Marco Polo's Forerunners to the Court of Qubilai Khan

by

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The date that Nicolau Polo, father of Marco Polo, arrived with his brother Mafeu at the court of Qubilai Khan is supposed to be approximately in 1266 A. D. Before the arrival, Niccolo and Maffeo stayed in the city of Bucara (Bukhārā), which is located in Central Asia, for three years. On account of the great war among the Tartars they were unable to proceed. During their stay, the Tartars finally made peace within themselves and a few days later came a wise man whom Ulau (Hulagu) sent as messenger to the great Khan Qubilai. When this messenger had learned the fact that the so called Latins were there and when he saw them, he was greatly amazed and was overjoyed, for he had never seen any Latins in that country. Marco Polo stated in the "Description of the World": "He [the messenger of Ulau] said to the two brothers, Sirs, says he, if you will trust me you will have great profit from it and great honours. The two brothers said to him that they will trust him gladly if it is a thing that they could do. The messenger says to them, Sirs, I tell you that the great Lord of the Tartars never saw any Latins and has great desire and wish to see some of them, and so if you will come with me all the way to him I tell you that, as you are noble and wise men, he will see you very gladly and will do you great honour and great good and will have the greatest pleasure and contentment in hearing from you the news and conditions of your lands, for he is a lord of the greatest power and has great wish to hear new things; and you will be able to come safely with me without any hindrance from any evil people or fear that any attack will be made on your persons while you are with me."(1) So the two brothers accompanied the messenger, and after a whole year of travelling they reached the court of the Khan. Marco says: "He [Qubilai Khan] has very great delight at their coming as one who had never seen any Latins, because in his days men of the sunsetting had not been in those parts. And he asks

them of many things of the lands of the sunset; first of the emperors of the Romans and how they maintain their lordships and their land in justice, and how they go when they have a great affair...”(2)

At that time Qubilai was in his upper Capital, Shang-tu 上都 (Polo’s Ciandu), i.e., K’ai-p’ing Fu near Dolon-Nor in Chahar, and it was the 7th year of his reign. Marco Polo repeats that Qubilai had never seen any Latins before he met his father and his uncle; however, there is some doubt about such a statement. I firmly believe that I could prove the fact that Qubilai saw some western Europeans five years before the arrival of the two Polo brothers. Wang Hun 王渾, a Chinese scholar who served as a civil servant under Qubilai Khan left a diary titled Chung T’ang Shih Chi 中堂事記. The Chung T’ang, Middle Hall, means the Department of Central Secretariate. This diary was written during the years when he was one of the officials of the department. In the second year of Chung t’ung 中統 (1261 A.D.), on the 7th of the 5th month (June 6), Wang Hun wrote in the diary as follows:

“To-day, the envoys of the Fa-lang Kuo (Country of the Franks) arrived and made an offering of clothes of plants(3) and other things. They came from their own country to Shang-tu (Ciandu) after more than three years travel. They said that their country is extremely west of the Uigurs. There, daytime continues without any night-time. The time that field mice come out of their holes is the evening of their country. There, when a person died, the people pray to Heaven with their whole heart. Sometimes, it occurs that some of the dead men revive. All flies and mosquitoes originate from wood. Women are very pretty and beautiful. Men have generally blue eyes and yellow hair. On the way the envoys traversed, there are two seas. It takes more than one month to sail across the one, and one year to pass the other. Their ships are so large as they can take on board from fifty to one hundred persons. The wine cups they presented seem to be of big eggs of some sea bird. It is supposed that the cups were made by cutting the shell of these eggs. If we fill these cups with cool liquor, the liquor gets warm very soon. Indeed I can not help thinking that these are the very cups that are called by the people Wên-liang-chan 温凉盏 (the cup which automatically warms the cold liquor).

(2) Ibid., p. 77.
(3) The word “弋服”, hui-fu, appears first in the chapter of Yu-kung 涼服 of Shu-king 史記 in that chapter, we read “島夷弋服” i.e., the aborigines of the islands in South-East Sea wear clothes of plants.
Our emperor (Qubilai) was much pleased with the coming of the envoys from so remote a country. He was extremely gracious and gave them abundant amount of gold and silk in return for the knowledge for which he had received from these foreigners."(4)

Fa-lang is the transcription of the Persian word "Farang." According to the "Persian-English Dictionary" by F. Steingass, "farang" or "firing" means "A Frank, an Italian, an European, a Christian, all nations which wear short garments, ruddy, of pleasing aspect," and "frangistān, firingistān" means "Italy, France, or the country of the Franks," and "frangi, firingi" means "French, Italian, an European Christian." We can find many examples of this word used in Chinese literary works during Yuan dynasty. For example Liu Yü wrote in his travelling record of Chang Té, an envoy of Qubilai Khan to the camp of Hulagu Khan in 1259 soon after the fall of Baghdad, as follows: "West of Misr (Egypt), there is a sea. West of the sea, there is Fu-lang Kuo. There, the costumes of women resemble that of painted Buddhist saints (Bodhisattva). Men wear clothes of Western barbarians. They do not undress themselves even while sleeping....."(5)

Concerning the arrival of John of Marignolli and other envoys of Pope Benedict XII at Avignon to Peking in 1342, the Yuan Shih (Annals of Yuan Dynasty) mentions: "I autumn, the 7th month, Fu-lang Kuo presented wonderful horses." The offering of these European horses was such a remarkable event that many Chinese men of letters at that time composed poems to eulogize the T’ien-ma (celestial horses). Several of these poems still exist and the poets call the country of these horses “Fu-lang Kuo” (佛郎國 or 佛郎國 or “Fu-lin Kuo” (佛臨國)

(4) Ch’iu-chien Hsien-sheng Ta-ch’uan chi 秋澐先生大全集 (Complete Works of Wang), Vol. 81.
(5) Hsi-shih Chi 西使記 (Record of embassy to western countries) by Liu Yü.
By these examples, it is clear that the Chinese people of the 13th and 14th centuries called the western part of Europe, including Italy and France, Fu-lang Kuo, i.e., Farang Country. In various Chinese books of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), we see the word “Fu-lang-chi 佛郎機,” which means mainly Portuguese and Spanish peoples. Julius Aleni wrote in his Chih-fang-wai-chi 職方外記 [world geography] that “Fu-lang-chi” is the name used by Musulmans to call the Westerners in general. Undoubtedly, this word must be the transcription of Persian “Frangi”. Wan Hun said that the envoys traversed two seas on the way to Mongolia. This means that they took the route via the Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea. It is interesting to note that they told about summer’s white nights in the polar zones. However I do not think that they came from somewhere in northern Europe. In my opinion, they merely told such a tale that they could amuse the courtiers of Qubilai Khan. It seems most probable to think that they were merchants who came from Italy or other countries in Western Europe. The statement that they were the envoys of some country is dubious. But, if they were the real official envoys of a specific country, they came to the Mongolian Court just nine years after the arrival of William of Rubruck who was sent there by Saint Louis of France. Moreover, during the glorious region of Qubilai Khan, no other European embassy appeared before him except these envoys and other private travellers like the Polo family. Therefore, this statement by Wang Hun in his diary seems very precious from the historical viewpoint, because it sheds precious light on the beginnings of relations between the East and the West. It is strange that such a document has been neglected by Orientalists to the present date.

As for the wine cups of big eggs, Wang Hun wrote that the eggs were those of sea birds. In 1926, Berthold Laufer published a monograph “Ostrich Egg-shell Cups of Mesopotamia and the Ostrich in Ancient and Modern Times”. In this monograph we can obtain many interesting facts. For example, Ernest Mackay wrote in his “Report on the Excavation of the ‘A’ cemetry at Kish, Mesopotamia” published by Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago as follows: “A rare object found in grave 2 was a cup which had been made from an ostrich egg-shell by cutting about one third of the top of the shell away and roughly smoothing the edge.....The remains of a similar cup were found in one of the chambers of a large building of plano-convex
bricks, about a mile from the ‘A’ cemetery, which appears to be of the same date......”(6) According to B. Laufer, great quantities of fragments of ostrich egg-shell were brought to light in the course of further excavations on the ancient sites of Kish. These cups anciently used by the Sumerians are almost porcelainlike in appearance and may claim an age of at least five thousand years. They were closed by pottery lids overlaid with bitumen, one of the oldest pigments used by mankind. The shell is extremely hard and on an average 2mm. thick. In China, there are various records of ostrich eggs anciently sent as gifts from Persia to the emperors of China. B. Laufer writes in the chapter “The ostrich in the records and monuments of the Chinese” as

follows: “The ostrich was first discovered for the Chinese by the renowned
general Chang K’ien 張騫 during his memorable mission to the nations of
the west (138-126 B.C.). He returned to China with the report that in the
countries west of Parthia there were “great birds with eggs of the size of a
pottery jar……” When Chang K’ien had negotiated his treaties with the
Iranian countries in the west, the king of Parthia (called Arsak by the Chinese)
sent an embassy to the Chinese court, and offered as tribute eggs of the
Great Bird. In A.D. 101 live specimens of ostriches, together with lions,
were despatched from Parthia to China, and at that time were styled “Arsak
(that is, Parthian) birds,” also “great horse birds”. On becoming acquainted
with the Persians of the Sasanian dynasty, the Chinese Annals mention ostrich
eggs as products of Persia, and describe the bird as being shaped like a
camel……Again, under the T’ang dynasty, in A.D. 650, the country Tokhara
offered to China “large birds seven feet in height, black in color, with feet
resembling those of a camel, marching with outstretched wings and able to
run three hundred (Chinese) miles a day and to swallow iron”. They were
then called “camel birds”, in accordance with the Greek, Arabic and Persian
designations. Again, in the first part of the 8th century, ostrich eggs were
sent to China from Sogdiana. We have to assume that the live birds
transported from Persia to the capital of China by a route of several thousands
miles must have been extraordinarily tame, and it was a remarkable feat at
that. These birds must have been kept in the parks of the Chinese emperors
who were always fond of strange animals and plants. What is still more
astounding is the fact that in the mausoleum of the T’ang emperors near
Li-t’süan in Shen-si Province there are beautiful, naturalistic representations
of ostriches carved in high relief in stone……”(7)

The monograph of B. Laufer is considerably long and worthy. But he
could not find any document which mentioned the use of ostrich egg-shell
cups in whatever country it may be. In my opinion, the wine cups made
of big egg-shells of sea birds may be in reality the ostrich egg-shell cups,
and the envoys of Fa-lang acquired them somewhere in the Middle East and
presented them to Qubilai Khan. If my supposition were recognized to be
true, the diary of Wang Hun may be the only document ever known

(7) Ibid., pp. 29-30.
which mentions the use of the ostrich egg-shell cups. Moreover, it is very interesting to know that such cups, which were in fashion in Mesopotamia among the Sumerians about five thousand years ago, were still used in the 13th century.

For my conclusion, I would like to say that Marco Polo's father and his uncle were not the first Europeans to Qubilai Khan. Secondly I wish to express that the fact of the envoys of Fa-lang Kuo (Farang Country) by Wang Hun is very precious from the standpoint of West-East intercourse history and also from the archaeological studies.