. They knew that in order to undertake any talks or negotiations with their eastern neighbours, one should bring generous and appropriate gifts to express respect for the hosts. For the sake of negotiations, it was also necessary to comply with local customs as much as possible:

The servants of Batu accepted ... 40 beaver skins and 80 badger skins. These gifts were carried by them between two blessed fires, and the brothers were forced to follow these gifts, because it is the custom of the Tartars to cleanse deputies and gifts with fire. Behind the fire stood a cart with a golden statue of the emperor, also to be worshiped, but the brothers, firmly refusing to worship [the statue], were only forced to bow their heads (*Ministri itaque Bati ... receperunt munera, scilicet XL pelles castorum et LXXX pelles taxorum. Que munera portata sunt inter duos ignes sacros ab eis et fratres coacti sunt sequi munera, quia sic mos est apud Thartaros expiare nuncios et munera per ignem. Post ignes stabat curras continens auream statuam Imperatoris, que similiter solet adorari, sed fratres omnino adorare renitentes, compulsi sunt tantum capita inclinare*).

Also, reports of the Mongols reached the Poles quite early, at the latest after the Battle of the Kalka River (modern Ukraine) in 1223, when several Rus princes were defeated by the Tartars, and their principalities were almost completely destroyed. Thus, we can assume that Benedict had knowledge of the eastern territories, unfamiliar to de Carpine, which enabled him to verify and organize the abundant documentary material that makes up, for the most part, the content of *Historia Mongalorum*. However, the participation of Benedykt Polak in creating the final version of the expedition report prepared for Pope Innocent IV was not specified anywhere in the text. It is, therefore, difficult to state which parts should be specifically attributed to the Pole, yet the reasons for it, even today, seem rather understandable. The fact that the main, extensive report was submitted to the pope by de Carpine does not in

⁴³ Kievan Rus - Ruthenia, see note 1.

any way diminish Benedict's role in its preparation. After all, de Carpine was the head of the mission. Thus, it was his responsibility to produce the fairest account of it. However, the very nature of the cooperation of the papal legate with his translator and secretary (as well as a brother of the same order, and perhaps also a friend) during their journey to accomplish a joint mission may suggest at least some cooperation during the preparation of the report. A brief mention in the introduction of *Historia Mongalorum* can serve as a subtle confirmation:

By the Pope's command we were to diligently examine and search out all things, which we carried out most ardently, together with one friar Benedict the Pole, being of the same order, and a partaker of all our miseries and tribulations (*Pontifice mandate, ut omnia, quae apud eos errant, diligenter scrutaretur, acceperat, tam ispe, quam Fr. Benedictus Polonus eiusdem ordinis, qui suae tribulationis particeps et socius erat*).⁴⁴

The Outcome

The accounts of John of Pian de Carpine and Benedict the Pole, because of their great scholarly significance and the authenticity of their descriptions, as well as an awareness of the actual extent of Eastern lands they brought to the attention of the medieval Europeans,⁴⁵ are considered by authorities in the field of the history of geography, such as Charles Raymond Beazley or Louis Vivien de Saint-Martin, among the most unjustly neglected milestones of research in world history and geography.

The accounts of the two Franciscan friars not only tell a story about the initial stage of diplomatic dealings between the Holy See and the non-Christian world, but they also provide a brief outline of church policy in Central and Eastern Europe. On the way to crossing into Asia, the envoys stopped over several times, partly to improve relations between the pope and the domains of the Rus princes. Also, they testify to the two main achievements of the expedition. The first one, which can also be called direct, was opening the way for merchants and missionaries and establishing political relations between the papacy and the Mongol leaders. The second, or indirect achievement, was the revelatory description of high geographical value, even though its effects were only observed later with the slow increase in knowledge about the world around the mid-fourteenth century. A century later, the impact of de Carpine and Benedict's findings weakened again as a result of the ground-breaking discoveries made by Columbus.

In spite of the significant Polish presence on this historic journey, for many centuries

⁴⁴ Beazley, *The Texts*, 74-75.

⁴⁵ For example, Br. Anthony of Taizé and Robert de Neff point out that *Historia Mongolarum* includes most probably the earliest mention of Korea (or rather of Koreans) made in a European source. Anthony of Taizé and Robert de Neff, *Brief Encounters: Early Reports of Korea by Westerners* (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2016), 153.

the Polish sources were rather silent about this great achievement. Benedict was mentioned neither in the Franciscan chronicles, nor in the monumental fifteenth century work by Jan Długosz, *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*. This peculiar phenomenon, however, could have at least two probable reasons. The first, and a very practical one, is that before the development of print, the number of possible readers of his account was obviously very limited, so not many people knew that he ever existed. The other possibility is the fear of propagating verified reports of lands beyond the borders of the known world among a population of innocent, pure and God-fearing people. Doubtless, the revolutionary vision of a new map of the world conflicted strongly with the established belief according to which Jerusalem was considered the centre of the universe.

Nonetheless, Benedict the Pole and John of Pian de Carpine remain the first Europeans on record after A.D. 900 who travelled east of Baghdad and returned to give an account of their travels. It is also without doubt that their accounts are a testimony to vital geographical discoveries, as well as early European contacts with Asia. In addition, both *Relatio Fratris Benedicti Poloni* and *Historia Mongalorum quos nos Tartaros appellamus* provide momentous documentation of global politics already taking place in the medieval world.

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