

Perspectives on Martyrdom among Medieval Franciscans in Asia

JANA VALTROVÁ*

Department for the Study of Religions, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia
• jvaltrova@phil.muni.cz • ORCID 0000-0003-4660-6086

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes perspectives on martyrdom in Franciscan letters and accounts regarding Christian missions in Asia during the 13th and 14th centuries. The accounts include, among others, those of William of Rubruck, John of Plano Carpini, John of Montecorvino, Andrew of Perugia, and Pascal of Vittoria. The aim of this analysis is to explore the authors' views on the martyrdom of their fellow friars but also on martyrdom as a potential and/or desirable part of their own mission. The paper points out a variety of attitudes to martyrdom, ranging from an explicit desire to silent rejection, and considers the discourses of memories of martyr death around medieval Asia, outside the regions under direct Muslim rule.

Keywords: Christian missions to Asia; martyrdom; Franciscans; Christian-Muslim encounter; Mongolian empire

Introduction

Martyrdoms of medieval Christian friars in the regions under the rule of the “infidels” have been studied mainly within the context of a discussion about Franciscan identities, Franciscan missions, and their development. Martyrdom has been considered as an inherent part of Franciscan missions, even as the



Religio 34, no. 1 (2025): 1–25.
<https://doi.org/Rel2026-43050>

This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

* The work on this article was supported by the grant “Reconfiguring the commons in conditions of uncertainty: Diplomacy of trust and experimental forms of cooperation and convergent action across divergent worlds” (RECOMUN), realized as specific research no. MUNI/A/1751/2025 at the Department for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, in 2026. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their comments.

crowning glory of their path of *imitatio Christi*.¹ Isabelle Heullant-Donat² and Christopher MacEvitt³ have both shown in their research that the development of the concept of martyrdom was significantly connected to conflicts over the virtue of poverty in the church at the turn of the fourteenth century, but also owed much to the crisis caused by the gradual “failure of western Christendom in its struggle to overcome Islamdom militarily and spiritually.”⁴ MacEvitt argues that from the initial “desire” for martyrdom that was expressed already by St Francis and also by Franciscans during the thirteenth century, but rarely achieved, martyrdom turned into a goal that was even sought during the following century.⁵ While in some cases martyrdoms could be linked to the crisis within the Franciscan order resulting from the debate over the poverty of the church, Heullant-Donat argues that for the Franciscans in the first decades of the fourteenth century, martyrdom *in partibus infidelium* was not only a concern for a radical minority, later labelled as Spirituals; even for the representatives of the order, such as Jerome of Caffa, who in 1318 became a bishop of a large diocese within the area of the Golden Horde,⁶ martyrdom was a “tangible sign of the remarkable expansion of the order,” whose friars shed blood in various places “from Morocco to India.”⁷ It is also clear that narratives of martyrdoms were strongly linked to the expansion of Islam, which represented a direct rival to the mendicant attempts to evangelize in the East.

In the following text I aim to explore the discourses on martyrdom reflected in the territories beyond direct Muslim rule with a special focus on the context of travel and the practice of preaching and evangelization, which to some extent

1 E.g. E. Randolph Daniel, *The Franciscan Concept of Mission in the High Middle Ages* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1975).

2 Isabelle Heullant-Donat, “Martyrdom and Identity in the Franciscan Order (Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries),” *Franciscan Studies* 70 (2012): 429–53.

3 Christopher MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire: Crusade and Martyrdom in Fourteenth Century,” in *Center and Periphery. Studies on Power in the Medieval World in Honor of William Chester Jordan*, ed. Katherine L. Jansen, G. Geltner, and Anne E. Lester (Brill, 2013), 223–35; Christopher MacEvitt, “Martyrdom and the Muslim World through Franciscan Eyes,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 97 (2011): 1–23.

4 Christopher MacEvitt, *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans. Islam, the Papacy, and an Order in Conflict* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 95.

5 MacEvitt, *The Martyrdom*, 68.

6 Jean Richard, *La papauté et les missions d’Orient au Moyen Âge (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)* (École française de Rome, 1998), 158.

7 Isabelle Heullant-Donat, “In ogni luogo il sague loro è sparso... Pauvret, martyre et identité franciscaine au XIVe siècle,” in *Expériences religieuses et chemins de perfection dans l’Occident médiéval. Etudes offertes à André Vauchez par ses élèves*, ed. Dominique Rigaux, Daniel Russo and Catherine Vincent (Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres – De Boccard, 2012), 293–309: 306.

represent a different framework for the conceptualization of martyrdom. In contrast to the findings based on the analysis of Franciscan chronicles and *passiones* performed by MacEvitt and Heullant-Donat, this set of sources more closely related to missions offers a slightly different perspective. Accounts and letters of missionaries, themselves being close to the eventuality of martyr death⁸ and its secondary consequences, such as the outbreak of communal violence,⁹ situate the narrative of martyrdom within the context of everyday life and its compromises. What kind of martyrdoms do these accounts relate then, and how can we understand them?

As I will show among the friars operating in the regions under Mongol rule, the attitudes toward martyrdom varied with respect to the local religious policy. The most striking differences from the tendencies suggested by Heullant-Donat and MacEvitt seem to occur among the Franciscans in Mongol China under the Yüan dynasty, where Islam did not gain dominance among other religious traditions. Although this is certainly a rather silent voice among the Franciscans, differing from that of the major discourse on martyrdom, it deserves close attention, because it reveals factors which possibly influenced the development of a martyr's death narrative and the vitality of its tradition.

Before proceeding to the analysis of records of martyrdoms as reflected in mendicant accounts from the Mongol empire, first I will present a brief overview of the sources dealing with martyr deaths of Franciscan friars in thirteenth and fourteenth century Asia.

The Sources

The sources used by MacEvitt and Heullant-Donat are those which reflect the history of the order and incorporate passions into a wider theological context, such as the *Chronicle of Twenty-Four Generals*.¹⁰ These texts express and

8 John of Montecorvino makes a passing reference to his fear of death in his letter from 1305 sent from Khanbalyk. *Sinica Franciscana*, ed. Athanasius van den Wyngaert (Quaracchi, 1929), 347. Hereafter *Sinica Franciscana 1*.

9 Discussions about faith which usually preceded a martyr's execution included opinions insulting to both sides of the dispute. E.g. the account of the martyrdom in Arzenga in 1314 mentions that after the execution of the friars, "all the other Christians, out of fear, fled to their homes." Arnald of Sarrant, *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals of the Order of Friars Minor*, trans. Noel Muscat (TAU Franciscan Communications, 2010), 557. Available online at https://www.academia.edu/41595097/Chronicle_of_the_Twenty_Four_Generals_of_the_Order_of_Friars_Minor. For Latin see *Chronica XXIV generalium Ordinis minorum. Cum pluribus appendicibus inter quas excellit hucusque ineditus "Liber de laudibus S. Francisci,"* Analecta Franciscana 3,(S. Bonaventurae, 1897), 414.

10 MacEvitt, "Victory by Desire," 223–35.

present intellectual reflections upon contemporary developments within the church and order; they reflect “the urgent need to reformulate fundamental Franciscan values.”¹¹

Franciscan accounts from Asia, unlike chronicles, represent a different kind of source. In the initial phase of Euro-Mongol contact up to the 1250s, they document the diplomatic exchange between European and Mongol authorities and describe the history of the Mongols and their natural and cultural milieu, including military aspects. Later records such as Franciscan letters and accounts that appear by the end of the 13th century record the progress of the mission¹² and its obstacles, and reflect to a certain extent also the personal attitudes of their authors.

The present paper is based on various medieval Latin accounts and letters of Franciscans, which were produced between the 1230s and the late fourteenth century within the context of the Franciscan mission in the dominions under the Mongol rule. Dominican accounts are complimentary to the main collection of sources, which is certainly not complete; nevertheless, the analysis deals with the most significant and detailed reports.

When studying martyrdoms in medieval Asia, we are limited to Christian sources only, because, as far as I am aware, these events remained largely invisible to non-Christian authors. In the regions of the Golden Horde and Chaghadaï khanate, where several martyrdoms took place, there exist no Muslim records of these incidents.¹³ With respect to other regions, it seems that the situation is no better – records of a missionary presence coming from a non-Christian environment are quite rare, and also reflect the authors’ indifference to the situation of Christians.¹⁴

One important part of the sources comprises letters written by friars in Asia, either directly reporting from their missions, or written after their return to

11 MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire,” 230.

12 E.g. Riccold of Montecroce explicitly claimed to have travelled to the East in order to evangelize among the Muslims and the Mongols. Rita George-Tvrčković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce’s Encounter with Islam* (Brepols, 2012), 152. Similarly, Franciscans who operated among the nomads of the Mongolian steppe where they tried to extinguish “idolatry.” See Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum,” 107, etc.

13 I am indebted to Peter Jackson for this information. One of the rare mentions of the presence of Christians in this region, not referring to martyrdom at all, may be found in the account of Ibn Battūta. *The Travels of Ibn Battūta, A.D. 1323-1354*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb (The Hakluyt Society, 1959), 470, 516. Notably, Marco Polo also does not refer to martyrdoms of Christians in Asia.

14 For Chinese records about local Christians (so-called “Nestorians”), see Arthur C. Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1500* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), 216–40.

Europe: letters of Hungarian Dominican friars from the 1230s;¹⁵ letters of the Franciscan friars John of Montecorvino (1247–1330?)¹⁶ and Andrew of Perugia¹⁷; and letters of Bartholomew of Tabriz¹⁸, Jordan of Catala (†around 1336)¹⁹, and also anonymous authors describing the situation in Crimea in the 1320s.²⁰

When judging the accuracy of these letters, I agree with Roman Hautala, who considers the Franciscan accounts of religious life in the region of the Golden Horde as quite realistic, certainly no less accurate than Oriental sources.²¹ Their implicit background, which in some cases is emphasized, is certainly the call for more friars to come to evangelize in Asia.²²

Another type of source is the accounts of envoys and missionaries, such as John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Jordan of Catala,²³ and Odoric of Pordenone (1286–1331).²⁴

Certainly, unlike in the elaborated narratives of passions in Franciscan chronicles, martyrdom is not a central issue in most of the above-mentioned accounts and letters. The focus of the letters – less so, the accounts, which cover a broader scope of topics – is the evangelization of the inhabitants of Asia, be they of different faiths, the obstacles faced, the methods used, and the achievements gained.²⁵

15 Heinrich Dörrie, “Drei Texte zur Geschichte der Ungarn und Mongolen,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 6 (1956): 125–202.

16 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 340–55. Two of his letters published in English by Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission. Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries* (Sheed and Ward, 1955), 224–31.

17 His Latin letter see *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 373–77, English translation in Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 235–37.

18 Christine Gadrat, *Une image de l’Orient au XIV^e siècle. Les «Mirabilia Descripta» de Jordan Catala de Séverac. Édition, traduction et commentaire* (École des Chartres, 2005), 314–15.

19 For Latin edition of his account with French translation see Gadrat, *Une image*, 237–95. For letters see Gadrat, *Une image*, 309–13.

20 The letter dated to 1323 and sent from Caffa was published by Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum,” 104–12.

21 Roman Hautala, “Latin Sources on the Religious Situation in the Golden Horde in the Early Reign of the Uzbek Khan,” *The Golden Horde Review* 4 (2016): 336–45.

22 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 349, 354.

23 Gadrat, *Une image*, 243–67.

24 About his life and journeys, see Igor de Rachewiltz, *Papal Envoys to the Great Khans*, (Stanford University Press, 1971), 179–86.

25 For more on missionary intentions and procedures, see Jana Valtrová, “Contextualizing Riccoldo da Monte di Croce’s Experience with Religious Conversion,” in *Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (†1320): Missionary to the Near East and Expert on Islam*, ed. Kurt Villads Jensen and Davide Scotto (Kungl. Vitterhetsakademien, 2024), 67–68, <https://doi.org/10.62077/35j8k4.nunhp3>.

The only exceptions in which martyrdoms become the central topic in these sources are letters written directly as reports of such an event – this is the case of letters referring to the martyrdom of Franciscan friars in the Indian city of Thanā in 1321²⁶ and in Almaliq in 1339.²⁷

Early Accounts of Persecution and Martyrdom in Asia

MacEvitt²⁸ points out that existing sources demonstrate that “[t]he Franciscans who *did* die as martyrs in the thirteenth century were ignored. No thirteenth-century narratives describing the deaths of the martyrs survive....”²⁹ On the other hand, he confirms that “Franciscan interest in martyrdom began with Francis himself”³⁰ and the desire for martyrdom became an important aspect of Franciscan literature.³¹

Can we perceive these trends also in Franciscan letters and accounts coming from Asia? Did the friars consider the possibility of martyr death as an outcome of their efforts, or did they even desire it, as some other sources such as the biographies of St. Francis and St. Clare³² suggest?

The earliest Latin accounts concerning the medieval Christian missions in Asia are very poor on information about martyr deaths. Despite the multiple threats that the first missionaries and envoys in Asia were exposed to, the idea of martyrdom was simply not in use – either in the context of accounts of potential death, or the various kinds of persecution that the missionaries were facing.³³

The religious situation in the Mongolian Empire, which offered the missionaries considerable religious freedom, certainly influenced the number of performed executions. Also in this context, martyrdom could not function as a narrative tool for competing with Islam, as was the case in regions under the Muslim rule.

26 Letters of various authors are used for an elaborated passion, contained in *The Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals*. See *Chronica XXIV generalium Ordinis minorum. Cum pluribus appendicibus inter quas excellit hucusque ineditus “Liber de laudibus S. Francisci,”* Analecta Francescana III, (S. Bonaventurae, 1897), 474–79. For English translation see Arnald of Sarrant, *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals of the Order of Friars Minor*, trans. Noel Muscat (TAU Franciscan Communications, 2010).

27 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 510–511; *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 530–32.

28 MacEvitt, “Martyrdom and the Muslim World,” 1–23.

29 MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire,” 229.

30 MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire,” 228.

31 MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire,” 229.

32 For more on this, see MacEvitt, “Victory by Desire,” 229–30.

33 For Latin edition of Carpini’s report see Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, ed. by Enrico Menestò (Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo, 1989), 227–28. English translation Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 3. For Hungarian Dominicans see Dörrie, “Drei Texte,” 125–202.

However, we should avoid an anachronistic application of our present knowledge about medieval Mongol religious policy to the situation of thirteenth-century friars. When they were setting out on their journeys, they did not know whether they might die among the Mongols, or not.

The account of the Hungarian Dominican friar Riccardus³⁴ described the journey of Dominican friars who, in the 1230s, had travelled in the territories of the Eastern steppes under Mongol rule in the quest for Great Hungary. A surviving friar, Otto, travelled in disguise as a merchant,³⁵ which indicates that dressed as a friar he would have been more vulnerable. In spite of the great hardship the Dominicans experienced, neither the account of Riccardus, nor the letter of another friar, Julianus, mentions martyrdom as a potential outcome of their journeys. The deaths of the survivors' companions did not receive any special attention in the sources apart from an interesting note that one of the friars died and was buried at a house of their Muslim host.³⁶ This may suggest that indeed the urgency to narrate martyrdom was not equally persistent during the period of medieval mendicant missions to the Mongols and the inhabitants under their rule.

Indeed, during the period of initial contacts between the friars and the Mongols, martyrdom was not an issue. After the Mongol invasion of eastern Europe in the 1240s, several diplomatic missions were sent by Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) to the court of the khans in order to establish a connection and to find out about these enemies from the steppe.³⁷ The account of the most well-known envoy, John of Plano Carpini (1182–1252),³⁸ reflects his fear for his life: “although we feared we might be killed by the Tartars or other people, or imprisoned for life, or afflicted with hunger, thirst, cold, heat, injuries and exceeding great trials almost beyond our powers of endurance [...], nevertheless we did not spare ourselves in order to carry out the will of God as laid down in the Lord Pope’s mandate, and be of some service to Christians [...] having learned the truth about the desire and intention of the Tartars, we could make this known to the Christians....”³⁹

34 About their mission, see Mary Dienes, “Eastern Missions of the Hungarian Dominicans in the First Half of the Thirteenth Century,” *Isis* 27 (1937): 225–41.

35 Dörrie, “Drei Texte,” 152.

36 Dörrie, “Drei Texte,” 156.

37 About the historical context of medieval missions, their aims, progress and results, see Richard, *La papauté*.

38 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 27–130.

39 da Pian del Carpini, *Storia*, 227–28; Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 3. For more about the expressions of fear in these accounts see Jana Valtróvá, “Struggling with Fear? Emotions in Medieval Travel Accounts about the Mongols,” in *To Jerusalem and Beyond: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Latin Travel Literature, c. 1200–1500*, ed. Martin Bauer, Philip Booth and Susanna Fischer (Heidelberg University Publishing, 2023), 93–116.

As a diplomat, Carpini certainly did not seek the “crown of martyrdom;” however, he also could not exclude the eventuality of his own death.

This becomes clear from his report of the case of Duke Mikhail of Chernigov (1185–1246)⁴⁰ and his boyar Fedor, who were executed after refusing to bow to the idol of Genghis Khan and performing the purificatory ritual of passing between two fires. Both of them are revered as martyrs by the Orthodox church. This case, however, was understood by Carpini to be rare.⁴¹

Even in the account of the embassy of a Dominican friar, Ascelin of Lombardy, who was sentenced to death by the Mongols, but finally released, we do not find any reference to the possibility of martyrdom.⁴²

Obviously, none of the accounts of envoys and friars from the thirties, forties and fifties of the 13th century indicated a burning desire for martyrdom among the Mongols. One aspect explaining this could be the “worldly,” practical goals of these embassies – finding Old Hungary and the mission to its inhabitants, the exchange of diplomatic letters, and finding out about Mongol military power and the possibilities of the khan’s conversion to Christianity.

Yet, we may find interesting traces of the friars’ thinking about martyrdom in some of the accounts from this period. William of Rubruck (1215–1270)⁴³ refers to “martyrdom” several times in his *Itinerary* in different contexts, and his report suggests various meanings for this term. One type of reference is connected closely to his itinerary and description of Asian geography. When passing by Cherson on a boat, Rubruck was reminded that it was a city “where St Clement was martyred.”⁴⁴ On his way back to Europe, he refers to Nakhchavan as a place where St. Bartholomew and Judas Thaddaeus were martyred.⁴⁵

40 About his life and death see Martin Dimnik, *Mikhail, Prince of Chernigov and Grand Prince of Kiev, 1224-1246* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981). More on the context of this case see also Jana Valtrová, “Provincializing Histories of Missions through Food: Friars and the Consumption of Kumiss in the Mongol Empire,” *Religio* 31, no. 2 (2023): 281–306, <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-2-5>.

41 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 10. di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*, 238.

42 There are only indirect accounts of his mission in the encyclopedia *Speculum Historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais and in *Chronica Majora* by Matthew Paris. Chapters which Vincent of Beauvais recorded as coming from the report of Simon of St. Quentin were published separately as *Histoire des Tartares*, ed. et trans. Jean Richard (Librarie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1965).

43 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 164–332. The most recent edition of Rubruck’s report was published as Guglielmo di Rubruk, *Viaggio in Mongolia*, ed. Paolo Chiesa (Fondazione Lorenzo Valla, 2014). For the English translation with notes and commentaries, see Peter Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck: His Journey to the Court of the Great Khan Möngke 1253–1255* (Hakluyt Society, 1990).

44 Jackson, *The Mission*, 62.

45 Jackson, *The Mission*, 265.

Remembering past Christian martyrs is a common feature of travel accounts, although in the Asian context there were not many such places to recall in the 13th century. Apart from those already mentioned, the only other widely-known martyr sent to Asia was the apostle Thomas, but that is another story.⁴⁶

Another perspective on martyrdom is offered by Rubruck's account of the food and conditions he had to endure during his journey. Here, he uses the term "martyrdom" (*martirium*) in the sense of the suffering, both physical as well as spiritual, which he had to overcome.⁴⁷

Martyrdom as a means of self-sacrifice for faith is mentioned by him only once in connection with Christian captives in Mongolia. Some of them confessed to him that they were forced to serve in the Mongolian army and obey such commands that were against their Christian convictions, namely attacking other Christians. Rubruck strongly disapproved of such actions: "I issued a firm injunction to them against attacking Christians or harming them: they should sooner let themselves be killed, since that way they would become martyrs."⁴⁸ In this case, however, martyrdom is not meant as a goal which should be sought, rather a reminder of the spiritual reward for strategic self-sacrifice.

The Rise of Martyrdom Narratives

As MacEvitt pointed out, around the 1320s, the first elaborated accounts of Franciscan martyrdoms appear, which should be viewed in relation to the developments within the Franciscan order.⁴⁹ Conflicts over views on the poverty of the church, which had been rumbling within the Order, were resolved by Pope John XXII (1316–1334) in two of his bulls (*Ad conditorem canonem*, 1322, and *Cum inter nonnullos*, 1323). In these documents he denounced the belief in the utter poverty of the church and ordered the persecution of all those who maintained such a belief.⁵⁰ According to MacEvitt, this represented an impulse for Franciscans to transform the concept of martyrdom, ever present in the form of a "desire," into practice. Following these bulls, those Franciscans who renounced the possession of goods as opposing their understanding of Scripture, decided for martyrdom because they could no longer live according to their ideal. Thus, the achievement of martyrdom may be interpreted as an expression of the Franciscans' renunciation of the world.⁵¹

46 See Adolphus E. Medlycott, *India and the Apostle Thomas: An Inquiry; with a Critical Analysis of the Acta Thomae* (David Nutt, 1905).

47 Rubruck mentioned short supplies of food, which he had to share with other people: "It was there that I experienced what martyrdom it is, when destitute, to give in bountifully." Jackson, *The Mission*, 188. Chiesa, *Viaggio*, 174.

48 Jackson, *The Mission*, 215.

49 MacEvitt, "Victory by Desire," 230.

50 MacEvitt, "Victory by Desire," 230.

51 MacEvitt, "Martyrdom and the Muslim World," 22.

*The Chronicle of Twenty-Four Generals*⁵² presents a number of martyrdoms in regions ranging from the Golden Horde, across Armenia and Persia, to Central Asia and India. Among them, the most detailed narratives describe cases in the Armenian city of Arzenga (Erzinjan) in 1314,⁵³ in the Indian port of Thana in 1321,⁵⁴ in Sarai⁵⁵ and Salamastra in 1334,⁵⁶ and a case in Almaliq in 1339.⁵⁷

All these cases, along with several others mentioned only briefly in the sources, concern martyrdoms at the hands of Muslims. This would evidently seem to be connected to the spread of Islam in this region. However, it should be taken into account that, in the light of recent scholarship, the process of the Islamization of the Golden Horde seems not to have been as forced as previously presented.⁵⁸ Devin DeWeese points out that the religious policy of Khan Uzbek (1312-1341) “should be considered outside the rather hackneyed framework of assuming ‘religious tolerance’ on the part of the Mongols, a tolerance that Özbek is usually (along with other converts to Islam among the Mongols) blamed for abandoning. What is at work is not a break with ‘tolerance,’ but rather a shift from one policy to another, both based upon assumptions of a communal basis and implications of religious affiliation.”⁵⁹

Christian missionary letters from Crimea offer a somewhat ambiguous image of the khans’ religious policy. On the one hand, martyrdoms of friars are reported, as well as other causes of conflict between Christians and Muslims.⁶⁰ On the other hand, one of the Franciscan letters contains a Latin version of Uzbek’s *yarlyk* from 1314, itself being an updated version of earlier *yarlyks*, which explicitly bans the persecution of the Franciscans, grants protection of their houses, and allows them to preach.⁶¹ This would indicate, that the danger of persecution was acknowledged by the khan; however, such persecution was not allowed. This assumption is further supported by a letter from 1320 written by a Hungarian

52 *Chronica XXIV generalium*.

53 *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 412–16.

54 *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 597–608; John Foster D.D., “The Four Martyrs of Thana 1321,” *International Review of Missions* 45 (1956): 204–8.

55 *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 515–24.

56 *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 524.

57 *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 531–32. This is not a complete list of missionary martyrdoms in Asia, but these belong to the most elaborated narratives.

58 Roman Hautala, “Latin Sources on the Religious Situation in the Golden Horde in the Early Reign of the Uzbek Khan,” *The Golden Horde Review*, 4 (2016): 338–39.

59 Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 100.

60 In a letter from Caffa, the ringing of bells is mentioned as one such cause of conflict between Christians and Muslims. Hautala, “Latin Sources,” 341.

61 Arthur C. Moule, “Textus Trium Novorum Documentorum E Tartaria Aquilonari an. 1314–1322,” *Archivum franciscanum historicum* 17 (1924): 65.

Franciscan friar Ioanca. He mentions missionary activities among the nomads and his captivity by the Muslims. While he himself was “joyfully awaiting death,” the Muslims “out of fear from the Tartars” did not dare to proceed.⁶² Other letters also suggest that missionaries enjoyed quite a large degree of freedom to preach – this is testified by the case of a certain German friar who took away ninety-three idols from the local people and baptized them.⁶³

Some of the passions described in the *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals* and accounts of martyrdoms contain motives which suggest that some of the friars were deliberately exposing themselves to dangerous situations, thus provoking martyrdom.⁶⁴ Although we are unable to find out the *real* motivations and behavior of the friars, we certainly cannot rule out such attitudes among them.

When confronting the passions of the *Chronicle of the Twenty-Four Generals* with letters of those who travelled through or near places of martyrdoms, we find that the past martyrdoms were not recalled with any great conviction. The martyrdom in Arzenga (Erzinjan) is described only briefly in the first letter of the Franciscans from Crimea in 1323 and possibly only alluded to in the second one.⁶⁵ No other missionary working or travelling in Armenia after 1314 makes a note of this event, although they passed through the region in which it occurred. Erzinjan lies on the route connecting the port of Lias with Tabriz, a route often taken by merchants as well as friars heading to Persia.⁶⁶ Odoric of Pordenone travelled in this region in 1318⁶⁷ and Jordan of Catala visited Erzinjan between 1318 and 1320.⁶⁸ Neither of them makes any note of this martyrdom. Jordan of Catala, however, does mention other martyrdoms connected to Armenia, all of them having happened in the more distant past.⁶⁹ None of these martyrdoms is connected to either of the orders operating in this region, nor do they establish any context for future missions.

62 Moule, “Textus Trium Novorum,” 66–8.

63 Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum,” 107.

64 Such motives are present in sources referring to the martyrdom of friars in Morocco already in 1220, later on also in Arzenga 1314 and definitely such intention is clear from the letter of Pascal of Vittoria.

65 Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum,” 104–5. The second edited letter mentions neither names, nor the exact place of the “martyrdom of four Italian friars.” Moule, “Textus duarum epistolarum,” 108.

66 See the itinerary of the journey of Jordan of Catala in Gadrat, *Une image*, 48–50, map III.

67 Gadrat, *Une image*, 48.

68 Gadrat, *Une image*, 46–7. Dominican friar Riccold of Montecroce visited Erzerum, near Erzinjan few years before the martyrdom. See Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce’s Encounter with Islam* (Brepols, 2012), 13–14.

69 He recalls the martyr deaths of Bartholomew, Simon and Judas, and of a royal daughter called Scala. Gadrat, *Une image*, 244. He also mentions ten thousand martyrs at the foot of the mountain of Ararat. Gadrat, *Une image*, 245.

Few other martyrdoms were mentioned by missionaries travelling in Asia. The martyrdom of Stephen of Hungary, which occurred in Sarai in 1334,⁷⁰ is briefly mentioned by Pascal of Vittoria, who travelled through this place a year later.⁷¹ Similarly, John of Marignolli reports about a martyrdom in Almaliq in 1339,⁷² a year before his own visit, but makes no reference to the martyrdom in Sarai (1334), which also occurred relatively shortly before his own visit. Marignolli simply confirmed that the mission in Almaliq was now re-established and could successfully continue.⁷³ Interestingly, the martyrdom in Almaliq received significant attention in Europe; the scenes of the execution of the friars were depicted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in Siena shortly after.⁷⁴

On the other hand, the memory of past martyrdoms in Asia does not seem to be of much importance for the friars operating in the very same regions. The letter of a Spanish Franciscan, Pascal of Vittoria (†1339),⁷⁵ demonstrates his personal desire for martyrdom, but, at the same time, does not express particular interest in past martyrdoms, which occurred in the very same place where he travelled.

Pascal describes his journey from Tana, through Sarai, where he stayed for one year and learned the Cuman language and Uighur letters to be able to preach to Muslims as well as local Christians.⁷⁶ From Sarai he travelled to Urgenj, from where he continued with a caravan of Muslim merchants to Almaliq. During this journey he kept on preaching the Gospel and also explained “the cheats, falsehoods, and blunders of their false prophet.”⁷⁷ He even reports of having preached

70 A detailed narrative of this martyrdom is included in *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 515–24. For more about this martyrdom, see Szilvia Kovács, “An Unremembered Hungarian Friar’s Martyrdom in the Golden Horde,” *Chronica* 18 (2018): 178–89, https://acta.bibl.u-szeged.hu/58480/1/chronica_018_178-189.pdf.

71 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 503.

72 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 510–11. Martyrdom is ascribed to the enthronement of ‘Alí Sultan, son of Üruk Temür. Michal Biran, “The Mongols in Central Asia from Chinggis Khan’s Invasion to the Rise of Temür: The Ögödeid and Chaghadaid Realms,” in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, ed. Nicola di Cosmo, Allen J. Frank and Peter B. Golden (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59.

73 *Kronika Marignolova*, ed. Josef Emler, *Fontes rerum bohemicarum III* (Museum království českého, 1882), 495. Newer edition of Marignolli’s text is Irene Malfatto (ed.), *Le digressioni sull’Oriente nel Chronicon Bohemorum di Giovanni de’ Marignolli*, 2015, electronic edition: <http://ecodicibus.sismelfirenze.it/index.php/iohannes-de-marignolli-chronicon-bohemorum-excerpta-de-rebus-orientalibus>, here page 2.

74 Burke, S. Maureen, “The ‘Martyrdom of the Franciscans’ by Ambrogio Lorenzetti,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 65, no. 4 (2002): 460–92.

75 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 501–6.

76 This is certainly another example, besides those mentioned in note 12, which prove serious Franciscan engagement with non-Christians in Asia.

77 Henry Yule, ed., *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China*, vol. 1 (Hakluyt Society, 1866), 231–37: 235; *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 504.

for twenty-five days near the mosque during Ramadan, disputing with Muslim qadis, which strongly resembles the actions of Franciscans in 1314 Arzena, who repeatedly preached near a mosque on Fridays, a day of the most important Muslim prayer. Besides describing in detail various physical assaults Pascal had to bear, he articulates his decision to stay and preach in the name of Jesus and also his expectation of more sufferings to come. He sent a farewell to his fellows, because he did not plan a return to Europe.

In spite of his proclaimed intention to evangelize and gain “a harvest of many souls,”⁷⁸ we do not find any particular reference to a conversion or baptism that he actually performed during his journey. Unlike the letters of Jordan of Catala sent from India, a letter sent by friar Ioanca in 1320, a letter from 1323 sent from Caffa, or the letters of Franciscan friars from China, he does not say a word about the actual results of his mission, nor does he describe any prospects for its further development. What he makes clear is his own decision to preach and die in the name of Jesus Christ.⁷⁹

Other sources worth mentioning in this context are certainly the letter(s) of a Dominican friar, Jordan of Catala, who was a companion of the four Franciscans martyred in Thana in 1321. These four Franciscans⁸⁰ became martyrs as a result of an unexpected and unsolicited confrontation with a Muslim qadi, which is described in detail in a letter of Bartholomew of Tabriz and the account of Odoric of Pordenone.⁸¹ The four Franciscans travelling to China via India were called to the court to act as witness in a process investigating domestic violence committed by their host on his wife. After the friars’ testimony, a dispute over their faith is reported to have been provoked by the Muslim qadi, who posed a question concerning the friars’ opinion about Muhammed and his “law.” As John Tolan pointed out, among missionaries it was already known from the beginning of the 13th century what the most sensitive areas of discussion with Muslims were and what the outcome of such a discourse was likely to be.⁸² After the Franciscans reluctantly gave their opinion on Muhammed and his law, the Muslim crowd was outraged and decided on their immediate execution. After an unsuccessful attempt to burn James of Padua at the stake, the friars were released, only to be killed shortly afterwards, each of them differently.

78 Yule, ed., *Cathay*, 237; *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 506.

79 Pascal’s wish was finally granted only a year later in Almalik, where he was martyred together with other friars. *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 510–11.

80 Among them were James of Padua, Thomas of Tolentino, Peter of Siena and Demetrius of Tiflis.

81 The most extensive are the accounts of Odoric of Pordenone, *Sinica franciscana* 1, 424–35; and passions in *Chronica XXIV generalium*, 474–79. For the evolution of the Thana martyrs narrative, see MacEvitt, *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans*, 106–16.

82 John V. Tolan, *Saracens. Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 221.

The Dominican friar Jordan of Catala, who travelled with the four Franciscans, was not present at the court or the martyrdom, because he was visiting Christians living in the vicinity. The letters of Jordan of Catala from 1321 and 1323 stand out because he was almost an eyewitness of the event itself and had to deal with its consequences on a practical level.

At the beginning of his first brief letter, Jordan expresses his regret at not being martyred together with his fellow brothers, about whose death he provides no details.⁸³ Considering the content of the whole letter, however, this statement sounds more like a formality, or regret at remaining alone in a foreign land, rather than the implication of a sincere wish. The rest of his letter actually resonates with optimistic enthusiasm for further missions, mentioning places where friars could settle, preach and baptize. If he had had a fellow brother, he would have stayed, he writes, but now he has to travel “on account of the canonization of the holy brethren above mentioned, and on account of religious and other business of a sufficiently perplexed and difficult kind.”⁸⁴ From this point of view, the martyrdom seems to have been a hindrance to his otherwise promising work. The conclusion of the letter explicitly contradicts his initial desire for martyrdom: “But I have been told by our Latin merchants the way to Ethiopia is open to anyone who wishes to go and preach there, where once St. Mathew the Evangelist did preach. I pray the Lord that I may not die until I have been a pilgrim for the faith into those regions, for this is my whole heart’s desire.”⁸⁵

While Jordan’s first letter reflects his enthusiasm to gather a “harvest of souls” and his great resolve to carry through his mission, the second letter dated to 1323 abounds with bitter disappointment over his current situation. Christine Gadrat considers the second letter to be only a revised version of the first one. In that case, it is interesting to note how the discourse on martyrdom changed between the two versions. The second letter expresses deep regrets that Jordan was “left behind” by his martyred fellows to travel alone and experience much hardship without being rewarded with the crown of martyrdom.⁸⁶ We may only speculate about the reasons why the second redaction letter articulates more explicitly a desire for martyrdom⁸⁷ and whether and to what extent this might reflect broader changes of perspectives on martyrdom.

83 Gadrat, *Une image*, 310.

84 Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China* 3 (Hakluyt Society, 1913), 77. Latin text see Gadrat, *Une image*, 311.

85 Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither* 3, 77. Latin text see Gadrat, *Une image*, 311.

86 Gadrat, *Une image*, 312–13. The same regret is expressed in his *Mirabilia*, see Gadrat, *Une image*, 266.

87 Gadrat, *Une image*, 251.

Obviously, the attitudes toward martyrdom in Asia varied among sources, what remains stable is the identity of the culprit, who is always a Muslim. The most pragmatic attitudes toward martyrdom within Franciscan sources seem to come from the Franciscans in Yüan China.

Potential Martyrs Not Welcomed?⁸⁸

Compared to the situation in regions of the Golden Horde, the Ilkhanate and the Chaghadai khanate, attitudes to martyrdom in the empire of the Great Khan seem to be different. We have no record of any martyr death in this region. The fact that Islam did not succeed in this region as a state religion seems to offer an obvious explanation for this situation. However, besides the actual religious policy of the khans, we must consider the approach of the missionaries themselves.

First, we should consider the question of whether the friars in China could have been informed about developments within the Franciscan Order – about the increasing focus on martyrdom and the potential tendencies of some friars to deliberately expose themselves to it. John of Montecorvino, in his letter from 1305, mentions that for twelve years he had been without any contact with the curia, while he had heard some echoes of the controversies between the papacy and the French king.⁸⁹ In spite of this long-term isolation we should take into account that in the years preceding his departure to India and China in 1291, he was an active missionary in Armenia and Persia.⁹⁰ Given this context, we may assume that he knew about the developments within the Franciscan order over the issue of poverty and that he was probably also acquainted with a group of Spiritual Franciscans who were operating in Armenia between 1289 and 1294.⁹¹

Although the elaborated passions occurred only in the 1320s, a short mention of a deliberate martyrdom in Salamastra is already dated to 1284.⁹² Although we have no direct evidence that Montecorvino knew about the disputes over poverty or about the increasing focus on martyrdom among some Franciscans, we certainly cannot rule this possibility out.

88 The following part of the text was in a different rendering published in Czech as Jana Valtrová, “Nedoceněná obět’? Propojené historie středověkých františkánských mučednictví v Asii,” *Axis Mundi* 17, no. 1 (2022): 2–9.

89 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 226. Latin text in *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 349–50.

90 Michael Robson, *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press, 2006), 108.

91 David Burr, *Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century after Saint Francis* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 45.

92 The case of Aldobrandus of Florentia and Antonius of Armenia is recorded in Girolamo Golubovich, *Biblioteca bio-bibliografica della Terra santa e dell’Oriente francescano* (1215–1300) 1 (Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1906), 429.

In a letter sent by Montecorvino in 1306 we find some interesting information documenting his knowledge of the state of missions in other Asian regions: “Brother John also says that since the Feast of All Saints he has baptized more than four hundred people. And because he has heard that a great number of Friars of the two Orders have reached Gazzaria and Persia, he exhorts them to preach the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ fervently and to gain fruit of souls.”⁹³

By mentioning the results of his own mission, he clearly wanted to invoke friars to convert and evangelize. But why would he so urgently invoke the friars to preach and “gain fruit of souls” if they had gone to these countries for this obvious reason? A possible interpretation might suggest that he might have had in mind the notion that some missionaries were more concerned with martyrdom than with their mission.

Another piece of the mosaic is contained in a letter from 1305, where he invokes friars in Europe to come: “If I had even two or three fellow coadjutors, perhaps the Emperor the Chan might have been baptized. I beg for some brethren to come, if any are willing to do so, so being as they are such as are anxious to offer themselves as an example and not to gain notoriety.”⁹⁴

Here, Montecorvino literally mentions that he is seeking those who do not want to “make their phylacteries broad,” which is, as indicated by Dawson, a reference to Mt 23, 5, a passage describing the Phariseans.⁹⁵ If he wanted to invite missionaries, why did he express such conditions and what did he mean by “the Phariseans” within the Franciscan order? As they are associated with showing off their devotedness and piety, could Montecorvino have in mind exactly those missionaries deliberately exposing themselves to a martyr’s death? The biblical allusion would allow him to express a characteristic that could not be referred to explicitly, as criticism toward martyrdom could not be possibly voiced. From various reports of the missionaries, it is clear that to evangelize and establish a vital community of converts requires a different kind of strategy than seeking the crown of martyrdom. From a pragmatic point of view, travelling to Asia required lots of time and energy, ideally also linguistic training; therefore, the martyr death of such a trained friar would have to be considered a great loss.

93 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 231. Latin text in *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 355.

94 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 226. Latin text in *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 349: “Rogo ut talem fratres veniant, si venire aliqui volunt, quod studeant se in exemplum dare et non suas fimbrias magnificare.”

95 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 226, n1. Mt 23, 4-7: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”

To resolve the question of whether Montecorvino consciously called for those friars who rather focused on mission than martyrdom, sources concerning the relationship between different strands of the Franciscan Order operating in Asia would have to be explored.

Putting aside the abovementioned hypothesis, there can be no doubt that Montecorvino's aim was to establish a self-sufficient, strong, local church with links to the papacy. Besides this, his mission was to a large extent economically dependent on his good relations with the Mongolian khan. Given these political and economic aspects of his mission, potential martyrs could hardly have been welcome. Martyrdoms of friars could cause serious problems for the local Christian community. This was the case with the martyrs of Morocco in 1220, the martyrs in Armenia in 1314, and the martyrdom in Sarai in 1334, when local Christians were reported to have hidden from crowds of Muslims who were outraged by the martyrs' assaults on their faith. Could Montecorvino have already predicted such problems in 1305? His perspective was more influenced by his troublesome relationship with the 'Nestorians' than with Muslims. On the other hand, thanks to this experience, he was aware of the potentially negative effects of inter-religious conflicts on his mission which he certainly would have liked to avoid.

Another piece of the mosaic is provided by the letter of Andrew of Perugia dated to 1326, which reflects on the martyrdom of four friars in the Indian city of Thana in 1321. Andrew of Perugia was one of the suffragan bishops who arrived in China in 1313 and consecrated John of Montecorvino as the Archbishop of Khanbaliq. He was selected by the pope to join Montecorvino in China, which is clearly evidence that he was a proponent of papal politics. In 1322, Andrew took up the seat of the bishop in Zaitun.⁹⁶ A very short message about the martyrdom in Thana is contained in the last section of his letter: "Four of our brethren were martyred by the Saracens in India: one of whom was thrown twice over into a great fire and came out unhurt. Yet, none of them was converted from his unbelief by such a stupendous miracle."⁹⁷

This short mention confirms that Franciscans in China were informed in some detail about this incident. However, the letter sounds quite abrupt with respect to the martyrdom by explicitly stating that the sacrifice had *no effect*. This is especially striking because other reports and letters either mention miracles and/or

96 After the death of Bishop Gerard Albuini, who was one of the suffragan bishops sent to China to consecrate John of Montecorvino. Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 236.

97 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 237. In Latin: "De sanctis fratribus quatuor nostril fratres martirizati fuerunt in Yndia a sarracenis, quorum unus bis in ignem coipsum iniectus illesus evasid. Et tamenad tam stupendum miraculum nullus est a sua perfidia permutatus." *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 376.

conversions occurring during or after the martyrdom,⁹⁸ or simply do not consider the effects of martyrdom at all.⁹⁹

I assume that there was a specific reason for Andrew's clear dismissal of any positive consequences of the martyrdoms in Thana. Missionaries in China, as we may observe from previous letters of John of Montecorvino from 1305 and 1306, were deeply concerned with the results of their missionary work – specifically, with numbers of converts. Montecorvino reported on the hundreds and thousands of converts, their origins, and the means by which the missionary goals were achieved. Without taking the mentioned numbers at face value, the discourse of these letters clearly reveals China's mission orientation towards planting a vital church within the existing social and religio-political context. I suggest that by stating that there were no converts after the martyrdom of the friars in Thana, Andrew implies that seeking martyrdom was not welcome. There are further points supporting this interpretation. His claim about the freedom and safety of preaching¹⁰⁰ could actually advertise that, indeed, friars didn't need to fear for their lives, and, at the same time, point out that any newcomers should not expect to gain the crown of martyrdom in these regions.

Assuming there was a relationship between Franciscan attitudes to poverty and a desire for martyrdom, one particular part of Andrew's letter is worth our attention. It is the description of the great beauty of the cathedral in Zaitun and Andrew's own residence:

There is a wood near the city, a quarter of a mile away, and here I caused a fair and fitting church to be built with buildings to house twenty brethren, and with four chambers, any of which is good enough for a bishop. Here I have taken up my abode, and I live on the bounty of the Emperor which I have already referred to and which, according to the estimate of the Genoese merchants, may amount to the value of a hundred gold florins or thereabouts. And a great part of these alms I have spent in this house and I think there is not a her[m]itage among all those in our province to be compared with it for beauty and convenience.¹⁰¹

98 The letter sent from Caffa in 1323 listing several martyrdoms concludes with a statement concerning a great number of converts among local people. Moule, "Textus duarum epistolarum," 106.

99 Pascal of Vittoria, in his letter, noted the martyrdom of Stephen of Hungary, which occurred in 1334 in Sarai, but did not mention whether there was any effect of his martyrdom. *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 501–6. Similarly, Bartholomew of Tabriz, after relating the passion in Thana, does not say a word about converts. Gadrat, *Une image*, 314–15.

100 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 237; *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 376.

101 Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 236; *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 376.

Obviously, such a representation of the state of a Franciscan mission clearly opposed any virtue of poverty and reflected the perspective of the *papal curia* on this issue. Andrew's letter sounds like an invitation to those missionaries who would appreciate significant comfort in their work, not those who renounced this world and embraced a life of poverty.

Also, it should be considered that Andrew's attitude toward poverty was probably influenced by the local cultural values to which the Franciscans had to adapt if they wanted to succeed. Indeed, the idea of making poverty a virtue was generally alien in China. Franciscans, after more than two decades spent in China, were probably aware of this.

Given the religious and political context of the Franciscan mission under Montecorvino and his fellows, it seems missionaries desiring martyrdom were not particularly welcomed. At the same time this does not mean that the whole concept of martyrdom was not remembered. A tombstone of Catherine of Vilioni, one of the Italian Christians living in Yüan China, bears a scene of the martyrdom of St. Catherine.¹⁰² The epigraphy of the tombstone suggests its connection to the Franciscan mission; however, of course, recalling the saint's death does not imply the Franciscans' own desire to follow her example.¹⁰³

Final hints to the local attitudes towards martyrdom provide records of the fate of the relics of the Thana martyrs. Odoric of Pordenone claims to have transported them to Zaitun¹⁰⁴ sometime in 1322;¹⁰⁵ however, Andrew of Perugia does not mention them in his letter from 1326, which either means that the relics were not transported, or that he did not aim to propagate their cult in Zaitun. Another Franciscan friar, John of Marignolla, who visited Zaitun probably in 1345¹⁰⁶ is also silent on the martyrs' relics, though he was well informed about the achievements of Montecorvino's mission in this area and the particular churches.¹⁰⁷ If the relics were transported by Odoric, which may be doubted, they were ignored by the contemporary Franciscans in China. Not so, however, in Europe, where

102 Jennifer Purtle, "The Far Side: Expatriate Medieval Art and Its Languages in Sino-Mongol China," in *Confronting the Borders of Medieval Art*, ed. Jill Caskey, Adam S. Cohen, and Linda Safran (Brill, 2011), 167–97.

103 Eva Caramello and Romedio Schmitz-Esser, "From Genoa to Yangzhou? Funerary Monuments for Europeans in Yuan China and their Paleographic Analysis," *Medieval Worlds* 16 (2022): 210–28.

104 *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 436–8. Placement of relics in Zaitun by Odoric is again mentioned in a chapter concerning Zaitun itself. *Sinica Franciscana* 1, 460.

105 Vladimír Liščák, *Bratr Odorik a jeho zpráva o východních krajích světa. Styky Evropy a mongolské Číny ve 13. a 14. století* (Academia, 2019), 176.

106 For the itinerary of his journey see Irene Malfatto, "Il viaggio in Oriente del frate fiorentino Giovanni de' Marignolli (1338-1353)," *L'Universo* 7, IGM Firenze (2014), 313–32.

107 *Kronika Marignolova*, 495; Malfatto (ed.), *Le digressioni sull'Oriente*, 3–4.

the scenes of Odoric carrying the skulls and bones of the Thana martyrs were depicted in Udine's church of St. Francis.¹⁰⁸

Comparing the Franciscan letters and reports about Thana martyrdom, we clearly see that the attitudes toward martyrdom among friars in Asia were not consistent. While the letters of John of Montecorvino and his fellow friars seem to dissuade friars from engaging in martyrdom in their vicariate, Odoric's report, dealing with the martyrs of Thana and the *translatio* of their relics to China may reflect a different, ambitious attempt – at least in the eyes of a European reader of his account – to establish their cult in Yüan China and prove the global agency of his order.

Conclusion

Letters and accounts of friars who travelled and evangelized in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Asia reflect a variety of attitudes toward martyrdom. In general, we may conclude that in the thirteenth century, the concept of martyrdom was largely ignored by friars, even in cases of imminent danger of death. The relative lack of interest in martyrdom narratives in the early period of Euro-Mongol contact should not be, however, simply ascribed to the Mongol's tolerant religious policy. For the Franciscans, the danger or possibility of their death was equally urgent when they were entering areas under Muslim rule, the eventuality of a martyr death being somewhat expected after the case of the martyrdom of five Franciscans in Morocco in 1220 when they entered Mongol territories. Diplomatic protocols of the Mongols often required several controversial actions for Christians – bowing to the idol of Genghis Khan, walking between two fires, genuflecting in front of the khan, and participating in the consumption of kumys, to name the most problematic ones.¹⁰⁹ Although the khans did not tolerate arrogance and disrespect, during the course of time, these issues became resolved by compromises.

This also indicates that martyrdom should not be simply understood as a radical response to strong pressure on religious values, but rather as a result of a deliberate discourse between the martyr and the culprit, translated into a narrative for a certain audience. During the first decades of the fourteenth century, news of particular martyrdoms recently occurring in the regions of the Golden Horde, the Ilkhanate, the Chaghadai khanate, and India, most exclusively in the territories under the Muslim rule, were spread among friars. However, the memory of them seems to be rather short-lived and not particularly connected to the friars' own approaches toward martyrdom, as the case of Pascal of Vittoria clearly indicates.

108 Raffaella Brusamonti, "Le storie del beato Odorico: il restauro di un nuovo ciclo di affreschi", *La Panarie* 182, no. 47 (2014): 73–8.

109 More about these interactions in Valtrová, "Provincializing Histories," 288–305.

Specific attitudes seem to have evolved among the Franciscans in the regions under the rule of the Mongol Yüan dynasty. These Franciscans seem to reject the idea of martyrdom as a useful concept for their mission and probably cautiously expressed that they would welcome fellows with similar opinions. This silent voice, which stemmed from the specific circumstances and practical needs of the Franciscan mission under the Yüan dynasty, represented an alternative to those discourses celebrating Franciscan martyrs as heroes opposing to their Muslim culprits.