



WILLIAM OF RUBRUCK

WILLIAM OF RUBRUCK, Friar (fl. 1253-1255), a Flemish Franciscan missionary who traveled through the lands that the Mongols had conquered in the Crimea, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Asia Minor between 1253 and 1255. Apart from references in the *Opus Maius* of his fellow-Franciscan Roger Bacon (see below), his report to the French king Louis IX, entitled simply the *Itinerarium* by scholars for the sake of reference, is our only source for his travels. We do not know his age, although the hardships of the journey he undertook render it unlikely that he was born before 1210.

His travels. From Palestine, where he was among Louis' entourage following the French king's disastrous invasion of Egypt (647/1249-50) during the Seventh Crusade, Rubruck secured the king's support to travel into Mongol territory in order to bring spiritual comfort to some German slaves who had been carried off into Asia from Hungary by the Mongol invaders in 1241-42. His aims also included spreading the Gospel and making contact with the Mongol prince Sartaq, who was based in the Pontic-Caspian steppes (the territory later known as the khanate of the [Golden Horde](#)) and of whose Christian sympathies the crusading army had heard. In 1253, accompanied by another Franciscan named Bartholomew of Cremona, one of Louis' clerks and an interpreter, Rubruck sailed via Constantinople to Soldaia (Sudāq) in the Crimea, and thence traveled into the steppe. In the event, he was disappointed in Sartaq, on whose Christianity he casts doubt, and failed to make contact with the German slaves. From the outset, moreover, the mission was bedeviled by the Mongols' misapprehension that the group represented an official



embassy and that the friendly letter from Louis that Rubruck carried to Sartaq was an appeal for military assistance against the Muslims. For this reason Sartaq sent the group to his father Bātu Khan, who in turn dispatched the two friars and the interpreter across Asia to the Great Khan Möngke in Mongolia. Here it was finally recognized that the party was not an embassy, and after a few months the Great Khan sent Rubruck back as his own envoy, with a letter demanding the King's submission. Returning via the Caucasus and the encampment of the Mongol general [Bāyjū](#) on the Aras river, Rubruck reached Palestine (1255), only to learn that King Louis had embarked for home a year earlier; he therefore sent his report to the king and asked Louis to secure permission for him to come to France in person. We know that he subsequently traveled to France, since Bacon met him there and cites him several times in the *Opus Maius*. The date of his death is unknown.

His report. Apart from chapters 2-8 and 35, the *Itinerarium* is not organized thematically; but since King Louis had instructed Rubruck to write of everything he saw and heard, he mentions fauna, including the yak and the horned sheep that would later take its name from [Marco Polo](#). He also incorporates a great deal of geographical and ethnographic material hitherto unknown to Europeans. Although he did not travel as far as China, Rubruck provides the earliest Western description of the Chinese (chap. 26, paragraphs 8-9), whom he correctly identified with the Seres of Classical geography. He mentions several peoples in the Caucasus region, such as the Lesgians ("Lakz") and the [Alans](#) ("Aas," Ās), and ascertained that the Caspian Sea, which he calls the "sea of Siroan [Šīrvān]," was landlocked rather than being a gulf connected to the encircling ocean (chap. 18, paragraph 5), as Europeans believed on the venerable authority of Isidore of Seville (d. 636). Naturally interested in religious matters, he provides an invaluable survey of Mongol shamanism (chap. 35), narrates in some detail his relations with Nestorian Christians in Mongolia ([CHRISTIANITY iii. In Central Asia And Chinese Turkestan](#)), and is the earliest Western writer to furnish a description of Buddhism (chaps. 24-25), of whose existence the Catholic world had been unaware.



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