

## A European Visitor to China



### 103 ▼ *Odoric of Pordenone, REPORT*

The Mongols reached a stalemate with Islam in Southwest Asia, after their defeat at the Battle of Ayn Jalut in 1260 at the hands of the Mamluks of Egypt. Faced with this reality, the Mongol *il-khans* (subordinate khans) of Persia were now willing to discuss an alliance with the Christian West against the Mamluks, who controlled Egypt and Syria and were systematically dismantling the last of the crusader states. On its part, because of the crisis facing the crusader states in the Holy Land, the West was more than willing to make common cause with the Mongols.

In 1287 *Arghun*, il-khan of Persia (r. 1284–1291), a nephew of the Great Khan Khubilai, sent a Nestorian Christian monk, *Rabban* (Master) *Sauma*, to the West bearing letters for the pope, the kings of France and England, and the emperor of Constantinople, in which the Mongol prince offered to become a Christian in return for an alliance against the Mamluks.

In response to Rabban Sauma's appearance in Rome in 1289, Pope Nicholas IV dispatched a Franciscan friar, *John of Monte Corvino* (1247–ca. 1328), to the Mongols with letters for Arghun and other khans farther to the east, including the Khan of khans, *Khubilai*. In 1291 John was in Tauris (modern Tabriz), Arghun's capital, but the il-khan died in March of that year, and his successor was on the verge of embracing Islam. Moreover, between May and July of the same year the last crusader strongholds in the Holy Land fell to Islamic forces. With nothing further to be accomplished in Persia, John set out for the court of the Great Khan in China. Due to delays, John arrived at the Mongol capital of *Khanbalik* (modern Beijing) in 1294/1295, around or just after Kubilai's death. Making the best of his situation, John remained in China as a missionary, and in time was joined by other Franciscans.

One of those assistants was Friar *Odoric of Pordenone* (ca. 1265–1331), who departed for the Far East in 1322. Brother Odoric, who had already served as a missionary in southern Russia for more than a decade and in Persia for eight years, sailed from the Persian Gulf to India, and from India sailed to the port of Guangzhou (Canton), arriving there around 1323–1324. He served in China for several years, where he assisted the aged Archbishop John of Monte Corvino, but departed for home before John's death (ca. 1328). Odoric's overland journey home finally got him to Venice in 1329. Soon thereafter he fell ill, but managed to dictate his travel adventures in May 1330. He died on January 14, 1331.

Friar Odoric was neither the first nor the last medieval Catholic missionary to work in China. The mission probably survived, but barely so, the collapse of Mongol authority in China in 1368. It might well have limped along until around 1400. Although several missionaries communicated with the West through letters sent back by Italian merchants and other travelers, Odoric's *Report* is, by far, the best and most detailed account by any Western missionary in China at this time. Its excellence, in fact, attracted the plagiarizing eyes of John Mandeville (source 98). In the following excerpts Odoric describes Hangzhou, the former capital of the

Southern Song Dynasty, the Great Khan's palace complex of *Dadu*, and his imperial court.

### QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. Does Friar Odoric's account seem to reach the level of unbelievable hyperbole at any point? Be specific.
2. Which parts of this account seem to be sober reporting of fact? Be specific.
3. Based on your answers to questions 1 and 2, what is your overall evaluation of this source's worth?
4. Compare Friar Odoric's description of Hangzhou (Cansay) with that of *A Record of Musings on the Eastern Capital* (source 71). Does conquest by the Mongols appear to have affected the city in any perceptible manner? Be specific in your answer.
5. How do we infer from this source that Marco Polo and Brother Odoric were only two of many Westerners who visited China in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries?
6. Based on what Odoric tells us about Dadu and about the composition and character of the Great Khan's court, how would you characterize Mongol rule in China in the early fourteenth century?
7. Compare the picture that this source gives us of the Mongol court with the image of Mongol life that emerges from sources 100 and 101. What has changed? To what do you ascribe those changes?

### CONCERNING CANSAY, THE GREATEST CITY IN THE WORLD

I came to the city of Cansay,<sup>1</sup> which means "City of Heaven." This is the greatest city in the world and a good 100 miles in circumference. Within it there is not a square yard<sup>2</sup> of earth that is not heavily populated. Quite often one can find a residence that contains fully ten or twelve households. This city also has huge suburbs that contain a population larger than that of the city itself. The city has twelve principal gates, and extending out from each of these gates, for a distance of almost eight miles, are cities larger than

Venice or Padua, so that one might journey six or seven days through one of these suburbs and it would seem as though he had traveled but a short distance.

This city is located on lagoons of standing and static water, like the city of Venice. It also has more than 12,000 bridges, on which are stationed guards who watch over this city for the Great Khan. Alongside the city flows a single river. Because the city is so situated, it finds itself in the same situation as Ferrara. That is, it is longer than it is wide.<sup>3</sup> I diligently inquired about this city and asked questions of Christians, Saracens,<sup>4</sup> idolaters,<sup>5</sup> and all others, and all said

<sup>1</sup>Hangzhou. Marco Polo also knew the city as *Kinsai*, which he also translated as "Heavenly City."

<sup>2</sup>The Latin is *spania*. It is not at all clear what Friar Odoric understood a "span" to be. Perhaps this comes close. See note 19.

<sup>3</sup>Like Ferrara along the Po, Hangzhou is stretched out along the contours of its river.

<sup>4</sup>Muslims.

<sup>5</sup>Buddhists, Daoists, and Mongol shamans.

with one voice that it is fully 100 miles in circumference.

They also have an edict from their lord that each and every hearth<sup>6</sup> shall pay annually one *balis* to the Great Khan, that is five pieces of paper<sup>7</sup> that have an equivalent value in silk of one and a half *florins*.<sup>8</sup> They have a means of coping with this. Fully ten or twelve households will share a single hearth and so will pay for only a single hearth. Regardless, these hearths number eighty-five *tumans*, with an additional four *tumans* for the Saracens. Combined, they number eighty-eight.<sup>9</sup> One *tuman* is fully 10,000 hearths. Then there are the others: Christians, other merchants, and other transients passing through the country. This being so, I marveled at how many human bodies could manage to inhabit the same space. Yet there is a great abundance of bread there, and of pork, and rice and wine. The wine is otherwise known as *vigim*, and is reputed to be a noble beverage. Indeed, an extraordinary abundance of every other sort of food is found there. . . .

If anyone should wish to tell of or report on the vastness of this city and the great marvels contained within it, a full quire of stationery could not contain all of these matters. Truly, this is the most noble and greatest city in the world for goods that are bought and sold. . . .

<sup>6</sup>*Ignis*: literally, "fire."

<sup>7</sup>The Song Dynasty began printing and using paper currency in the 1120s.

<sup>8</sup>The *florin*, the official coin of Florence since 1252, was made from 3.53 grams of pure gold and was equal in value to a pound of silver.

<sup>9</sup>Someone's arithmetic is off. It should be eighty-nine.

<sup>10</sup>Turkish for "city of the khan." This is the usual term that Western sources use for Beijing under the Mongols. But see note 12.

<sup>11</sup>Northern China, which received its name from the *Khitans* Mongols, who established the *Liao* state there in 907. They were replaced by the *Ruzhen*, who set up the *Jin* state in 1125, but the name *Cathay* stuck.

<sup>12</sup>In 1266 Khubilai Khan ordered the construction of a new capital slightly northeast of the *Jin* capital of *Zhongdu* (Central Capital). In 1272 the newly completed capital acquired the Chinese name *Dadu* (Great Capital), and to the Mongols

## CONCERNING THE GREAT CITIES OF KHANBALIK AND TAYDO AND THE PALACE OF THE KHAN

I passed through many cities and lands on my way east before arriving at the noble city of Khanbalik,<sup>10</sup> an exceedingly old and ancient city in the famous province of Cathay.<sup>11</sup> The Tartars took the city and then built another one-half mile away, which they called Taydo.<sup>12</sup> This second city has twelve gates,<sup>13</sup> spaced two miles apart from one another. A large population resides between the two cities, and together the cities have a perimeter that extends more than forty miles.<sup>14</sup> The Great Khan resides in this city and has a great palace, the walls of which are a good four miles in circumference.<sup>15</sup> Within the Great Palace's enclosure there is a man-made hill on which has been constructed another palace, the most beautiful in the world. This entire hill has been planted over with trees, and for this reason it is called *Green Mount*. A lake has been created alongside the hill and an exceedingly beautiful bridge built over it. On this lake there are so many geese, ducks, and swans that one is struck in awe. For this reason, there is no need for that lord to leave home when he wishes to go hunting. Also within this palace enclosure are thickets filled with various sorts of wild animals

was known as *Daidu*. Khubilai mandated that the entire urban complex, namely both *Dadu* and the former *Zhongdu*, was to be called *Dadu*, but it seems likely that even the Mongols normally used the Turkish term *Khanbalik* when referring to this complex. *Dadu* later became the nucleus for the Ming (1369–1644) capital of *Beijing* (Northern Capital), which took shape under the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–1424). Regarding the Yongle Emperor, see sources 106 and 107.

<sup>13</sup>Apparently it had only eleven gates.

<sup>14</sup>*Dadu* alone had a perimeter of 28,600 meters, or more than seventeen and one-half miles.

<sup>15</sup>The palace complex had a perimeter of 3,480 meters, or a bit more than two miles.

so that he can take to the chase whenever he desires without ever leaving home.

For this palace in which he resides is vast and beautiful. Its ground floor is raised about two paces,<sup>16</sup> and inside there are twenty-four columns of gold. All of the walls are draped with red-leather, said to be the finest in the world. In the center of the palace there is a great cistern, more than two paces in height, totally fashioned out of a single precious stone called *merdacas*.<sup>17</sup> It is bound all around in gold, and in every corner there is a dragon<sup>18</sup> whose mouth threatens in a most menacing way. This cistern also has a hanging network of great pearls that fringe it, and these fringes of pearls are a good yard<sup>19</sup> wide. Drinking water for use in the royal court is dispensed through the cistern, which is fed by pipes. Nearby the cistern are many golden goblets from which those who desire to take a drink can drink. In that same palace there are also many peacocks made from gold. When one of the Tartars wishes to amuse his lord, one after another they clap their hands, upon which the peacocks flap their wings and appear to dance. Now this has to be done either through some diabolical art or by means of some underground engine.

## CONCERNING THE LORD KHAN'S COURT

When that lord is seated on his imperial throne, the empress resides on his left, and one step below sit two of the other wives whom he keeps. At the bottom of the stairs are all the other women of his family. All of the women who are married have on their heads [something shaped like]<sup>20</sup> a human foot, which is a good forearm and a half long. On the lower portion of the [so-called] foot are crane's feathers fashioned into a

peak, and the entire "foot" is ornamented with great pearls. Whatever large and beautiful pearls there are in the world, they are to be found on the decorations of those ladies.

On the right-hand side of this king sits his first-born son, who is expected to reign after him. Beneath them are placed all who are of royal blood. There are also four scribes there who write down every word that the king utters. Before the khan stands an innumerable multitude of his barons. None of these dares to speak a word except if addressed by the great lord, except for the jesters, who might wish to amuse their lord. But even these jesters must not dare to do anything beyond the limits that the king has laid down for them. Before the gates of the palace stand baronial guards, on watch lest anyone tread on the threshold of the door. If they catch anyone doing that, they beat him soundly.

When this great lord desires to hold any sort of large entertainment, he has 14,000 crowned barons waiting on him at the festival, each of whom has a coat on his back whose pearls alone are worth more than 15,000 florins.

The court of this lord is well ordered, namely ranked into tens, hundreds, and thousands,<sup>21</sup> with all their assigned places and all answerable to one another lest any defect ever be found in the performance of their duties or in any other matter.

I, Brother Odoric, was there in this city of his for a good three years and often present at their festivals, for we Friars Minor<sup>22</sup> have an assigned place in his court, and it is always our duty to go and give him our blessing. So I took the opportunity to ask and inquire of Christians, Saracens, and all sorts of idolaters, as well as from those converts to our faith who are great barons in that court and who wait solely on the person of the king. They all said with one voice that of jesters

<sup>16</sup>About six feet.

<sup>17</sup>Jade from the region of Khotan.

<sup>18</sup>The Latin is *serpens*, but dragon seems a better translation than "serpent."

<sup>19</sup>*Spansa*. See note 2.

<sup>20</sup>Words in brackets are supplied by the translator.

<sup>21</sup>The Mongol army was organized along this decimal system, with troops organized into squadrons of tens, companies of ten tens, regiments of ten hundreds, and divisions of ten thousands.

<sup>22</sup>The official title of the Franciscans is the Order of Friars Minor (Lesser Brethren).

alone there are easily thirteen *tumans*, of which one alone consists of 10,000 jesters. Moreover, when it comes to other groups: Of those who care for the dogs, wild beasts, and fowl, there are fully fifteen *tumans*; of physicians who care for the

king's person, there are 400 idolaters, eight Christians, and one Saracen. All of these are supplied with everything that they need from the king's court. As for the rest of his household, it is beyond counting.