
THE CONVERSION OF THE ALANI BY THE FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES IN CHINA IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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THESE NOTES DEAL WITH ONE PHASE OF THE MISSIONARY activities of the Franciscans in China during the Mongol period, namely, the conversion of the people of the Alani to the Roman church.¹ This particular event was selected in order to raise some questions regarding the general problem of conversion and of the motivations involved in the acceptance of a higher religion.

When describing the conversion of Northern Europe to Christianity after the fall of Rome, most historians tend to agree that Christianity conquered not only because it came as a higher religion, but also because it represented a superior civilization and a superior political power. Christianity in crossing the Alps as a higher religion seemed to offer to the barbarian greater supernatural help, since it was dogmatically formulated, efficiently organized, and spread by the burning missionary zeal of the early Christian Church. Representing the surviving culture of the civilized world, it was offered with authority as a finished system to simple people. Finally, and perhaps most decisively, Christianity came as the representative of Rome, with all the prestige and power of the empire. Christianity north of the Alps appealed first of all to kings, the strong and the free. It seems conversion meant primarily a political decision to the barbarian kings, as in the case of Clovis.

The idea that conversion is primarily due to the impact of a superior² civilization and political power is also well supported outside the Roman church. The case of Vladimir and Kievan Russia represents an excellent example. Measured against the importance of Byzantium as a political and cultural power and terminal of the great Dnieper River trade route, Islam, Rome, and Judaism were all rejected in favor of Greek Orthodoxy. This decision involved objective and careful weighing of the alternatives. The Chronicle of Nestor tells of the impression St. Sophia made that "we did not know whether we were on heaven or on earth—such was the splendor."

¹ Franciscan activities in China are treated at length by K.S. Latourette in his *History of Christian Missions in China*, as well as by A.C. Moule in *Christians in China Before the Year 1552*.

² Superior here is used not as value judgment, but as index of material culture.

This splendor obviously meant more to Vladimir than merely Greek liturgy and ritual.

Another instance is that of the Khazars. This trading state on the lower Volga comprised a mixture of Turks and Hunno-Bulgar tribes and controlled the flow of commerce between the Volga, the Caspian, the Caucasus, and the Near and Middle East. It was exposed to the influence of Islam from the South and that of Christianity from the West. The Khazar Kagan, after lengthy consideration, decided to embrace Judaism, since it appeared as a neutral faith, carrying with it no political threat, as did the other two rival faiths. Here is a case of conversion along political lines, selecting the politically least dangerous of creeds, while yet gaining cultural advantages.

In a study of the work of the Franciscan missionaries in China during the Yuan period, it is clear that the gains of the Roman church were almost exclusively confined to non-Chinese (foreigners such as a few Mongols, Onguts, and above all, those people known as the Alani). To the Chinese, as is well known, Christianity made no appeal, since it furnished neither a more highly developed system of religion (able to replace the Chinese trinity of Confucianism, Buddhism and the Way), nor did it represent a superior civilization. Political power, of course, was totally lacking.

The real success of the Friars remained limited to the mass conversion of the Alani, who, numbering about twenty to thirty thousand, were brought into the Nicaean fold largely through the efforts of John of Montecorvino. What was its appeal, and for what reasons was Christianity accepted by them? What stage of cultural, religious, and social development had been reached, so that the Franciscan effort found ready response?

The Alani, an Indo-European tribe, entered the steppes between the Urals and the Caspian from Central Asia, in the wake of the Sarmatian invasions of the 3rd century B.C.³ There is some belief that they were related to the Yueh-chi, or at least had some connections with them. At first they seem to have occupied the area east of the Sea of Azov, and the Kuban basin; later they are to be found in the foothills of the Northern Caucasus, as mentioned by both Pliny and Seneca.

Some tribes of the Alani joined the Suevii and the Vandals during the time of the great barbarian invasions, and passed with the Vandals through Gaul and Spain into North Africa (419 A.D.). For those Alani who remained in the Caucasus, contacts with the Eastern Empire became increasingly frequent and close. Leo the Isaurian in particular supported them by subsidies, in line with the traditional Byzantine diplomacy. The political and cultural attraction of Constantinople resulted, one is tempted to say almost

³ For a description of the early history of the Alani see: *Dictionnaire d'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastique* (Paris 1912), Vol I, pp. 1334-1338, and also R. Blechsteiner, "Das Volk der Alanen," *Berichte des Forschungsinstituts für Osten und Orient* (Vienna 1918), Vol. II, pp. 4-16.

inevitably, in the coming of Christianity. They were converted to Greek Orthodoxy under the Patriarchate of Nicholas Mysticos (first quarter 10th century). This conversion proved to be short lived, the Alani renouncing Christianity by 940, if Masudi the Arab historian is to be believed.⁴ The final conversion to the Greek church took place only as late as the very early part of the 13th century. Christianity then could not have had time to penetrate very deeply before the Alani were forcibly expelled from the Caucasus and transplanted across Asia by the Mongols, thereby losing all connection with the Byzantine state and patriarchate. Between this second conversion and the coming of the Mongols not more than 30 years could have elapsed. The first contacts of the Alani with the Mongols occurred in 1223 when the Mongol expedition of Subotai and Chebe fought its way across the Caucasus to invade the Kipchak territory in Southern Russia, to punish that tribe for its alliance with the Sultan of Khwarezm who had been utterly defeated by the Mongols in 1220. A battle was fought between the Mongols, the Alani and other Caucasian tribes, and the Mongols forced their way through the mountain passes. But the Alani were not decisively conquered until the time of Subotai's great expedition into the South Russian steppes and Eastern Europe, 1235 to 1252. It seems that the Alani submitted to the overlordship of the Mongols by 1236.⁵ The chiefs surrendered to Mangu, and were given titles by the Mongols and ordered to serve with their people as auxiliary troops.⁶ About 30,000 mounted horsemen called Asu or A-lan-a-ssu under a chief called Nieh-ku-la (very likely Nicholas) were sent into Central Asia. At first they were stationed at Karakorum, but later they saw service in the role of bodyguards as well as in that of auxiliary troops under Kublai Khan in his conquest of the state of Nanchao in 1253. And subsequently they were employed in the war against Sung China. We possess a number of biographies of Alani chieftains in the *Yüan shih*; they seemed to have enjoyed privileged positions at the Mongol court, presumably because they had yielded peacefully, and probably also because many Alani were excellent craftsmen, skilled in armor-making, a long established tradition of the Caucasian mountaineers.⁷

Alani princes commanded exclusively Alani troops, which were organized in units of 1,000. The *Yüan shih* contains a number of references regarding appointments to the rank of chiliarchs by Alani chieftains. Marco Polo also referred to the services rendered by them to Kublai Khan. Alani bodyguards are first mentioned in 1237 at Karakorum, and they seemed to be rapidly increasing in numbers thereafter, continuing to exist as late as 1330.

⁴ Masudi as quoted in C. Rambaud, *Constantin Porphyrogenete*, p. 525.

⁵ E. Bretschneider, *Medieval Researches*, p. 294.

⁶ R. Grousset, *Histoire de l'Extrême-Orient*, p. 466.

⁷ L. Olschki, *Guillaume Boucher*, p. 8.

While serving the Mongol Khans, the Alani rapidly lost touch with the Greek clergy. Rubruquis, that intrepid traveler, knew the Alani as Aas, or Akas, and noticed that they were Greek Orthodox Christians using Greek books and Greek priests.⁸ He stated, however, that at the time of his visit to Karakorum in 1256, the Alani were "Christians of Eastern rites who had not seen the sacrament since their capture." This seems a bit surprising at first, given the well known fact of the Mongol policy of religious toleration. Although the Mongols supported all religions for political reasons, support was not given in the same degree. The Mongols drew the line at importing priests, or being interested in maintaining religious connections for one of the conquered people, if that people proved to be not more than a small and unimportant minority in the Empire. Assuredly, in the case of the Alani, there did not exist the same political necessity as in case of the Chinese or Persians. On the other hand, the Mongols did show some interest in the Christian West. Although they had requested and facilitated the travel of Franciscans to China, they had done so because they hoped to learn something from them about the European world, and not because they desired to become converts. Christianity could not furnish to them the cultural and political strength which Islam gave to the Ilkhanate, or Buddhism to the Yuan rulers.

But, and this is the most interesting point in the history of the Franciscans in the Far East, their coming did result in the reconversion of the Alani. Friar John of Montecorvino achieved his greatest success in about 1318, when, as the Franciscan source has it: "certain good Christians who are called Alani, receiving pay from the most great king for 20,000 persons, themselves and their families have joined Brother John. And he supports them and preaches."⁹ Montecorvino was born in Southern Italy in 1246, and entered the Order of the Minor Friars in 1272. He was active at the court of the Eastern emperor, Michael Paleologus, and was a missionary in Asia Minor and Armenia until 1289 when he returned to Rome with a letter from Argun, the Mongol ruler of the Persian Ilkhanate, to request the pope to send some Catholic missionaries to Kublai Khan. The pope, Nicholas IV, entrusted Montecorvino with this mission and he left Rome in 1289 with letters to Kublai Khan and to Argun, accompanied by one Dominican who died enroute, and an Italian merchant, Peter of Lucalongo. Travelling by sea from Persia to India where he stayed well over a year, he reached China in 1294, shortly after the death of Kublai Khan. He won the favor of the new Emperor Timur, after overcoming considerable Nestorian opposition, and in 1300 Montecorvino built a church in Khanbaliq (the city of the Khan), Kublai's new capital city in China on the site of present day Peking.¹⁰

⁸ W. W. Rockhill, *William of Rubruquis*, p. 213.

⁹ Letter of Peregrine of Castille, Franciscan Friar, 30 December 1318, given in A.C. Moule, *New China Review* (December 1920), pp. 538-44.

¹⁰ L. Olschki, *Marco Polo's Precursors*, p. 74.

A letter from Montecorvino dated 8 January 1305, states:

I have built a church in the City of Khanbaliq, where the king has his chief residence. And this I completed six years ago; and I also made a belltower there, and put three bells in it. (unam ecclesiam edificauj in ciuitate Cambaliech ubi est pre cipua residemia regis quam ante sex annos conpleuj. ubi etiam feci campanile et ibj tres campanas posuj.)¹¹

Until 1306 Montecorvino had the help of only one other Friar, Arnold of Cologne, but the report of his successes, conveyed to Rome by Friar Thomas of Tolentino, created great interest, and Pope Clement V decided to support actively the missionary work at the far corner of the world. Montecorvino was able to be consecrated archbishop (summus archiescopus) with a diocese embracing the bishoprics of Zaiton, Almaliq, Saraia, Tana, Kaffa in the Crimea and Kumuk.¹² He was installed in that position in 1307, and it was this Catholic archbishop who succeeded in the conversion of the Alani to the Roman faith.

The personality of Montecorvino himself must have made a deep and lasting impression upon the Alani chiefs. His knowledge of the "Linguam Tartaricham" (undoubtedly Mongolian rather than Chinese) must have aided his success, but it is also interesting to speculate upon the events which preceded the actual conversion. Did some of the Alani leaders come to see Montecorvino, or did he go out and convert them solely by his own effort? What sort of an appeal was made by him, and what selected from the Christian heritage as being particularly responsive to the needs of this specific group? What was the way in which this selection of elements was presented to them? Even though the Alani may have been ready and eager to accept the Christian doctrine, this conversion is a great tribute to the character and personality of Montecorvino, placing him in the first ranks of great missionaries. His work may well be compared to that of Raymond Lull, the other outstanding missionary of the Avignon papacy who worked among the Saracens.

The letter of the chiefs of the Alani to the pope in 1336 and the letter of the Yuan emperor Toghay Timur (1333-1368) to the pope in which he requested him to accept his recommendation of the Alani as the pope's "Christian Sons" give evidence of the esteem in which Montecorvino was held by them, and are witness to the fact that his success was partially due to the nobility of his character:

Let this moreover be known to your Holiness, that for a long time we were instructed in the Catholic faith, and wholesomely governed and very much comforted [sic] by your Legate Brother John, a valiant, holy and capable man,

¹¹ MSS Latin 5006, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; as printed in A.C. Moule, *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society* (1914), pp. 533-599.

¹² F.E.A. Krause, *Geschichte Ostasiens* p. 353

who nevertheless died eight years ago. In which years we have been without a governor and without spiritual consolation. . . Wherefore we beseech your Holiness to send us a good, capable and wise legate who may care for our souls; and that he come quickly, because we fare ill without a head, without instruction, and without consolation.¹³

It appears then that about 20,000 Alani, deprived of contact with the Greek church, turned eagerly to the church of Rome when its representative in China offered them an opportunity to continue in the Christian faith. It is true that this Franciscan success did not last for any length of time. The Alani were soon again deprived of Christian contacts, and were expelled together with the Mongols from China with the fall of the Yuan in 1368. It is probable that the Asiatic Alani were assimilated with the Mongols; a Mongol tribe of the name of Assod, or Asod, which appears for the first time in 1399, may well have constituted the Alani remnant.

The conversion of this people by the Franciscan in 1318 remains as a most interesting problem within the general question of conversion. Here is a people who exchange the Greek church for that of Rome, being at the utmost distance from both, and living in an entirely different cultural and political sphere. The Franciscans did not represent superior political power, nor did they appear in China as bearer of a superior civilization. Why then did this conversion take place?

I think it is possible to suggest at least one reason for the reconversion of the Alani to Roman Catholicism. The Alani had been exposed to the Greek church at one particular stage in their cultural history, and had experienced the civilizing and political advantages which Christianity gave to a people with whom it came into contact. This exposure probably did not have time to penetrate deeply, yet the impression must have been considerable enough to create a feeling of the need for renewed Christian values when the occasion presented itself. For when the Alani were deprived of the spiritual leadership emanating from Byzantium, and were transplanted into China, they sought for and found another Christian creed of a high order among the Franciscans. The short span of time during which the Alani had been subject to Greek Orthodoxy was just long enough to create a new demand for the Christian creed, but not so long as to create a barrier against Catholicism. Significantly enough, the Alani had bypassed the Nestorian Christians who flourished in Karakorum. Nestorianism represented considerable political influence among the Mongols and Onguts, but had itself been corrupted in Central Asia, leaning heavily towards Shamanism.

The salient feature of the reconversion of the Alani by John of Montecorvino was that religion was again accepted to satisfy strictly spiritual

¹³ A. C. Moule, "The Minor Friars in China," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (January 1917), pp. 1-36.

needs; superior culture and political power played little if any role. The Franciscans were successful precisely because the Alani had arrived at a particular stage in their cultural development and found themselves in the very special position of having been transported across Asia and deprived of contact with Byzantium. Christianity, which, if one accepts the general thesis of conversion, had originally been accepted by them for reasons of culture and political considerations, had achieved sufficient penetration among the Alani to create a genuine thirst for its spiritual values.

Certainly the history of the Alani in the years between 1210-1320 is most interesting. They were exposed to a great number of political, social, religious, and cultural influences, ranging from a close relationship with Byzantium through the Mongol conquest to residence in China and the influence of Franciscan missionaries. In conclusion, I think that the study of the work of the Franciscans seems of particular value since it affords insight into the processes by which a religion is accepted. The case of the Alani seems to suggest that Religion is at first accepted in accordance with the previous formula because it brings with it superior civilization and represents political power; however, after a certain period of time these two conditions are considerably less influential, and religion seems to create a genuine appeal along spiritual lines. It seems to me that a study of this kind of a transitional process can be of particular satisfaction to the historian.