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OVERVIEW OF THE ROLE OF BYZANTINE EMPIRE AS COMMUNICATION CROSSROAD BETWEEN CHINA AND EUROPE DURING THE PERIOD OF PAX MONGOLIANA IN THE 13-14 CENTURIES

Abstract: As we know, the large part of the Eurasian continent became part of the Great Mongolian Empire in the 13-14 centuries and we could qualify this period as Pax Mongoliana when the communication network between different parts of the the Ancient World has been more closely interconnected. During the Yuan dynasty in China (1271-1368), the Mongolian dynasty founded by Kubilai Khan, grandson of Gengis Khan, although here was no direct diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Yuan China, Byzantium played an important role in the context of Eurasian network as communication crossroad between China and Europe, specially through Constantinople and Trabizond. In this paper, we will observe briefly the political, economic and religious context of this period both in Byzantium, Balkan Peninsula in general, in China and in western Europe in order to give an overview of the role of Byzantium as communication crossroad between China and Europe and to discern for what reasons Eastern Roman Empire assumed this role of communication crossroad and why this role declined in the 14th centuries.

Keywords: Byzantium and Mongolian Empire, Byzantium and China, Empire of Trabizond, Nicean Empire and Paleologus dynasty.

In the 13-14 centuries, the most part of the Eurasian continent was dominated by the Great Mongolian Empire, this period could be qualified the period of Pax Mongoliana when the communication network of the Ancient World has been more tightly connected. (Fig. 1)

During the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in China, founded by Kubilai Khan, grandson of Gengis Khan in 1271, even if there was no direct diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Yuan China, Byzantium served as communication crossroad between China and Europe, specially Constantinople and Trabizond. In this paper, we would like to give an overview of the role of Byzantium as communication crossroad between China and Europe within it's political, economic and religious context with two case studies of the travel of



Fig. 1
The Great
Mongolian
Empire
Сл. 1 Велико
монгольско
царство

family of Marco Polo and that of Chinese Ughur Nestorian monk Rabban Bar Sauma. Instead of entering into all the details since this general research could not accomplish this task, we tend to give an overview of the important role of Byzantium in the middle of communication road between Europe and China during the period of Mongolian domination in the most part of the Eurasian continent in the 13 – 14 centuries.

I The relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Mongolian Empire

The number of the works on the research on the connection between Byzantium and Mongolian Empire are until now are quite limited among which we can mention for example the article of Jean Richard *Byzance et les Mongols* in *Franks et Orientaux dans le monde des croisades*¹. As far as we know, the only monography on this topic was an unpublished PhD paper in the year 1980s. in United States². If that paper we just try to give an overview of the relationship between Byzantium and Mongolian Empire and in the future it's always possible to enlarge the horizon of the research on this topic.

Concerning the Byzantine sources mentioning the political and diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Mongolian Empire, we can

¹ J. RICHARD, *Franks et Orientaux dans le monde des croisades*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Variorum collected studies series, 2003, XXII – XXVI. We can also cite some other references about this subject without being exhaustive: Gaston Cahen, *Les Mongols dans les Balkans*, *Revue Historique*, 146, (Paris 1924), 55 – 59, Guillaume de Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l'empire mongol, 1253 – 1255*, translated by R. KAPPLER, C. – C., KAPPLER, Imprimerie nationale, Paris 1985, B. SPULER, *Die Goldene Horde : Die Mongolen in Russland 1223*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1965, R. GROUSSET, *L'empire des steppes : Attila, Gengis-Khan, Tamerlan*, Payot, Paris 1939.

² THE MONGOLS AND BYZANTIUM, 1243-1341 LIPPARD, BRUCE G. Indiana University ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 1984. 8417206.

cite the historical works of George Akropolites with the addition of Theodorus Scutariota³, *Historic Relationships* of George Pachymeres⁴ and *Roman History* of Nikephorus Gregoras⁵, and official registers⁶.

Even if Byzantine Empire began to enter into contact with Mongolian Empire during the Nicean Empire, except for Trabizond Empire, the official diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Mongolian Empire started during Paleologus Period⁷. Michel Paleologus had good relationship with Il Khanat in Persia and married his illegal daughter Maria to Il khan Aqaba. When the Aqaba khan, the husband of Maria died, Maria Paleologus returned to Constantinople and became abbess of the monastery which will take her name as the monastery of saint Mary of the Mongols to commemorate her according to certain hypothesis⁸. (Fig. 2,3)

³ Cf. Georgii Acropolitae, Opera, recensuit A. Heisenberg, Edditionem anni MC-MIII, correctiorem curavit P. Wirth, Volumen I, continens Historiae, Breviarium historiae, Theodori scutariotae additamenta, Teubneri, Stutgardiae 1978.

⁴ Cf. Georges Pachymère, Relations historiques, édition, introduction and notes by A. FAILLER, french translation by V. LAURENT, Les belles lettres, Paris, I., 1984, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae volumen XXIV/ 1, II., 1984, volumen XXIV/2, III, 1999, volumen XXIV/3, IV, 1999, volumen XXIV/4. V. 2000, Volumen XXIV/5. The author talks about the political and diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Mongolian Empire from Nican Empire until the early Paleologian Empire.

⁵ For the original text in greek, cf. Nicephorus Gregoras, Historia Byzantiae cura Ludovicus Schopenus, Bonna, Ed. Weberi, Volumen I 1829, Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae 38, Volumen II, consilio B. G. Niebuhrii C. F. 1830, Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae 39, Volume III, consilio B. G. Niebuhrii C. F., 1855, Corpus Scriptorum Historum Byzantinae 40, and Patrologia Graeca 148, 149, Migne (ed.), Migne, Paris 1865.

⁶ For the official registers during the Nicean Empire and early Paleologus Empire, cf. *Regesten der Kaiserurkunden des oströmischen Reiches von 565 – 1453*, bearbeitet von F. DÖLGER, 3. Teil: Regesten von 1204 – 1282, zweite, erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage bearbeitet von P. WIRTH, C.H. BECK, München 1977, 4. Teil: Regesten von 1282 – 1341, 1960.

⁷ The emperor John III Doukas Vatatzes, emperor of Nicaea was not interested to enter into direct contact with the Mongolians, maybe one reason is his alliance with Frederic II of Hohenstaufen his father-in-law who fought the Mongolians in central Europe because of their certain agreement on political and diplomatic issues and also his alliance with the Seljuk Sultan Ghjassaddin-Kai-Khusru, but the most important reason could be the following : John III wanted to keep distance to the distressing event like Mongolian expansion to decide how to react the best possible facing to this people until then little known, although at the same time he prepared for the danger in a more defensive way, just like Hohenstaufen did when Mongolian army invaded Hungary. For the alliance between John Vatatzes and the sultan Ghjassadin, cf. *Regesten* 3. Teil, 1776, p. 36 – 37. For the role of Frederic II during Mongolian invasion in Europe, cf. Matthiew of Paris, cf. Z. RAPP REED, *Matthiew Paris on the Mongol invasion in Europe*, Brepols, Turnhout 2022, Cultural encounters in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, volume, 38. According to Pachymeres, John Doukas fortified the frontier in preparation for eventuel conflict, cf. Pachymère, *Relations historiques* I, II, 25, 186 – 187. Moreover, also according to Pachymère, empereur Theodore received an Mongolian embassy, cf. Ibid. I, II, 25, 186 – 189. But in general, the Mongolian expansion didn't change the political lanscape of Nicean Empire, and we should wait for the Paleologus period for that the mongol – byzantine relationship could have been strengthened.

⁸ For the description of the architecture of the church, cf. Μπούρας Χ., «Η αρχιτεκτονική της Παναγίας του Μουχλίου στην Κωνσταντινούπολη», *Δελτίον της*



Fig. 2 Παναγία η Μουγλιώτισσα
Сл. 2 Богородица Монголска

After the defeat of Michel Paleologos by the army of the Golden Horde in Thrace, Michel VIII also changed his attitude towards the Golden Horde and tried to establish a good relationship with of new master of Eastern Europe. Eastern Roman Empire both concluded matrimonial relationship by sending three Byzantine princesses both with Il-Khanat and the Golden Horde during the reign of Michel VIII Paleologus and Andronic II⁹.

II The historical, political and social context in Balkan peninsula

During the eastern and middle-southern part of Balkan In first part of XIIIth century, a large former Byzantine territory became part of the second Bulgarian Empire which itself became a vassal state of Golden Horde, one of the Khanats of Great Mongolian Empire, like the Serbian Kingdom later on. (Fig. 4)

Afterwards as the second Bulgarian Empire declined, the Byzantine Empire, both Nicean dynasty and Paleologos dynasty tended to reconquer this region, and large part of this region later entered into the Serbian domination during XIVth century. Despite the conflict between different powers, namely Nicean and Paleologus Empire, Bulgarian Empire, Serbian Empire, the Despote of Epirus and Frankish states in the region of Balkan and the continual Mongolian threat in Balkan until the first half of XIVth century, the situation in the Balkan at the end of 13th century and the beginning of 14th century was relatively stable with certain balance between the different antagonist powers. As a consequence, in this context the communication road through Balkan to Constantinople and from Constantinople to China became relatively safe and stable.

Another important factor of the network of communication between Western Europe, Eastern Mediterranean world and the East was the privileges accorded to the Genoese state in Byzantine Empire and in the Gold Horde. Despite the disaster caused during its expansion, the Mongolian Empire, including Il Khanat and the Golden Horde which had more connection with Christian world kept good relationship with Christian states, one reason could be the strong existence of Christianity in the ruling Mongolian-Turkish families of Mongolian Empire in the XIIIth century, mainly of Eastern Assyrian Church, so-called "Nestorian", but also for practical reason, for example, the need of coop-

Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας Δ 26, (Αθήνα 2005), 35-49.

⁹ Cf. J. RICHARD, *Franks et Orientaux dans le monde des croisades*, XXIV, 89 – 92, 95.

eration against the Mamlouk Muslim power between Il Khanat and the Christian states¹⁰. Getting benefit from the prerogatives accorded by the Byzantine Empire who preferred to be allied to Genoese state rather than Venetian State, maybe because the commercial ambition of Genova was considered more moderate in the eyes of Byzantines comparing to Venetia which was more interested on establishing its dominations on the eastern Mediterranean world other than acquiring just commercial advantages, The Genovese founded the famous colony Pera on the northern suburb of imperial capital city to facilitate its control of the commercial network between Black Sea world and Mediterranean world.



Fig. 3 Παναγία η Μουχλιώτισσα 600

Сл. 3 Богородица Монголска

Image V The commercial empire of Genoa

Also at the end of XIIIth century and the beginning of XIV century, the relationship between Byzantium and Western Roman Catholic states was also relatively pacific despite certain conflicts which also facilitated the free circulation of people all alongside the ancient Silk road from Europe to China.

III The political and social context of China under Mongolian domination

Even if the Mongolian domination was not long in China and not without political instability full of putschs, the society of Mongolian Yuan dynasty at the end of XIIIth century and in the beginning of XIV century was relatively stable and prosperous. One characteristic of this period was the prosperity of the oversea trade which already largely flourished during former Song dynasty. According to geographical book original from the records of the foreign merchants in the bureau of maritime douane in the metropolitan city of QuanZhou (Zayton in foreign sources), A Brief Account of Island Barbarians (島夷誌略) by WangDaYuan (汪大淵)¹¹, we can assess that the geographical knowledge of Chinese world could be extended until the Mediterranean world mainly thorough the vast Islamic world.

¹⁰ For the general political history of Il Khanat, cf. B. SPULER, *Die Mongolen in Iran: Politik, Verwaltung und Kultur der Ilchanzeit 1220 – 1350*, Hinrichs, Leipzig 1939.

¹¹ For a bilingual version (Chinese – English) of this book, cf. *Dao – Yi- Chi- Lue* (Chinese v. English Version) (Concise Record on Island Barbarians), LanTai, TaiBei 2023.

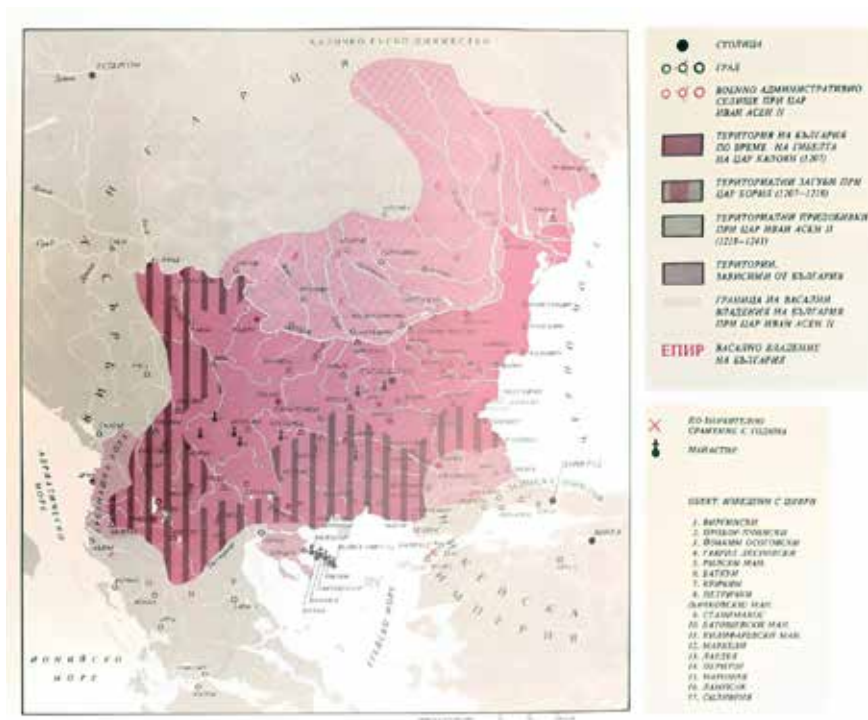


Fig. 4 The second Bulgarian empire under Ivan Asen (1218-1241)

Сл. 4 Друго бугарско царство под Иваном Асенем (1218–1241)

IV The historical context of European society

The role of Byzantium as the connection point between China and Europe is also linked to the geo-political situation of Western Europe in late Medieval period. Since 11th century, Latin Europe undergoing a period of prosperity started the Crusade movement which will last for the following two centuries. As one result of the Crusade movement, many Latin (Frankish) colonies have been founded in Eastern Mediterranean area¹². At that period, the political expansion of Latin Europe towards East was also followed by commercial activities and the need for developing political and diplomatic with Oriental world. As we already mentioned, Genova controlled the Black Sea international commercial network besides Venice whose domination was more on the Eastern part of Mediterranean Sea. And Latin world had intense relationship with Byzantine Empire despite some enmities between them. All these factors contributed to the importance of the role of Byzantium as indispensable crossroad towards Orient for Western Latin Europe.

¹² For the general history of Crusade movement, cf. R. GROUSSET, *Histoire des Croisades et du royaume franc de Jérusalem*, Paris, Pion, 1934. This work is a classic for this subject.

V The missionary, religious, diplomatic and commercial network through Byzantium with case studies

1 Commercial exchange between Europe and China through Byzantium under Mongolian rule

Although the true identity of the author of *Millione* stays controversial, we can at least trust the testimony in this book about the venetian commercial family of Polo whose members went to China through Constantinople¹³. Maybe the best example which can illustrate the commercial connection between Europe and China through Byzantium during this period is the journey of the venetian commercial family of Marco Polo. Another example is the itinerary of the famous Northern African Muslim traveller Ibn Battuta¹⁴.

2 Religious exchange between Europe and China through Byzantium under Mongolian rule

Already during the Latin Empire of Constantinople, the Franciscan monk William of Rusbrock¹⁵ went to Mongolian Empire in the middle of XIIIth century (both to the Golden Horde and the Great Khanat) with diplomatic task and missionary interest invested by saint Louis, king of France and with the advices of Baudouin of Hainaut, diplomate of Latin Empire of Constantinople. During the period Yuan in China, because of a large number of Christian elites original from Central and Western Asia, the Christians, both of Eastern Assyrian Church and Roman Catholic Church enjoyed certain privileges in Chinese Empire. The passage of Christian ecclesiastic figures through Constantinople, the capital city of Byzantine Empire continued and also from other side, namely the trip of a monk of Oriental Assyrian Church Rabban Sauma from China to Western Europe with the support of the Yuan emperor Kubilai khan. Rabban Sauma met the Byzantine emperor Andronic II in Constantinople before continuing his way toward Western Europe where he met successively Philip IV, king of France and Edward II, king of England and the pope Nicolas IV¹⁶. It's obvious that despite the schism between Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, the Paleologus imperial power rather chose a pro-latin attitude and tried many times the reunification of the two Churches, this fact facilitated without doute the circulation of Christians of different traditions between China and Europe.

Image VI Voyages of Rabban Bar Sauma

¹³ For the original text of *Millione* in medieval French, cf. *Le livre de Marco Polo*, publié par M. G. PAUTHIER, Slatkine Reprints, Genève 1978.

¹⁴ Cf. Ibn Battuta, *Voyages*, traduit de B. R. SANGUINETTI, C. DEFREMERY, Paris, La découverte, 1997.

¹⁵ For the text of journey of William of Rusbrok and other Franciscan missionaries who travelled to China during Yuan dynasty, cf. *Sinica Franciscana*, Itinera et relations Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV, collegit, and fidem codicum redegit. ANASTASIOS VAN DEN WYNGAERT, Quaracchi, Firenze 1929.

¹⁶ For a version of the text of the voyage of Rabban Sauma edited, commented with Italian translation, cf. P. G. BORBONE, *Storia di Mar Yahballaha e di Rabban Sauma. Cronaca siriana del XIV Secolo*, Moncalieri 2009 (Translated into French and English).



Fig. 5 The trading empire of Genoa around 1400.

Сл. 5 Трговачко царство Ђенове око 1400.



Fig. 6 The Travels of Rabban Bar Sauman

Сл. 6 Путовања Рабана Бар Саума

3 The Role of Trabizond as another communication crossroad between Europe and China and the continuity of ancient Silk Road during the time of Mongolian domination and combination of the terrestrial road, maritime road and the Northern Steppe road.

Comparing to the previous time, the combination of the use of terrestrial road, maritime road and the Northern Steppe road was specially manifest during this period. And this period witnessed specially the importance of the road alongside the southern coast of Black Sea which made important the geographical position of Trabizond Empire which controlled a large part of the road of southern coast of Black Sea despite the fall of the city of Synope on 1214 on the hands of Seljuks¹⁷. When the Mongolian armies invaded the Caucasian region, the emperor of Trabizond chose to submit to Mongolian Empire as the

¹⁷ Cf. Αλεξίος Γ. Κ. Σαββιδής, *Ιστορία της Αυτοκρατορίας των Μεγάλων Κομνηνών της Τραπεζούντας (1204-1461)*, Κυριακίδη, Θεσσαλονίκη 2016, 55 and the following.

Georgians and the Armenians did and Manuel II went to Karakorum, the capital city of Mongolian Empire to assist on the occasion of the crowning of the new great Khan Guyuk¹⁸. So after Constantinople we can also conform the role of the city and the state of Trabizond as another communication crossroad between Europe and China during Mongolian period.

4 The end of the role of Byzantium as communication crossroad between Europe and China

The Eastern Roman Empire declined very fast in the XIVth century with the two civil wars between Andronic II, Andronic III, and between John V and John VI Cantacuzene¹⁹. And facing to the fast expansion of the emerging Ottoman Empire Eastern Roman Empire lost most of its territory. In China the popular revolt stimulated by economic and social poverty mixed by religious sectary Millennialist endeavour put end of the Mongolian rule of the inner part of China and this period of chaos in the middle of XIVth century ended with the establishment of the new-coming Ming dynasty whose ruling family was again the main Han ethnic Chinese. After the great oversea exploitation with the largest navy in the human history led by the Muslim-original eunuch – amiral ZhengHe until Eastern Africa in the beginning of Ming dynasty, the Empire closed his gates to external maritime connection for different reasons that we couldn't enter into details now. Even if the terrestrial connection over the Silk Road toward the West stayed open, the communication became quite limited. We can also mention the expansion of the emerging power of the Empire of Tamerland at the end of XIVth century and the beginning of XVth century. Even if the rulers of the Empire of Tamerland wasn't hostile to trade, it's military expansion did disturb the ordinary communication all alongside the Silk Road. Meantime, the black death struck heavily Latin Europe and with the end of Crusade movements and the loss of all the Crusaders lands on Orient, Latin Europe also somehow withdrew from the Eurasian network landscape and stayed more in the limits of Latin Europe. Because of the above reasons the role of communication crossroad of Byzantium declined a lot since the middle of XIV century.

5 Some conclusive points

After the concise observation of the role of Byzantium during 13 – 14 centuries, we could give some conclusive points: firstly, even if there was no direct diplomatic relationship between Eastern Roman Empire and Chinese Empire of Mongolian Yuan dynasty, the two empires belonged to the same global network of the Eurasian continent which had been closely tightened during the Pax Mongliana; secondly, Byzantium played an important role as communication crossroad between Europe and China through which diplomats, travellers and religious men passed; thirdly, the appearance and disappearance of the role of Byzantium as crossroad had been influenced by both internal factors inside Byzantine Empire and the external global geo-political factors of Eurasian continent.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Richard, *Francs et Orientaux dans le monde des croisades*, XXIV, 85.

¹⁹ For the political histories of the two civil wars in Byzantium, cf. С. Д. Сказкин (ed.), *История византии в трех томах*, Наука, Москва 1967, Tome III, 123 – 160.

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ПРЕГЛЕД УЛОГЕ ВИЗАНТИЈСКОГ ЦАРСТВА КАО РАСКРСНИЦЕ
КОМУНИКАЦИЈЕ ИЗМЕЂУ КИНЕ И ЕВРОПЕ ТОКОМ ПЕРИОДА РАХ
MONGOLIANA У XIII –XIV ВЕКУ

Иако је Источно римско царство имало интензивне односе са Илканатом и Златном Хордом, два дела Монголског царства у XIII и XIV веку, који се могу квалификовати као период *Rax Mongoliana* због релативне стабилности и просперитета након експанзије Монгола на већем делу Евроазије, само је неколико истраживања спроведено о односу између Византијског царства и Монголског царства, и ово поље је прилично мало познато међу научницима. У овом раду намеравамо да пружимо преглед једног аспекта византијско-монголских односа, односно улоге Византије као раскрснице између Кине и Европе током овог периода.

Иако у декадентији током периода Палеолога, византијско Царство је преузело улогу раскрснице за трговачке, религијске и културне размене између Европе и Кине у геополитичком контексту Евроазије у XIII и XIV веку. Позиција Византије као раскрснице између Европе и Кине током периода *Rax Mongoliana* одређена је општим политичким, социјалним и религијским околностима Источног римског царства, Кине и Западне Европе, као што су трговачка мрежа коју су контролисали Ђеновљани, релативно добри односи између латинских држава, Источног римског царства и Монголског царства, отвореност кинеског царства под монголском доминацијом и улога Цариграда и Трапезунта као два велика центра на путу комуникације између Европе и Кине. Најзначајнији путници тог периода, као што су Марко Поло, Ибн Батута и Рабан Саума, који су пролазили кроз Византију, добро илуструју важност Византије као раскрснице.

Коначно, пад улоге Византијског царства као раскрснице у XIV веку такође је био резултат геополитичких промена у Евроазији, као што су грађански рат у Византији, релативна тенденција затварања Западне Европе и Кине у поређењу са претходним периодом и експанзија царства Тамерлана.