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The Mongol “Other” and the Limits of Europe’s Christian Self-Perception

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Sometime in the year of 1250, King Bela IV of Hungary (1206-1270) wrote a letter to Pope Innocent IV (1195-1254) expressing his fear of another Mongol invasion of his country. And remembering the devastation of their earlier campaigns during the year of 1241, King Bela IV was preparing for the worst.¹ “Most of the Kingdom of Hungary has been reduced to a desert by the scourge of the Tartars,” he wrote to the Pope, using a then common though semi-misleading term for the Mongols, “and it is surrounded like a sheepfold by different infidel peoples like the Ruthenians and the Brodniks on the eastern side and the Bulgarians and Bosnian heretics against whom we have been fighting until now with our armies on the southern side.” And “for this reason,” King Bela IV adds:

and especially because of the Tartars, whom the experience of war has taught us to fear in the same way as all the other nations that they have passed through has learned... we hasten to flee to the worthy vicar of Christ and to his brethren, as to the sole and very last true protector of Christian faith in our ultimate need, so that what we all fear will not happen to us, or rather, through us, to you and to the rest of *Christendom*. Day after day news of the Tartars come to us: that they have unified their forces—and not only against us, with whom they are the most enraged, because we refuse to submit to them even after all the injury... It is rather against the whole of *Christendom* that their forces are unified,

¹ Zoltan Kosztołnyik, *Hungary in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 180.

and, insofar as it is deemed certain by several trustworthy people, they have firmly decided to send their countless troops against the whole of *Europe* soon (italics mine).²

The Mongols were not only going after the Kingdom of Hungary, King Bela IV assured the Pope, but *Christian Europe* as a whole.

Given the Pope's divine responsibility for protecting the world's Catholics, King Bela IV's rhetorical appeal to the possible destruction of European Christianity is both a logical and persuasive argument. Yet his conflation of Christendom with Europe—a geographic landmass then populated by a countless number of kingdoms and villages that lacked a common, transnational identity—raises two important questions. First, how did Christianity come to define the identity of the formerly-pagan continent of Europe? And second, did the Mongols similarly perceive Europe as a Christian continent as well, and thus could confirm the accuracy of King Bela's IV assertion?

Ultimately, I argue that the intellectual origins for King Bela IV's conflation of Europe as Christendom was the product of the combination of two intellectual developments. First, the expansion of the Papacy's geopolitical authority over recent centuries; and second, the intellectual apocalypticism that accompanied the earlier Mongol invasion of Hungary. Despite this conclusion, however, I further show that earlier letters sent between Pope Innocent IV and Guyuk Khan (1206-1248), the chief of the Mongols, ultimately reveal the limits of King Bela IV's view of Europe as Christendom itself. Although King Bela IV could intellectually justify his perception of Europe as a Christian continent, the Mongols could not, since the internal logic

² Barbara Rosenwein, *Reading the Middle Ages: Sources from Europe, Byzantium, and the Islamic World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 382.

of their religious belief system undermined the authority—or perhaps even further, the mere existence—of the Christian god.

Unlike its theological predecessor of Judaism, Christianity is an inherently proliferating religion. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus Christ admonished his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations,” thereby motivating his followers’ zealotry to forever spread the faith throughout the world.³ Consequently, Christianity was already widely practiced throughout the world by 1250, the year King Bela IV sent his aforementioned letter to Pope Innocent IV, pleading for his support in defending “Christendom” from the Mongols.

Curiously, however, the narrow geographic focus of this letter implies a similarly narrow definition of Christendom as equaling Europe. After first asserting Hungary as the Mongols’ first military objective in their possible new campaign, King Bela IV then tells Pope Innocent IV that their next objective would be “the whole of Christendom” before then attacking “the whole of Europe” afterward. While it is possible that King Bela IV meant to separate Christendom from the entirety of Europe in this letter—perhaps Christendom could have been understood as a subsection of Europe—the order in which he prioritizes the Mongols’ objectives instead suggests a conflation between the two, since the final reference to Europe after Christendom *increases* the situation’s urgency. Accordingly, this order implies that the fall of Christendom would then precipitate the fall of Europe as a whole, as if the survival of Europe itself depended on the survival of Christendom.

Given that King Bela IV was writing to the Pope, one would think that Christendom would take the priority over Europe. However, if Europe was then already perceived as uniquely embodying Christianity, then the letter’s conflation between the two would make logical sense.

³ Matt. 28:19-20 NIV.

Correspondingly, after tracing the intellectual development of the concept of Christendom, it appears that the Papacy's gradual geographic expansion over Europe during this period—and its political centralization of authority that came as a result—ultimately set the foundation for King Bela IV's later conflation of Europe as Christendom.

According to Catholic theology, when Jesus named his disciple Peter as the “rock” on which he would build his church, he created the position earthly head of the Christian faith known today as the Pope.⁴ For centuries, nevertheless, this “rock of the church” lacked substantive political influence as the practice of Christianity long remained illegal throughout the Roman Empire. Once Christianity was finally legalized after Emperor Constantine's fourth-century conversion to the faith, however, Christianity spread widely throughout the empire's European borders.⁵ Accordingly, by the advent of the Medieval Era, much of European civilization could have been considered as religiously Christian. Despite this religious identity as nominally Christian, however, it took the various Crusades over Jerusalem to firmly entrench the faith into Europe's cultural identity overall. More specifically, the First Crusade of 1096 between the Muslim Seljuks and various Christian-European armies established the primacy of both Europe and its Christian faith over its non-Christian Eastern neighbors. Combine this dynamic with the simultaneously-increasing acceptance of the Church of Rome's political authority among the European clergy and laity, and you can see the origins of the Latin Papacy's 13th century religious-political dominance over Europe.⁶

Consequently, the term *Christianitas*—which was originally only used to refer to the Christian faith or Christians themselves—began to take on territorial significance as well,

⁴ Matt. 16:18 NIV.

⁵ Robert Wilken, *The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

eventually developing into the term *Christendom*.⁷ This identarian transformation was especially evident at Europe's borders, when Christian and non-Christian communities eventually adopted the same "us" versus "them" mentality seen with the past "civilized" versus "non-civilized" binary discourses around the borders of the Roman Empire.⁸ Instead of membership in Roman civilization serving as the differentiating factor between the in-group and out-group, however, it was the practice of Christianity that made the distinction. And given Hungary's position at the eastern edge of "Christian Europe," such a mentality was especially present during the first Mongolian invasion of the kingdom during the year of 1241.

When looking at the rhetoric surrounding the Mongols' first invasion of the Kingdom of Hungary, however, it is evident that it wasn't interpreted as just an existential threat to Hungary itself. Rather, the invasion was also understood intellectually as an existential threat to Christianity. For many Eastern Europeans, the event served as a harbinger of the Biblical Apocalypse—the literal end of the world as they knew it. For example, one monk's chronicle from the era described the Mongols as "inhuman and like beasts, they should sooner be called monsters than men... their strength does not wane, they are invincible in war and indefatigable in their toil."⁹

Although in retrospect, such apocalyptic visions proved to be unfounded, given the context of the time, however, a certain measure of catastrophism could be justified. For one, barely any European even knew of the Mongols' mere existence up until the beginning of the

⁷ John Tolan, "Constructing Christendom," *The Making of Europe*, ed. John Hudson and Sally Crumplin (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 280.

⁸ Michel Bouchard, "From Barbarian Other to Chosen People: The Etymology, Ideology and Evolution of 'Nation' at the Shifting Edge of Medieval Western Christendom," *National Identities* 17, no. 1 (2014): 9, DOI: 10.1080/14608944.2014.920805.

⁹ Huub Kurstjens, "The Invasion of the Christian West by the Mongols," *Golden Horde Review* 5, no. 2 (2017): 263, DOI: 10.22378/2313-6197.2017-5-2.258-275.

13th century.¹⁰ And going into the mid-13th century when the invasion actually happened, the most substantive knowledge of the Mongols that any ruling elite of Europe had was limited to just a handful of recent diplomatic envoys. Accordingly, the 1241 Mongolian invasion of Hungary effectively came as a complete surprise to most Europeans.¹¹ And so devastating were the Mongols' attacks on the unprepared and poorly defended villages and kingdoms of the Hungarian kingdom, that a certain measure of apocalyptic fear was understandable. After all, without warning, entire populations were completely slaughtered by a seemingly endless number of powerful, foreign invaders.¹² Consequently, during the 13th century, the Mongols came to exemplify the concept of the "other" with respect to Christian European civilization. For example, in this time they were often referred to as agents of the Antichrist, the son of Ishmael, and the descendants of Gog and Mog, among many other biblical allusions that were meant to illustrate both their foreign status and unique depravity.¹³ Perhaps surprisingly, even a man as well-traveled as Marco Polo later associated the Mongols both geographically and characteristically with Gog and Magog.¹⁴

This apocalyptic catastrophism, however, was only possible due to the gradual conflation between Europe and Christendom this essay earlier traced. Had Europe not gained its Christian identity through the spread and strengthening of the Latin Papacy, then the Mongol invasion probably would not have taken on the same Biblical significance that it did at the time. After all, the prophesied location of the Battle of Armageddon—the final battle between the forces of God

¹⁰ Ibid., 260.

¹¹ Ibid., 264.

¹² Ibid., 265.

¹³ Charles Connell, "Western Views of the Origin of the 'Tartars': An Example of the Influence of Myth in the Second Half of the Thirteenth Century," *The Spiritual Expansion of Medieval Latin Christendom: The Asian Missions*, ed. James Ryan (London: Routledge, 2016), 106.

¹⁴ Ibid., 120.

and earthly evil—is a hill in northern Palestine, not a valley in Eastern Europe.¹⁵ But with the newly formed identity of Europe as Christendom, however, an attack on Europe could very well be interpreted as the beginnings of the spiral towards Armageddon.

Given the historical context in which he was living, King Bela IV's Biblical catastrophism in his 1250 letter to Pope Innocent IV is then understandable. Not only was he trying to convince Pope Innocent IV to come to his aid through an appeal to his responsibility of defending Europe's Christians, but the historiography surrounding the earlier Mongol invasion of his country supported his apocalyptic concerns as well. As far as he knew, the Mongols were actually unified "against the whole of Christendom," since they—"the agents of Satan"—were returning to finish the job they had started just nine years earlier. And given the conflation of Europe with Christendom, it was then internally logical that the "whole of Europe" would eventually fall to these Satanic forces as well, since their objective was Christianity itself. Unless, of course, Pope Innocent IV could use his ecclesiastical authority to organize a defense of the continent.

Accordingly, the next logical question asks whether the Mongols themselves saw their military campaigns throughout Hungary as being against Christian Europe, and thus would confirm Europe's self-perception as a Christian continent? Perhaps surprisingly given King Bela IV's conviction, however, an earlier series of letters exchanged between Pope Innocent IV and Guyuk Khan following the 1241 Mongol invasion of Hungary suggests not. The Mongols appear to have been disinterested in—if not completely unaware of—the religious or geographic significance of the lands they were invading.

¹⁵ Robert Lerner, "Armageddon," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2021.

During the year 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent two letters to Guyuk Khan, the leader of the Mongols, by way of an embassy consisting of Lawrence of Portugal and John of Plano Carpini, two faithful Franciscans.¹⁶ After opening the first letter with a lengthy and detailed retelling of the redemptive story of Jesus Christ, Pope Innocent IV appears to benignly invite Guyuk Khan to convert to Christianity for the sake of his soul.¹⁷ In his second letter, however, Pope Innocent IV's underlying political motivations for his invitation to conversion become much more evident, as he then calls for Guyuk Khan to end his militancy and instead follow the peace-loving example of Jesus Christ. "We, therefore, following the example of the King of Peace," Pope Innocent IV writes:

and desiring that all men should live united in concord in the fear of God, do admonish, beg and earnestly beseech all of you that for the future you desist entirely from assaults of this kind and especially from the persecution of Christians, and that after so many and such grievous offences you conciliate by a fitting penance the wrath of Divine Majesty... nor should you be emboldened to commit further savagery by the fact that when the sword of your might has raged against other men Almighty God has up to the present allowed various nations to fall before your face; for sometimes He refrains from chastising the proud in this world for the moment.¹⁸

Guyuk Khan's response to this letter in 1246, however, reveals the logical limits of the Pope's evangelical message. After first acknowledging the political authority of the Pope, Guyuk Khan then expresses his confusion about the Pope's plea that he stops seizing "the lands of the Magyar and the Christians." "These words of thine I have also not understood," Guyuk Khan wrote: "the eternal God has slain and annihilated these lands and peoples, because they have neither adhered to Chingis Khan, nor to the Khagan, both of whom have been sent to make known God's command, nor to the command of God... How could anybody seize or kill by his

¹⁶ Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1955), XV.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

own power contrary to the command of God?... From the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject. Who could do this contrary to the command of God?”¹⁹

Evidently, Guyuk Khan did not understand the religious significance of his attacks on the “Magyar”—the Hungarians—nor the Christians as Pope Innocent IV did. Instead, the internal logic of his belief system suggested that his military victories over Asia and Eastern Europe were ipso facto proof of God’s approval of his actions. After all, he had received some sort of “Mandate from Heaven” from the god Tengri to conquer the world—to desist from doing so would have meant disobeying a clear religious imperative. Consequently, Guyuk Khan could not comprehend what Pope Innocent IV had meant when he asked him to submit to Christ’s peace-loving ways, since it was clear to him that God had favored the Mongols over the Christians given their military victories over them. The Pope’s refrain that he should not take military victories as proof of God’s approval of his actions would have then probably sounded absurd. Why then he would submit to a defeated people, thus disobeying his god’s order to conquer the world, when there is nothing to stop him except for the supposed disapproval of their god?²⁰

Along a similar line of reasoning, the historical record suggests that Guyuk Khan was also just as confused about the unique concept of “Europe” Pope Innocent IV had accused him of attacking. For one, the Mongol’s own “Secret History” text suggests that the West was much less of a military priority for the expanding Mongols than their East.²¹ Additionally, the self-reinforcing logic behind their geographic expansion equally applied to Christian Europeans as it did to the “felt-walled peoples,” or the nomadic tribesmen, that the Mongols initially set out to

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Mongol Orders of Submission to the European Powers, 1245-1255,” *Byzantion* 15 (1940): 405.

²¹ Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* (London: Routledge, 2018), 65.

conquer in the Indo-European Steppes.²² And finally, the stark difference between the Mongols' religious tolerance of their victims who they conquered—and their ruthless slaughter of those who resisted—suggests a world view that overlooked civilizational differences, whether European or not, given their submission to their political authority.²³

Accordingly, herein lie the limits of European self-identification as uniquely Christian: The Christian identity that King Bela IV and Pope Innocent IV applied to the continent of Europe was only evident to those who already accepted both the theological validity of Christianity and the geographic concept of Europe as a continent. The moment the foundations of either of those beliefs were rejected, however, the internal logic then breaks down. Consequently, King Bela IV and Pope Innocent IV were defending a Christian Europe from a people who were unable to even comprehend the existence of such a civilization. And accordingly, any such rhetorical effort to discourage their invasion would thus have been ineffective. For an identity to be truly effective, then, the foundations on which that identity is based have to be accepted by both the individual bearing it, and the party being asked to recognize it.

Ultimately, if Christian Europe was then only evident to Christian Europeans, then the idea that the continent of Europe was distinctly Christian and European would merely be an opinion of the time, and not reflective of an enduring characteristic of the region. While this does not diminish the existential significance of another Mongol invasion for King Bela IV, it does moderate the *ideological* significance of the threat with respect to the historical long-term. After all, had the Mongols successfully realized their second attempt at taking over the continent, the

²² Ibid., 48.

²³ Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, XXIII.

identity of Europe might have thus simply shifted from a Christian identity to a Mongolian one, just as it had shifted from a Pagan identity many centuries earlier.

About the author

Kevin Petersen is a student at Columbia University's School of General Studies studying Economics and European Intellectual History. On campus, he was the production editor of the *Morningside Review*, and is a frequent contributor to the *Columbia Daily Spectator*. He is interested in applying the methods of researching intellectual history to studying international relations in graduate school.

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