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Provincializing Histories of Missions through Food: Friars and the Consumption of Kumiss in the Mongol Empire

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The medieval mendicant missions to the Mongols lasted for just over a hundred years, from the 1230s to the 1350s. The reconstruction of their history is often based mainly on Latin historical sources, which illuminate the missions' diplomatic and political backgrounds, namely the agency of the papal curia, mendicant orders, and other representatives of the European elite.¹ In this text, I approach these missions as specific types of intercultural encounters, as processes shaped not only by the aims of European diplomacy but also strongly by the intended recipients of the mission, their natural, cultural, and religious world.

Medieval encounters between friars and inhabitants of the Mongol empire were an important experience in cross-cultural communication history. This process not only included the diplomatic exchange of embassies, letters, gifts, and technologies,² but was also an occasion when diverse

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1 Jean Richard, *La papauté et les missions d'Orient au Moyen Âge (XIII^e–XV^e siècles)*, Roma: École française de Rome 1998; Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press 1971; Michael Robson, *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages*, Martlesham: The Boydell Press 2006, 108–118.

2 Claudia Garnier, “Gabe, Macht und Ehre. Zu Formen und Funktionen des Gabentauschs in den Beziehungen zwischen Mongolen und Europäern im 13. Jahrhundert”, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, (Neue Folge 63/1, *Die Sprache der Gaben: Regeln der symbolischen Kommunikation in Europa 1000–1700*), 2015, 47–68; Jana Valtrová, “Christian Material Culture and the Mongols: The Case of William of Rubruck”, *Eurasian Studies* 17/2, 2020, 228–243; Andrew J. Watson, “Mongol inhospitality, or how to do more with less? Gift giving in William of Rubruck’s Itinerarium”, *Journal of Medieval History* 37/1, 2011, 90–101; Marianna Shreve Simpson,



food cultures encountered each other. In this paper, I aim to analyse a problematic food issue that arose in the early phase of the medieval Franciscan missions to the Mongol empire. In particular, I focus on the attitudes to kumiss, which is fermented mare's milk, among the various Christian groups existing under the Mongols. The social, cultural, and religious significance of kumiss for diverse communities created a complex network of sometimes conflicting positions, into which the Franciscan friars entered and had to deal with. The most detailed accounts of the initial encounter between the Franciscans and the diverse inhabitants of the Mongol empire come from John of Plano Carpini (1182-1252)³ and William of Rubruck (1215-1270).⁴ Carpini travelled to Karakorum between 1245 and 1247 as a papal envoy, Rubruck's journey took place between 1253 and 1255 under the auspices of the French king Louis IX. They were not the only friars operating in the Mongol empire in this period; however, their accounts are the most detailed and reveal that, interestingly, the two friars adopted contrasting attitudes towards kumiss. The main research questions of this paper, therefore, are: What kind of dynamics was triggered by the social, cultural, and religious roles of kumiss? What were the attitudes of the diverse Christian communities towards kumiss? How did these attitudes to kumiss affect the Franciscans' attitudes and their potential to complete their missions successfully?

First, I will explain the theoretical background that shapes the perspective of this text. In the subsequent part, I will briefly introduce the sources which refer to the use of kumiss among different communities, which is followed by a discussion of kumiss as a nutrient and local cultural agent. Finally, the diverse communities' approaches to kumiss will be examined,

"Manuscripts and Mongols: Some Documented and Speculative Moments in East-West/Muslim-Christian Relations", *French Historical Studies* 30/3, 2007, 351-394.

- 3 Latin edition: Athanasius van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I. Itinera et relationes fratrum minorum saeculi XVIII et XIV I*, Firenze: Quaracchi 1929, 27-130. In this text I refer to a newer edition: Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, eds. Enrico Menestò et al., Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto medioevo 1989. For an English translation see Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission. Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, New York (NY): Sheed and Ward 1955, 3-76.
- 4 Guglielmo di Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia*, ed. Paolo Chiesa, Milano: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla 2014. For English translation with notes see Peter Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck. His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253-1255*, London: Hakluyt Society 1990. The Latin text of his account is also published in A. van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I...*, 164-332. Older English translation is C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission...*, 89-220. In this text, I will quote from Jackson's translation and also refer to the Latin original in the most recent edition by Paolo Chiesa.

with a special focus on their impact on the creation of social bonds and their potential to work for or against Christian missions.

Provincializing missionary situations?

The histories of medieval Christian missions, which are usually based on church history or the history of church orders, are usually achievements-oriented narratives, which focus therefore on the *results* of missions.⁵ Although this is a legitimate approach, in this text I prefer to conceptualize historical missions as *processes*, chains of “missionary situations” in which the missionaries negotiate their position with multiple actors,⁶ these including, among others, the missionaries’ religious norms and habits, but no less importantly the norms and habits of their potential converts, which, together, interact within a specific natural, social, political and cultural environment.

Food has been an important agent in the process of boundary-making between different religious confessions.⁷ As Jon Keune pointed out with reference to Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, “activities involving food do not simply appear on a social stage that already exists; food creates and mediates the social stage itself”.⁸ In this paper, I aim to examine how the attitudes to kumiss affected the complex network of interdenominational relationships between the existing Christian communities and the newly arriving missionaries.

Another theoretical inspiration for this work comes from the scholars of postcolonial historiography – in particular, Sunjay Subrahmanyam and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Subrahmanyam’s project of “connected histories”⁹ calls for a study of cross-cultural and transnational continuities of historical issues that have traditionally been conceptualized within the perspective of “national” histories. While Subrahmanyam demonstrates the im-

5 Cf. Ian Gillman – Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, New York (NY): Routledge 1999, 205-306; M. Robson, *The Franciscans...*, 108-118.

6 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005.

7 Dorothea Weltecke, “Essen und Fasten in interreligiöser Abgrenzung, Konkurrenz und Austausch – einleitende Bemerkungen”, in: Dorothea Weltecke (ed.), *Essen und Fasten. Interreligiöse Abgrenzung, Konkurrenz und Austauschprozesse / Food and Fasting. Interreligious Differentiations, Competition and Exchange*, Köln – Weimar – Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2017, 7-22.

8 Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food. Equality and Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, 45.

9 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia”, *Modern Asian Studies* 31/3, 1997, 735-762.

portance of developments beyond Europe for understanding history as a “connected” process,¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty directly calls for “provincializing” Europe within history and historiography as well.¹¹ By this, he means to refrain from using European history as the universal conceptual model for global history. This perspective is especially fitting for studies in the history of the Mongol empire, where multiple agents interacted on a large geographical scale. The environment and culture into which the Franciscans were entering were aspects of the encounter that were equally as important as the cultural background of the Franciscans, their training, and their diplomatic and missionary goals.¹²

Following upon these theoretical perspectives, this article tries to “provincialize” Franciscan missions within the cultural context of the Mongol empire and “connect” the Franciscan experience with kumiss with other actors of the historical network. The central point of this network is kumiss as a cultural agent, rather than the Franciscan friars themselves.

With all the above-mentioned theories in mind, however, writing post-colonial medieval mission histories that would be free from implicit Eurocentrism is a task limited by the nature of the available sources as well as by the range of possible competencies of a single scholar. It is not easy “to provincialize” the Franciscan missions of John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, as exactly their accounts are the most detailed documents of their travels. Other sources coming from outside the European discourse on the Mongols do not provide us with sufficiently detailed information on the friars’ activities;¹³ however, they provide an important cultural context that enables us to reconstruct the “actors-network” of the missionary situations that arose around kumiss.

10 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500-1700: A Political and Economic History*, London – New York (NY): Longman 1993.

11 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 2000.

12 The active role of ‘the Other’ within travel accounts is also stressed by Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes 1250-1525*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000, xiii.

13 As Lauren Arnold demonstrated, the friars weren’t of particular note to the khans. The embassy led by John of Marignolli brought a beautiful horse to the khan Shundi in 1342; however, only the horse was worth mentioning in the Chinese sources. Lauren Arnold, “The Heavenly Horse has come from the West to the West: Two Paintings illuminating the Role of Latin Christians at the Mongol Court”, *Orientations* 45/7, 2014, 1-4.

The sources

The sources relating to kumiss, and practices connected with its production, use, and consumption, come from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Certainly, I was not able to collect all mentions and records; however, I believe that the main body of sources collected here includes representatives of the main discourses around kumiss.

Practices related to kumiss were recorded in travel accounts, such as those by Carpini and Rubruck, or the Venetian merchant Marco Polo (1254-1324)¹⁴ and the Arabian traveller Ibn Battúta (1304-1368/1369).¹⁵ Other sources are chronicles that include the histories of the regions subjected by the Mongols such as Armenia and the principalities of Rus', as well as chronicles of the Mongols and their allies. More details about each source will be provided later; however, in general, it is obvious that these narrative sources provide rich discursive frames for depicting and interpreting Mongol culture and religion. Records of kumiss and its use reflect these discourses, which were shaped by the political and social ties between the authors' communities and the ruling Mongols and their allies. Thus, kumiss is not just a nutritional substance, but also an actor within the religio-political network.

Despite possible contradictory evaluations of the practices surrounding kumiss, corroboration of the various sources enables us to confirm the very existence of certain practices and attitudes beyond the discourse of self-presentation. This enables us to reconstruct the "actors' network", with its possible implicit tensions and problems.¹⁶ It should be noted that the

14 Marco Polo's retelling of his travels developed into a complex tradition of various textual and language versions. Marco Polo, *Il «Milione», prima edizione integrale a cura di L.F. Benedetto*, Firenze: Olschki 1928.

15 Ibn Battúta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354*, trans. et ed. Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, London: Routledge and Kegan 1953 [1929].

16 The credibility of accounts by Marco Polo and Odoric of Pordenone was recently corroborated by the comparative research of Chinese sources done by Xiaolin Ma. The author confirms that both European authors described the Mongol court festivals correctly and in great detail. Xiaolin Ma, "Le feste del Grand Qa'an nei resoconti di Marco Polo e Odorico da Pordenone", in: Alvisé Andreose (ed.), *La strada per il Catai: contatti tra Oriente e Occidente al tempo di Marco Polo*, Milano: Guerini e associati 2019, 115-130. Odoric of Pordenone (1286-1331) was a Franciscan friar who travelled across Asia between 1317/1318 and 1329/1330. Odorico da Pordenone, *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tartarorum*, Firenze: SISMEL 2016. English translation of the account in Henry Yule – Henri Cordier (eds.), *Cathay and the Way Thither; being a collection of Medieval Notices of China 2*, London: The Hakluyt Society 1914. About Odoric and his travels see Vladimír Liščák, "Odoric of Pordenone, a Franciscan missionary to Mongolian China", *Archiv orientální 77/1*, 2009, 59-77.

sources also reflect the dynamics surrounding the issue of kumiss consumption, which was by no means static.

Kumiss consumption among the medieval Mongols

The term *kumiss*, also transcribed as kumis, cumys, or koumiss, comes from Turkic; in Mongolian it is called *airag*.¹⁷ However, the term used in the *Secret History of the Mongols* is *esük* in Middle Mongolian (*esiüg* in classical Mongolian).¹⁸ In the accounts of Carpini and Rubruck, we find various terms. John of Plano Carpini tells of *lac iumentium*, “milk of the cattle”, thus not distinguishing particularly between milk and kumiss as its product, as we shall see later. William of Rubruck refers to kumiss as *comos*,¹⁹ while Marco Polo calls it *kemiz*,²⁰ and Ibn Battúta, *qumizz*.²¹

Kumiss is fermented milk, most often of mares, sometimes camels, and sometimes even goats and sheep. It is made by churning the milk in a large leather bag that is hung up in a yurt. This drink has been produced traditionally in pastoral areas of the steppe. Fermentation is one of the means of processing redundant fresh milk that is available during the summer months, approximately from June to October. As a result of fermentation, kumiss contains alcohol at a rather low level, ranging between 1.65 % to 3.25 %.²²

In modern times, kumiss has been appreciated for its nutritional values²³ and positive effects on several aspects of human health, including intestinal microflora, blood pressure, and levels of cholesterol. In some

17 Paul D. Buell, *The A to Z of the Mongol World Empire*, Lanham (MD) – Toronto – Plymouth: The Scarecrowpress 2010, 102, 184.

18 *The Secret History of the Mongols. A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth century*, trans. et com. Igor de Rachewiltz, Leiden – Boston (MA): Brill 2004, § 85, notes to it on page 379.

19 G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 26, 30, 50 etc. A more exclusive type of kumiss is called by Rubruck *caracomos*, ‘black kumiss’, which takes longer to produce.

20 Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China I*, London: Hakluyt Society 1866, 257.

21 Ibn Battúta, *Travels in Asia...*, 144.

22 John Masson Smith, “Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire”, *Journal of Asian History* 34/1, 2000, 35-52: 39.

23 For the nutritive values of mare milk compared to the milk of other ruminants, see Klemen Potocnik – Vesna Gantner – Angela Cividini – Krešimir Kuterovac, “Mare’s milk: composition and protein fraction in comparison with different milk species”, *Mljekarstvo/Dairy* 61/2, 2011, 107-113; A. Musaev – S. Sadykova – A. Anambayeva et al., “Mare’s Milk: Composition, Properties, and Application in Medicine”, *Archives of Razi Institute* 76/3, 2021, 1125-1135.

countries it is even used as a treatment for tuberculosis.²⁴ Although there are no official standards and the quality of the drink may vary regionally, kumiss has been accepted by nomadic populations as a food of significant practical value.

In medieval historical sources, kumiss is reported as the preferred drink of the Mongols, especially during the summer, when the herds were growing, and mares were milking foals. John of Plano Carpini noted that the Mongols consumed mare's milk in great quantities.²⁵ William of Rubruck recorded that in summer the Mongols cared little for any other kind of food.²⁶

According to the estimates of John Masson Smith, to live exclusively on kumiss and receive at least 2000 calories per day requires the consumption of approximately nine pints (approximately 4,3 liters) of the liquid. This equals the production of two mares, which is the usual number kept by a family.²⁷

During the first generation of Genghis's successors, around the middle of the 13th century, the poorer members of Mongol society, whose resources were limited, could benefit from the nutritive value of kumiss. In contrast, wealthier Mongols, and especially the members of the ruling dynasty, soon became prone to the excessive consumption of kumiss, which had negative consequences. The slightly alcoholic nature of kumiss encouraged the practice of excessive drinking among high-ranking Mongols, which is testified in many contemporary sources. As Masson Smith and Allsen pointed out, heavy drinking significantly affected the life-span and health of the khans and, according to them, contributed to the decline of the whole ruling dynasty.²⁸ By the second half of the 13th century, with their geographic expansion, the ruling Mongols had acquired access to many other types of alcoholic drinks, such as grape wine and rice wine; this was also at a time when brandies and whiskies were becoming broadly consumed²⁹ – unluckily for the Mongols, as their drinking prob-

24 Askar Kondybayev – Gerard Loiseau – Nawel Achi et al., “Fermented mare milk product (Qymyz, Koumiss)”, *International Dairy Journal* 119, 2021, 105065; Hou Qiangchuan – Changkun Li – Yahua Liu et al., “Koumiss consumption modulates gut microbiota, increases plasma high-density cholesterol, decreases immunoglobulin G and albumin”, *Journal of Functional Foods* 52, 2019, 469-478.

25 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 17; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 247.

26 G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 26; P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 76.

27 J. M. Smith, “Dietary Decadence...”, 39.

28 J. M. Smith, “Dietary Decadence...”, 35-52; Thomas T. Allsen, “Ögedei and Alcohol”, *Mongolian Studies* 29, 2007, 3-12.

29 Paul D. Buell – Eugene N. Anderson, *Soup for the Qan. Chinese Dietary Medicine of the Mongol Era as Seen in Hu Sihui's Yinshan Zhengyao*, Leiden – Boston (MA): Brill 2010, 46-47.

lems only worsened. Some of the khans became heavy drinkers who were hard to control.³⁰ As Paul Buell pointed out, the larger choice of alcoholic drinks, which were much more potent than those brewed previously, and the seasonally-consumed kumiss produced among the Mongols a marked inclination towards alcoholism.³¹ That kumiss remained a popular drink over decades is testified also by Marco Polo, who witnessed the festival of the offering of mare's milk by the emperor in 1276.³²

From a food-historical perspective, kumiss may be considered one of the most important agents within the dynamics of the Mongol empire – as a nutrient, but also as one of the reasons for its decline. Both Carpini and Rubruck noted the Mongols' tendency towards excessive alcohol consumption and their lack of restraint. The friars perceived Mongol drunkenness in close connection with the Mongols' lack of recognition of the whole concept of sin.³³ However, there were also other, more problematic aspects to kumiss.

Kumiss as an offering

The social and religious life of the nomads³⁴ was closely intertwined with the ritual usage and consumption of kumiss. Kumiss was used both in private as well as collective rituals that were supposed to ensure family prosperity, health, and the success of future activities practically daily.³⁵ We may distinguish two different types of ritual manipulation, which do not exclude each other and could have occurred as complementary. One of them was the libation of kumiss over religious objects, such as felt “idols”

30 According to Rashīd al-Dīn, Ögedei khan was by the end of his life watched over by an appointed emir who was supposed to ensure that the khan would not exceed a limited number of cups of wine per day. The khan solved this problem by using larger cups. Rashīd al-Dīn Ṭabīb, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, trans. et ed. John A. Boyle, New York (NY): Columbia University Press 1971, 65.

31 P. D. Buell – E. N. Anderson, *Soup for the Qan...*, 46-47.

32 H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither...*, 300. For the chronology of Marco Polo's activities in Mongol China see Xiaolin Ma, “Le feste del Grand Qa'an...”, 117-118.

33 The leanings of the Mongols towards alcohol and the problems it caused in intercultural contact are also discussed by Antti Ruotsala, *Europeans and Mongols in the Middle of the Thirteenth Century. Encountering the Other*, Saarijärvi: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters 2001, 110-130.

34 For more about the environmental aspects of the organization of Mongol life, see P. D. Buell – E. N. Anderson, *Soup for the Qan...*, 28-31.

35 Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, Cambridge: Cambridge university Press 2001, 128.

(*onggons*),³⁶ or its dispersion into the air in the four cardinal directions of south, north, east, and west. Another type of kumiss use was ceremonial drinking, to which I will return later.

Libations of kumiss are still performed today as a daily morning routine; according to historical sources they also preceded important actions in life, such as moving to seasonal pastures, starting a military campaign, or embarking on a journey, etc.³⁷ Such offerings were also part of funeral rituals; according to some sources, a goblet or bowl with milk was provided in the graves of high-ranking Mongols.³⁸

Franciscan friars travelling among the Mongols noted ritual libations as a common feature of the daily life of the Mongols. John of Plano Carpini related that the Mongols brought offerings to their “idols” and also to the sun, the moon, fire, water, and earth. They did this in the morning before they ate or drank.³⁹ The worship of “idols” made of felt was to ensure the wellbeing of the cattle and bring enough milk.⁴⁰ William of Rubruck observed that offerings of kumiss were performed in the four cardinal directions, and while genuflecting.⁴¹

In medieval times, libations performed among the members of the ruling dynasty were also intended to honour dynastic ancestors and were part of rituals legitimizing the rule of their heirs.⁴² Only members of the ruling family took part in libations of kumiss that were performed near imperial burial sites.⁴³

Therefore, kumiss was linked to the everyday life and prosperity of the nomadic population, and on a dynastic level these ritual libations confirmed the legitimacy of the rule once established by Genghis Khan. From

36 P. Buell, *The A to Z of the Mongol empire...*, 206; Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, New York (NY): Facts on File 2004, 424-425.

37 For libations in modern Mongolia, see Sharon Hudgins, “Tsatsal: The Symbolism and Significance of Mongolian Ceremonial Milk Spoons”, *Mongolian Studies* 36, 2014, 41-77: 45-49.

38 “Simon of Saint Quentin: History of the Tartars”, XXX, 86 [online] <<http://www.simonofstquentin.org/website/framework.htm>>, [25. 1. 2023]; C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 12; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 242.

39 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 9-10; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 236.

40 *Ibid.*

41 G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 24. Marco Polo also refers to libations of milk as an offering to the earth, air, and ‘false gods’. Henry Yule – Henry Cordier (trans. et eds.), *The Travels of Marco Polo I*, New York (NY): Dover Publications 1993, 300-301.

42 Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition*, University Park (PA): Penn State Press 2010, 211.

43 *Ibid.*, 216.

the actor-network theory perspective, offerings of milk or kumiss invited transcendental actors into the network. Through libations and offerings, relationships with ancestors and spirits were established and maintained, which of course presented a potential problem for Christians. However, kumiss played an essential role also in establishing relationships with other people on earth.

Kumiss consumption and social bonds

The practice of drinking among the Mongols is related by several Asian sources⁴⁴ as well as by many travellers including Rubruck,⁴⁵ Marco Polo,⁴⁶ and Ibn Battúta.⁴⁷ During courtly ceremonies, the participants had seats as well as roles assigned to them. Food and drinks were served by the members of *keshig*, the imperial guards.⁴⁸ Both Polo and Carpini point out that music was an important part of the event,⁴⁹ which is even depicted in a few European illuminated medieval manuscripts.⁵⁰

The famous fountain made by the French goldsmith William of Bouchier, which was constructed to provide various kinds of drinks,⁵¹ testifies to the importance of the drinking culture at the khan's court. Visits to the court were associated with drinking, as Rubruck's remark about his guide suggests: "Our guide and his comrades were getting drunk at court and had little thought for us."⁵² However, even outside the imperial context, drinking was a common part of social interaction. According to Carpini and Rubruck, drinking cups were placed inside yurts, just next to the entrance.⁵³

44 *The Secret History of the Mongols...*, § 28, 31, 154, 156 etc. Other references and notes also see in *Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan*, trans. et ed. Urgunge Onon, London – New York (NY): Routledge 2001, 134, 156. For reference to Chinese sources see P. D. Buell – E. N. Anderson, *Soup for the Qan...*, 86, note 16.

45 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 209-210; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 210-214.

46 H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither...*, 381-384.

47 Ibn Battúta, *Travels in Asia...*, 144.

48 C. P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia...*, 184.

49 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 57; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 312. Cf also H. Yule – H. Cordier (trans. et eds.), *The Travels of Marco Polo...*, 383.

50 *Livre des Merveilles*, BNF Fr2810 fol. 136v, *Li livres du Graunt Caam*, Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 264 Ms fol. 239r.

51 William of Bouchier, or Guillaume de Bouchier was a French goldsmith, who was taken by the Mongols and worked in Karakorum at the court of Möngke. Leonardo Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher, a French Artist at the Court of the Khans*, Baltimore (MD): The Johns Hopkins Press 1946.

52 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 175; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 150.

53 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 76; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 26.

Feasts and audiences at the khan's court were not just occasions for the consumption of alcohol, music, and entertainment. They also had political, social, and economic functions. When an assembly of higher-ranking representatives (*quriltai*) took place, they were occasions of the display of power and social hierarchy. As Marco Polo also mentions, the khan's "barons", that is the imperial guards, were assigned a specific role and even wore a special robe, which signified their rank by an assigned colour.⁵⁴

Political ties were built and strengthened also with an exchange of gifts, a common part of banquets.⁵⁵ Such banquets were essential components of the empire's economy and tools for creating political ties.⁵⁶ Taking part in a banquet and consuming the drinks and foods offered would imply becoming involved in the network of social bonds and hierarchy of the ruling class. As Paul Buell pointed out, "to eat his [i.e. the khan's] food meant to accept his special position".⁵⁷

As we have seen, kumiss was related to both political and religious spheres, and to both private as well as public rituals. In both cases, it was an essential actor within the networks of relations with various agents, including transcendental beings as well as other humans. A ritual offering of kumiss to ancestors and spirits revived the legitimacy of the existing political rule, which was further confirmed by the ceremonial consumption of drink with the khan's subjects. This network of social and economic ties as well as their symbolic meanings had a specific impact on Christian communities living among the Mongols, which developed specific attitudes to it.

54 This information was corroborated by an independent Chinese source. Cf. Xiaolin Ma, "Le feste del Grand Qa'an...", 115-130.

55 It should be mentioned that there was a certain discrepancy between the concepts of "gifts" and "tributes" as understood by both sides of the encounter. C. Garnier, "Gabe, Macht und Here"..., 47-68. Also L. Arnold, "The Heavenly Horse...", 1-4; Ya Ning, *Courtly Encounters along the Silk Roads: Diplomats, Diplomatic Gifts and Symbolic Competitions in the Mongol Eurasia* [unpublished PhD. thesis], Budapest: Étvös Lóránd University 2021.

56 Thomas T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles*, (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization), New York (NY): Cambridge University Press 1997. An example of a close continuity of banquets with gift distribution is provided by the Muslim traveller Ibn Battúta (1304-1368/1369), who reported about his audience at the court of khan Uzbek: "After the banquet was over, a robe was presented to the amír and to each member of his family and to me, then the amír with his brother were presented with ten horses, his sons with six and I too with one." Ibn Battúta, *Travels in Asia...*, 145.

57 P. D. Buell – E. N. Anderson, *Soup for the Qan...*, 34, note 54.

The avoidance of kumiss among some Christian communities

Some Christian communities, but not Syriac Christians, who will be discussed later, are reported to have explicitly refused to partake in the consumption of kumiss. Rubruck reported Alan, Greek and Russian Christians as those who avoided kumiss.⁵⁸ Various historical sources provide different contexts to this practice, but all basically agree upon the fact that, for them, kumiss was an unacceptable food.

The relationship of the Orthodox Churches and Latin Roman church to Mongol rule was naturally critical; however, only Russian, Alan, Armenian, and Greek Christians were directly affected by Mongol rule and administration, having become their long-term subjects.⁵⁹ In both Armenian chronicles and the chronicles of the principalities of Rus', the practice of kumiss consumption is related within the context of negotiations between Christian nobles and representatives of the victorious Mongols. Some of the problematic aspects conflicting with Christianity included the custom of passing between two fires, which was required as a form of purification;⁶⁰ bowing to the representation of Genghis Khan and bowing to or genuflecting in front of the living khan;⁶¹ and, finally, the consumption of kumiss, which, however, was treated as a political act of compliance with the Mongols, not only in the religious sphere (if we may apply these distinguishing terms upon a historical situation).

The Galician-Volhynian Chronicle, covering almost the whole 13th century and including the events connected with the Mongol expansion to Rus', was preserved only as a part of the *Hypatian Codex* from the early 15th century.⁶² In spite of this chronological gap,⁶³ the fundamental contrast between the Christian identity of the princes and the pagan nature of the Mongols remains obvious. The audience of the duke Daniil of Galicia-Volhynia with khan Batu in 1245 represents clearly the contrast between the two worlds. The duke's submission to the khan required that he knelt

58 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 101; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 54.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Ch. P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia...*, 178.

61 Cf. A. Ruotsala, *Europeans and Mongols...*, 78-88.

62 George Perfecty (ed.), *The Hypatian Codex II: The Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*, Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies 22/16, München: Verlag Wilhelm Fink 1973, 11-12.

63 The major shift which occurred and is partially reflected in the chronicles of the principalities of Rus' is the gradual Islamization of the Golden Horde. However, the *Galician-Volhynian Chronicle*, as preserved in the *Hypatian Codex*, recorded numerous pre-Islamic ritual practices, such as worship of a bush, or walking between two fires, which were obviously not obliterated by any possible younger redaction of the text.

in front of the khan, expressed his submission, promised to pay a tribute, and finally drank kumiss. On account of this, claims the chronicle, the Mongols considered Daniil as being “one of them”.⁶⁴

Submission of the representatives of the principalities of Rus’ to Mongol customs, including the acceptance of kumiss, is often viewed critically by the chronicles, but, at the same time, as a necessary sacrifice preventing the complete destruction of the occupied lands.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, resistance to the Mongols’ “idolatrous” practices was considered a sign of great bravery and strong belief, which may have led even to martyrdom. Among the most celebrated opponents of the Mongols was Duke Mikhail of Chernigov (1185-1246),⁶⁶ who together with his boyar Fedor refused to follow the “idolatrous” customs of the Mongols – specifically, to pass between two fires and to bow to the “idols”. Their stubborn approach resulted in their execution. Sources of the principalities of Rus’⁶⁷ interpreted the duke and his boyar’s behaviour as resistance to complying with “idolatry,” which was rewarded by their celebration as martyrs.

However, as scholars have pointed out, this particular execution must be understood as a penalty for disobedience and the refusal to accept Mongol rule, not as an example of “religious persecution”. The duke had already resisted the Mongols for some years; therefore, his behaviour at the audience was simply the “final straw.”⁶⁸ An important testimony of these events is also recorded by Carpini, who pointed out that such an execution for “religious” reasons was exceptional among the Mongols: “Since they [i.e. the Mongols] observe no law with regard to the worship of God they have up to now, so we understood, compelled no one to deny his faith or law with the exception of Michael of whom we have just spoken.”⁶⁹

The Chronicle of Novgorod, which also refers to the visit of Duke Mikhail at the Orda, does not mention kumiss explicitly; however, it contains a strong recommendation for Duke Mikhail to avoid eating and drinking unclean food at the Mongol court.⁷⁰

64 G. Perfecky (ed.), *The Hypatian Codex...*, 58-59. I would like to thank Pavel Boček and Irena Valentová for pointing out the important Russian sources.

65 Charles J. Halperin, *Russian and Mongols Slavs and the Steppe in Medieval and Early Modern Russia*, Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române 2007, 106.

66 About his life and death see Martin Dimnik, *Mikhail, Prince of Chernigov and Grand Prince of Kiev, 1224-1246*, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1981.

67 For the corroboration of various sources relating to Mikhail’s death, see M. Dimnik, *Mikhail...*, 130-135.

68 C. Halperin, *Russian and Mongols...*, 106; M. Dimnik, *Mikhail...*, 134-135.

69 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 10; G. di Pian di Carpino, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 238.

70 *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016-1471*, trans. Robert Michell – Neville Forbes, London: Offices of the Society 1914, 89. Such a warning could combine more motives – to avoid both the consumption of unclean food as well as food poisoning.

In a similar context – i.e., the political negotiation of the terms of submission to Mongol rule – Mongol customs are described by an Armenian historian Kirakos Ganjaketsi (1201-1272), who was an eyewitness to the Mongol invasion and in 1236 spent one year in Mongol captivity. This experience gave him the opportunity to make close acquaintance with the Mongol language, Mongol religion and Mongol history.⁷¹ In his *History of the Armenians*,⁷² Kirakos treats kumiss as an unacceptable, unclean food, which Christians should avoid. A passage describes the audience of Awag, the prince of Greater Armenia, with a Mongol commander who had besieged the Kayen fortress and blocked the supplies of water. After some time, Awag surrendered to the Mongols and was taken to the commander, Chormaghan:

They brought large quantities of meat both from clean and from unclean animals, cut apart, ground, and cooked, and also kumiss (xmuzy) made from mare's milk, according to their custom. They brought this food in many bags, threw them before the guests, and they began to eat and drink. But Awag and those with him did not eat or drink. The commander asked him: "Why don't you eat and drink?" Awag replied: "Christians are not accustomed to eat this food and to drink this beverage, rather, they eat meat from clean animals which we have sacrificed, and they take wine to drink."⁷³

After that, the commander ordered wine to be brought and such food that would be acceptable to Awag. Regardless of whether or not the encounter happened exactly as described, Kirakos pronounces his view on kumiss as an unacceptable food and portrays Awag as the one who managed to resist Mongol customs, although he did not manage to resist them in the battlefield.

The discourse on kumiss in Russian and Armenian sources reflects the difficult situation of the regions subdued by the Mongols, but also reveals the discrepancy between the Christian and Mongol understanding of a "religion". There is no record suggesting that the Mongols required anyone to consume kumiss or other food. On the contrary, there are several occasions recorded when the Mongols offered an alternative to their guests.⁷⁴

71 Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220-1335)*, (Brill's Inner Asian Library 24), Leiden – Boston (MA): Brill 2011, 11-12.

72 Kirakos Ganjaketsis, "Translator's Preface", *History of Armenians*, trans. Robert Bedrosian, 1975 [online], <<http://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg1.htm>>, [10. 1. 2023].

73 Kirakos Ganjaketsis, *History of Armenians*, trans. Robert Bedrosian, 1975 [online], <<http://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg9.htm#27>>, [10. 1. 2023].

74 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 62, 64; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 318, 322. There is a certain discrepancy between the manuscripts of Carpini. C has *iumentinum minime habebamus*, but W has *tale bibere non poteramus*, see notes in 318. K. Ganjaketsis, *History of Armenians...*

In Christian sources, kumiss is described as an unclean food, which reflects the authors' knowledge of the various ritual practices of the Mongols. At the same time, kumiss was associated with humiliating occasions on which Christians submitted to Mongol rule. While it was not possible to resist the Mongols militarily or politically, the refusal of kumiss seems to have symbolized in quite a safe way Christian resistance to Mongol customs and "idolatry", even though the Mongols themselves never required their subjects to abandon their beliefs.

The refusal of kumiss among Orthodox Christians is recorded not only in the above-mentioned chronicles but also independently in the Latin sources of the Franciscans, who showed that this attitude existed beyond the narratives of the respective chronicles. William of Rubruck noted that the consumption of kumiss among these Christians equalled apostasy for them: "[T]he Russian, Greek and Alan Christians who live among them and who wish strictly to observe their religion⁷⁵ do not drink it, and in fact once they have drunk it they do not regard themselves as Christians, their clergy reconciling them as if they had abjured the Christian faith."⁷⁶

The classification of kumiss as an unclean food is by some scholars supported by biblical references. Peter Jackson in a brief note pointed out the Acts of the Apostles referring to "food offered to idols":

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.⁷⁷

[...]

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.⁷⁸

Whether these biblical prescriptions played any role for the Orthodox Christians is not clear, as there is no explicit reference to them in the above-mentioned sources. In my opinion, in the case of the avoidance of kumiss, both aspects need to be considered – its connection with "idolatrours" rituals, as well as its contextual link to the humiliating occasion of Christian submission to Mongol rule. The refusal of kumiss reported in the chronicles of the subjugated Christians may have symbolized a strategy of how to strengthen community boundaries between them and the "idolatrours" Mongols, both on a religious as well as political level. Refusing

⁷⁵ The Latin original has 'legem', i. e. lex – one of the medieval terms used for 'religious' norms. G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 54.

⁷⁶ P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 101; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 54.

⁷⁷ Acts 15, 19-20.

⁷⁸ Acts 15, 29.

kumiss on a symbolic level represented resistance to the rule of the “idolatrours” Mongols over the principalities.

Milk and kumiss consumption among the Syriac Christians

The refusal to drink kumiss was not universal among all the Christian denominations existing in the Mongol empire. The East Syriac Christians, labelled in Latin historical sources as the “Nestorians”,⁷⁹ had no such taboo, although there were other strict food regulations, namely fasting.

Avoiding food delights, even a completely ascetic way of life, is a virtue often ascribed to the authorities of the East Syriac Church. Rabban Sauma (1220-1294), who travelled as a pilgrim from Khanbaliq to Jerusalem and later to Rome, is glorified as a person who “renounced the trivial affairs of this world along with its delights: meat was as good as non-existent for him, and he also abstained from all intoxicating beverages.”⁸⁰ Although we may ascribe these features to the hagiographical tone of such Syriac accounts, a similar emphasis on austerity and fasting among the Syriac Christians is also reflected in the work of a Dominican friar Riccoldo of Montecroce (1243-1320). Riccoldo, who spent about a decade in the Near East at the end of the 13th century, considered the doctrines and practices of the East Syriac Christians and Jacobites as full of errors, “[b]ut the other things which they have added are perfections. For they have great abstinence; they pray much and fast much. Their religious, bishops, and superiors exhibit great poverty, austerity, integrity and humility [...]”⁸¹

In contrast to this image of austerity, Rubruck describes the Christians of the same church as “great drunkards” and their attitude towards kumiss is for him a sign of their corrupt morals:

“The Nestorians there are ignorant. [...] Above all they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them, furthermore, who live among the Tartars, have several wives just as the Tartars have [...] they are all simoniacs [...] have an eye not to spreading the Faith but to making money. [...] For the lives of the Mo’als, and even of the tuins (that is idolaters), are more blameless than their own.”⁸²

79 In this text, I use the term “Nestorian” as an emic term used by the Latin sources. For a discussion about the inappropriateness of its usage in modern discourse, see Sebastian Brock, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer”, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 78/3, 1996, 23-35.

80 *The History of Mar Yahballaha and Rabban Sauma*, ed. et trans. Pier Giorgio Borbone, Hamburg: Verlag edition 2021, 61.

81 Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq. Riccoldo da Montecroce’s Encounter with Islam*, Turnhout: Brepols 2012, 209.

82 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 163-164; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 134.

Rubruck's perspective on Syriac Christians living among the Mongols was shaped by his view of them as "heretics".⁸³ Nevertheless, we cannot blame his pejorative image of his rivals on simple prejudice, as the adaptation of Syriac Christianity to Mongol habits is testified also by other sources.⁸⁴ The somewhat younger chronicle of Rashīd al-Dīn (1247-1318) describes the presence of the "Nestorian" leader Bulgha Aqa at courtly feasts.⁸⁵

Why did these "Nestorians" accept kumiss, when other local Christians did not? This practice has to be ascribed to the long history of the adaptation of Syriac Christianity in the areas along the Silk route. By chance, we know that their relationship towards milk had been dealt with on an official ecclesiastical level already two centuries before the arrival of the Franciscan friars. East Syriac Christianity had reached China along the Silk route already during the Tang dynasty (618-907).⁸⁶ In the 11th century, East Syriac Christianity was embraced by the Keraites, a tribe living in the region between Lake Baikal and the east Mongolian steppe,⁸⁷ and was also successful among the members of several other ethnic groups, such as Naimans, Uighurs and Onggüts.⁸⁸ Meat and milk constituted an essential part of their diet; however, both these food items should have been avoided during the Lent fasting period in the Syriac church. A Syriac *Ecclesiastical Chronicle* (Chronicon Ecclesiasticum) written by Bar Hebraeus (1226-1286) testifies that this problem had required a solution already in the 11th century. The chronicle summarizes a letter from 1007 written by a Metropolitan of Merv addressed to the Patriarch in Baghdad reporting the conversion of two hundred thousand Keraites to Christianity. The Metropolitan of Merv asks about the required fasting during Lent, because in this country "apart from meat and milk, we have no other food; how

83 The rivalry between Franciscans and the 'Nestorians' is even more strongly pronounced in letters of John of Montecorvino from around 1300.

84 C. P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia...*, 107. For more about the process of adaptation of Syriac Christianity on its way along the Silk Routes and its dialogue with Buddhism and Manichaeism, cf. Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, London – New York (NY): I. B. Tauris 2008 (2006), 179-193.

85 R. al-Dīn Ṭāḥib, *The successors...*, 207.

86 Antonio de Caro, "Christianity in China from the Seventh Century to the Sixteenth Century", in: Cindy Yik-yi Chu – Beatrice Leung (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Catholic Church in East Asia*, Singapore: Springer 2022, 2-11; Ian Gillman – Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, New York (NY): Routledge 1999, 205-306.

87 I. Gillman – H.-J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia...*, 226.

88 Li Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag 2011.

could we then fast”.⁸⁹ The Patriarch responds that Keraites should abstain from meat during Lent, but can drink milk on account of the lack of other food suitable for Lent.⁹⁰ There seems no doubt that, at the time of Rubruck’s visit, milk and its products were an accepted and often consumed food among local Syriac Christians.

The attitude of Syriac Christians towards kumiss developed not only in line with their natural conditions but also in line with their relations with the Mongols. As is well-known, alliances between the Mongols and other tribes of the region, whose members were “Nestorians”, were built through marriage.⁹¹ The Mongol khans took for wives Christian women from these tribes, thus building mutually profitable alliances. Syriac Christian families became part of the ruling class, thus gaining access to courtly feasts and power.

It is therefore quite understandable that Syriac Christian sources provide a rather positive image of the Mongol khans. According to Mikko Vasko, Syriac Christian sources depict the Mongol khans as protectors of the Christian faith, and, for this reason, Mongol drinking habits are mitigated, unlike in the detailed and critical accounts of parallel Latin sources.⁹² This may also be because of the Syriac Christians’ inculturation of drinking habits into their religious practice, as Rubruck relates.

The “blessing” of cups?

While the hagiographies and normative sources of the Syriac Christians promoted strict fasting rules and austerity, Rubruck’s account provides a different image of their attitudes toward drinking alcoholic beverages. According to him, collective drinking was a usual part of their interactions. He mentions several occasions when the habit of collective drinking was combined with a practice he labels as a “blessing” (lat. *benedictio*). One such occasion occurred during Rubruck’s visit to the dwelling of the

89 I. Gillman – H.-J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia...*, 227. For the Syriac version with translation into Latin see Barhebaeus, *Chronicon Ecclesiasticum* III, Joannes Baptista Abelos – Thomas Josephus Lamy trans. et eds., Paris: Lovan 1877, 279-280.

90 *Ibid.*

91 James D. Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans: Tartar Queens and Missionary Expectations in Asia”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8/3, 1998, 411-421; C. Baumer, *The Church of the East...*, 197-199.

92 Mikko Vasko, *Writing a Christianized History of the Mongols. The Mongols in Syriac texts in the late 13th and early 14th century*, unpublished MA thesis [online], University of Oulu 2006, 61, <https://www.academia.edu/3846098/Writing_a_Christianized_History_of_the_Mongols_The_Mongols_in_Syriac_texts_in_the_late_13th_and_early_14th_century>, [20. 2. 2023].

Khan's eldest son (probably Baltu), who was mentored by a "Nestorian priest named David, a great drunkard".⁹³ After prostrating himself in front of Rubruck carrying a cross, "he now made us sit down and had the priests served with drink, and he himself drank too once he had received their blessing."⁹⁴ Pronouncing a "blessing" of the cups before they were drunk from is reported as a common ritual that Rubruck reluctantly had to join: "When we had come into the Chan's presence, ... Then they [i.e. the "Nestorians"] chanted a blessing on his drink and the monk followed with a blessing of his own; and last of all we had to pronounce one."⁹⁵

Again, when visiting one of the khan's wives, the cup was "blessed" by the "Nestorians": "Then drink was brought – rice ale, red wine like the wine of La Rochelle, and *comos*. The lady held the full cup in her hand, and on her knees asked for a blessing. The priests all chanted in a loud voice, while she drained the cup."⁹⁶

How should we understand such activity, described as a "blessing"? It should be ascribed to the Mongol religious policy, which considered the representatives of various traditions – not only shamanism (sometime called Tenggerism), but also Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, and Islam – as "holy men". Their blessings and prayers in support of the khan were encouraged.⁹⁷ Another aspect pertains to the Mongol liking for music, which always accompanied the drinking, and people were (and even today still are) encouraged to sing before cups were emptied. Therefore, the "blessings" provided by Christians fulfilled both expectations – the demand for an auspicious prayer from a "holy man", and the desire for musical accompaniment.

Such situations were certainly problematic for the friars, because they recontextualized Christian prayers into a morally dubious social milieu of excessive drinking. What would have been otherwise a welcome opportunity for a mission, turned into a form of unexpected and unwanted inculturation.

93 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 194; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 184.

94 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 194. "...Dauid nomine, ebriosum ualde, qui docet eum. Tunc fecit nos sedere et dare sacerdotibus ad bibendum; ipse etiam bibit recepta benedictione ab eis." G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 184.

95 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 194; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 182.

96 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 191; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 178.

97 C. P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia...*, 469.

The Franciscans and kumiss

The Franciscan friars entering the Mongol steppe in the 1240s and 1250s had a different status compared to the Christians already living under the Mongols. Unlike the Russian dukes and Armenian princes, the Franciscans were not (from the Mongol point of view “not yet”) the khan’s direct subjects. Unlike the Syriac Christians, they had no family ties with the ruling class, nor could they take part in the government. The foreign envoys were travelling under protection, their ignorance of Mongol customs was mostly acknowledged, and as foreigners, they were excused for transgressing some taboos on the condition this happened unknowingly.⁹⁸ How did the Franciscans consider kumiss, which had ambiguous symbolic meanings for different Christian communities and could arouse unwanted associations?

From a normative perspective, the travelling Franciscans were not bound by any specific food taboos. Already, the First Rule (*Regula non bullata*) of the Franciscan order from 1221 stated that the friars were supposed to fast in the Advent and Lent periods; however, when travelling on a mission, they were allowed to eat and drink whatever suitable food they were given by their hosts. The Second Rule (*Regula bullata*) confirmed this position regarding food and drink, without any more specific details.⁹⁹ This position certainly allowed William of Rubruck to consume kumiss regularly after tasting it for the first time: “[...] on swallowing it I broke out in sweat all over from alarm and surprise, since I had never drunk it before. But for all that I found it very palatable, as indeed it is.”¹⁰⁰

After some time, he even appreciated kumiss more than wine, because “comos does more to satisfy a man who is hungry.”¹⁰¹ This preference supports the impression provided in his report, that his relationships with Russian or Armenian Christians were not very close. On the other hand, he did not approve of the habits of heavy drinking observed among the Mongols and “Nestorians” alike. The kumiss taboo represented for Rubruck an unexpected complication. He recorded an episode that suggests that the taboo connected to kumiss could have had negative effects on his missionary attempts. In this episode, Rubruck convinced a certain

98 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 194-196; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 182-188.

99 *The writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, London: Burns and Oates 1907, 11; Luke 10, 7: “And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire.”

100 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 99; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 50. For another description of the taste of kumiss see P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 81-82.

101 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 264; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 302.

Muslim to receive baptism; however, after the man consulted his wife, he declined:

[...] he did not dare by any means receive baptism, since this meant he would not drink komos [i. e. kumiss]: the Christians in this country claimed that nobody who was truly a Christian should drink it, and he could not survive in that wilderness without the drink. I was wholly unable to disabuse him from this idea. You should know for a fact, therefore, how far they are alienated from the Faith by such a notion, which has now gained currency among them through the Russians, who live among them in great numbers.¹⁰²

Whether this was a one-off case, or whether the situation recurred is not known. There are no answers to this question in the sources. Nevertheless, this case may lead to speculation about the problem of kumiss consumption being one of the possible causes of the failure of the mendicant missions among the nomads.

In contrast to Rubruck's pragmatic position towards kumiss, John of Plano Carpini completely followed his guides and partners in diplomatic exchanges, which were primarily the Russian Christians. His attitudes toward the Mongols and their customs were strongly shaped by their perspective, which he accepted. This attitude certainly has to be linked to his diplomatic goals, because he strived to negotiate a church union with the Church in the Rus'.

He made a brief mention of the problem of kumiss consumption on the occasion of his audience at the Mongol court:

We were invited inside and they [i.e. the Mongols] gave us mead as we would not take mare's milk. They did this to show us great honour, but they kept on plying us with drinks to such an extent that we could not possibly stand it, not being used to it, so we gave them to understand that it was disagreeable to us and they left off pressing us.¹⁰³

[...]

Whenever we went in we were given mead and wine to drink, and cooked meat was offered to us if we wished to have it.¹⁰⁴

102 P. Jackson, *The Mission...*, 104; G. Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia...*, 58.

103 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 62; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 318. The Latin manuscripts use different verbs relating to the milk. The quoted edition has: "Nos autem vocaverunt interius et dederunt nobis cervesiam, quia lac iumentinum minime habebamus." This does not make much sense, as it would imply that Carpini and his companions brought their own drinks with them for the audience, but only had little of it. Another manuscript noted as W has: "...et dederunt nobis cervesiam, quia lac tale bibere non poteramus", that is "because we cannot drink such milk". I believe that the second version only makes sense within the context.

104 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 64; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 322.

It seems that Carpini's association with the Christians in the principalities of Rus' resulted in his acceptance of their dietary rules. However, unlike the Russian and Armenian sources, Carpini does not mention the supposedly unclean character of kumiss, nor its politically problematic symbolism. Carpini's acceptance of the taboo seems to be simply a result of his social ties, not a consciously reflected position.

Unlike Rubruck, whose main aim was to explore the possibilities for evangelization among the diverse religious communities, Carpini was on a diplomatic mission that aimed to expand the frontiers of the Christian oikumene and find out more about the Mongols. His report seems to turn a blind eye to the diversity of Christian denominations existing among the Mongols. This is clearly visible in the terminology which he used to refer to these Christians.¹⁰⁵ In sharp contrast to Rubruck, Carpini made no specific distinction between the various Christian denominations, nor did he use the term "Nestorian" to describe the Christians at the khan's court. They were simply "Christians", whose presence offered the hope that the khan himself might also someday convert to Christianity.¹⁰⁶ Obliterating confessional boundaries among various Christian denominations may be ascribed to an intention to unite Christians against the Mongols if they proceeded in their destruction of Christendom. This strategy also, in my opinion, explains why there are only a few references to kumiss consumption in Carpini's account – because it could make the interconfessional boundaries more visible. In contrast, Rubruck made the distinctions among Christian denominations very clear, presenting himself as the only representative of the "true faith", who had to deal with "ignorant Nestorians", and refute the unsound taboo spread by the Orthodox Christians.

Dissolution of the actors' network?

The problems of kumiss consumption seem to disappear from mendicant accounts relating to missions after 1300. The Franciscan friars, who reportedly established close relations with the imperial court in Khanbaliq approximately between 1300 and 1330, make no mention either of the ceremonial drinking of the Mongols, nor of ritual libations. John of Montecorvino (1247-1330?), who sent two letters from Khanbaliq in 1305

105 About the attitudes of the travelling friars to the Christians of other denominations, cf. Jana Valtrová, "Indian Christians in Medieval European Travel Accounts", in: Marián Gálik – Martin Slobodník (eds.), *Eastern Christianity, Judaism and Islam between the death of Muhammad and Tamerlane (632-1405)*, Bratislava: Ústav orientalistiky Slovenské akademie vied 2011, 195-213.

106 C. Dawson, *Mongol mission...*, 6; G. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli...*, 327.

and 1306, reported his own missionary progress as well as his rivalry with the “Nestorians”; however, he made no mention of the Mongols’ habit of heavy drinking.¹⁰⁷ Neither of his fellow friars, Andrew of Perugia¹⁰⁸ and Peregrine of Castello,¹⁰⁹ make any mention of the drinking habits of the Mongols.

At the same time, this does not mean that the drinking ceremonies disappeared, as we have the testimonies of Marco Polo, dated to the 1270s, and also of Odoric of Pordenone, from the 1320s. There are also Chinese sources from the period which confirm the development of imperial feasts into highly organized celebrations.¹¹⁰ Whether the relationship of Montecorvino with the imperial court was less close than he claims, or whether he refrained from recording the Mongols’ potentially problematic habits of drinking in order to gain the much-needed support from the papal curia is hard to judge.

Besides this apparent ignoring of Mongol drinking habits, from these letters we also know that the Franciscans were financially supported by an Armenian lady,¹¹¹ which clearly shows that the refusal of kumiss so strongly pronounced in Mongol-occupied Armenia around the middle of the 13th century did not represent any issue for cooperation between the Franciscans and Armenians in 1300s Khanbaliq. Coming back to the actor-network theory, such a development in attitudes towards kumiss is only logical, as the political, natural, social, and religious contexts of the whole network of relationships were different and new tensions arose.¹¹² Drink and food choices for the urban population of Mongol China around 1300 were much broader than the options available to the nomads living in the steppe in the 1240s and 1250s, and attitudes to kumiss no longer represented an issue of political or religious significance in western sources.

107 A. van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I...*, 340-355. Two of his letters were published in English translation in C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission...*, 224-231.

108 His Latin letter see A. van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I...*, 373-377, English translation in C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission...*, 235-237.

109 A. van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I...*, 365-368. English translation in C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission...*, 232-234. The genuity of Peregrine’s letter is considered somewhat dubious.

110 More about their accuracy cf. Xiaolin Ma, “Le feste del Grand Qa’an...”, 115-130.

111 C. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission...*, 233, 236; A. van den Wyngaert (ed.), *Sinica Franciscana I...*, 367, 374-375.

112 For example, traditional halal slaughter was considered as problematic by Mongol law. Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz, “Von Blut-Essern und Schweinefleisch-Liebhabern: Esskultur, Religion und Herrschaftsverständnis in den mongolischen Herrschaftsgebieten im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert”, in: Dorothea Weltecke (ed.), *Essen und Fasten / Food and Fasting. Interreligiöse Abgrenzung, Konkurrenz und Austauschprozesse / Interreligious Differentiations, Competition and Exchange*, Köln – Weimar – Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2017, 51-74.

A brief record of kumiss is contained in a letter sent by the Franciscans from Caffa in Crimea in 1323. A passage describing the land and its fruits also mentions a drink made from milk from various cattle, including cows, goats, sheep, and others. No details regarding the context of its consumption are provided, but the drink is characterized as “healthy and tasty” (*sanus et sapidus*),¹¹³ which leads one to assume that the friars appreciated it and indeed consumed it. This development would suggest that the practical aspects of kumiss consumption outweighed its polluting nature assumed by the local Orthodox Christians, who refused to drink it for religious and political reasons. Another aspect that needs to be considered is, of course, the changing religious affiliation of the ruling Mongols, who by then inclined to Islam;¹¹⁴ therefore, kumiss as a symbol of Mongol “pagan” rule was no longer the most salient problem.

One of the last mendicant accounts about Mongol food and drink relates to the middle of 14th century Mongol China. The papal envoy to the khan, Franciscan John of Marignolli, who travelled across Asia between 1338 and 1353, mentioned that his company was provided, besides other items, with food and drinks by the khan’s court in Khanbaliq,¹¹⁵ but he doesn’t specify what kind of drinks these were, nor does he consider them anyhow controversial.

The problem of how to approach kumiss as a symbol of negotiating with Mongol paganism seems to have disappeared for the Franciscan friars of the late 13th century. It may well be because, instead of paganism, the friars had to react to the expansion of Islam instead.

Conclusion

Franciscan attitudes to kumiss in the 1240s and 1250s were not shaped by the Franciscans predefined concepts of purity or fears of pollution; rather, they stemmed from their socialization and the strategic goals of their missions. As newcomers, they had to adapt to the already existing networks, but it seems that it was not easy for them to “fit in” well.

113 Arthur C. Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum fr. Minorum Tartarie Aquilonaris an. 1223”, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 16, 1923, 104-112: 110.

114 About the process of Mongol conversion to Islam, see D. DeWeese, *Islamization...: also Peter Jackson, The Mongols and the Islamic World. From Conquest to Conversion*, New Haven (CT) – London: Yale University Press 2017, 328-380.

115 Irene Malfatto (ed.), *Le digressioni sull’Oriente nel Chronicon Bohemorum di Giovanni de’ Marignolli*, 2015, 3. Electronic edition: <<http://ecodicibus.sismelfirenze.it/index.php/iohannes-de-marignollis-chronicon-bohemorum-excerpta-de-rebus-orientalibus>>.

Unveiling the broader network of agents that arose around kumiss also points to an important natural, yet sometimes overlooked, feature of historical cross-cultural contacts. In contrast to scholarship which understands European historical sources as merely Orientalizing products of their authors, the analysis of broader “missionary situations” reveals the agency of the Others, who “preassembled the social”, to paraphrase Latour, before the friars stepped in.

For Rubruck, the different attitudes to kumiss, which he discussed in great detail, marked the interconfessional boundaries between himself, the Orthodox Christians, and the “Nestorians”. He had to balance the practical aspects of kumiss consumption with an unwanted recontextualization of his religious practice. While he embraced food provided by natural conditions without hesitation, he reluctantly joined the practice of “pronouncing blessings”, because they seemed inculturated into Mongol drinking habits. This was an important experience, one revealing that his missionary work could become out of his control.

In contrast, Carpini was more concerned with the frontiers between the “pagan” and Christian worlds. Therefore, he related many details about the ritual use of kumiss, libations, and offerings, and also mentioned briefly the avoidance of kumiss by the Christians in the principalities of Rus’, but omitted any reference to the drinking of kumiss by the “Nestorians”.

One more issue becomes obvious when dealing with the problem of kumiss in these historical accounts. The friars’ experience with various communities’ attitudes towards kumiss as a cultural and social agent raised an implicit question – which habits and practices should be considered as “religious”? Which of the Mongol customs were “idolatrous” and which were simply forms of diplomatic protocol? The missionaries had to negotiate with both sides – with the church as well as with their (potential) converts – with regard to which practices should be strictly regarded as contradicting Christian principles and abandoned, which could be adapted somehow, and which could be accepted simply as harmless cultural idiosyncrasies. The positions and strategies they adopted certainly contributed to the process of the negotiation of a more general concept of a “religion”.



SUMMARY

Provincializing Histories of Missions through Food: Friars and the Consumption of Kumiss in the Mongol Empire

The article focuses on the question of the consumption of kumiss, a drink made from fermented mare's milk, among the various religious groups coexisting in the medieval Mongol empire. Inspired by Actor-Network Theory (B. Latour) and the project of provincializing Europe (D. Chakrabarty), the article provides a comparative contextual analysis of medieval sources, including accounts of the Franciscan friars John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck, and other relevant sources relating to the history of the principalities of Rus', communities of Syriac and Armenian Christians, and the Mongols. It sheds light on the role of kumiss as a natural, cultural, and religious agent, which provoked diverse attitudes among the different religious groups and revealed their interdenominational and inter-religious dynamics. Comparing the various, often contrasting attitudes towards kumiss consumption enables us to better understand the missionary situation of the Franciscan friars and also reveal the practical challenges and problems facing medieval Christian missions in the Mongol empire.

Keywords: kumiss; Mongol empire; provincializing Europe; Franciscans; medieval Christian missions; food

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