The Khan as 'Meta-Emperor' in Marco Polo's *Devisement du Monde*

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Marco Polo's Le Devisement du Monde *(end of the thirteenth century) is one of the earliest, longest and more detailed travelogues of the Middle Ages. Widely read, the text not only describes the travels of its protagonist, but equally furnishes a comprehensive overview of Mongolian culture, society and territories. This article analyses the categories Marco Polo uses in order to describe the Khan's realm and his exercise of power. The author rarely uses the notion of emperor in his narrative, although he clearly recognises the Khan's claim to universal rule. The reasons behind this reluctance can be explained in several ways. First, Marco Polo became acquainted with the main languages in the regions under Mongolian rule; it might thus have seemed natural to him to use the 'correct' titles. Second, the French vernacular word 'empire' might have been reserved, in his mind, for the rulers of the 'Roman Empire' (in the Latin West and/or the Greek East). Finally, it seems that Marco Polo sought to ascribe to the Khans a kind of power and authority that surpassed even the might of the emperors in Europe, and this specificity could best be expressed by using a Mongolian title that, finally, was not entirely synonymous with the notion of empereur. All in all, these observations imply that the* Devisement du Monde *can be read not only as a travel narrative, but also as a treatise on the understanding of imperial power.*

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Marco Polo was 17 years old in 1271 when he travelled with his father and uncle, both merchant traders, to Khan Kubilaï's court in Mongolia.[1] It took them three and a half years of rough travel from Venice—through Acre, Armenia and Persia—to reach Chang-Tou, the summer palace of the Khan. In the person of Kubilaï Khan, Marco Polo discovered a monarch of unparalleled power. In Polo's *Le Devisement du Monde*—a book devoted to the description of the peoples he encountered and the territories he visited during his voyage—82 out of nearly 200 chapters are devoted to the Great Khan, his power and his rule.[2] It is clear, therefore, that the potentate is a central part of the book, of which he comprises almost half. In his narrative, Marco Polo describes at length the efficiency of the grid layout the Khan had introduced in order to structure his empire, the number of people he can mobilise, the numerous manifestations of his authority and his control over the population. Though the author effectively assigns the characteristics of an empire to the Khan's realm, he never actually refers to it using the word 'empire'; even though he does call the Khan 'empereur' on occasion, he does not do so consistently. A study of the vocabulary used by Marco Polo in *Le Devisement du Monde* will allow us to offer several hypotheses to explain his terminological choices, and from these we will explore Marco Polo's understanding of the stratification of power in the Mongolian Kingdom.

As a 'European', Marco Polo certainly stood out at the court of the Khan but, as his stay in Mongolia became near permanent, he seems to have blended in quite well, learning Tartar customs and even the language.[3] Because the Khan found him loyal, wise and prudent—according to the *Devisement*—he even made the young Marco Polo one of his ambassadors. Most of all, Kubilaï valued the fact that Marco Polo was the only one among his envoys to understand the importance of recording stories about the lands he crossed and the people he met. He actively collected details and oddities about his travels to tell the Khan; that is why Marco

[1] On Marco Polo's life, see, for example, Münkler, *Marco Polo*; the classical study remains Olschki, *Marco Polo's Asia*. For the question if he actually had travelled in China, see most recently Vogel, *Marco Polo Was in China*.

[2] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*: vols. 3–5 (Chapters 75–156).

[3] *Ibid.*, vol. i: 129 (Chapter 15).

Polo received a growing number of honours and gained ever-expanding responsibilities at court. This brief account, which is located near the end of the prologue, creates the image of Marco Polo as a keen observer who also had a good command of the local language.[4] In fact, it seems plausible that as a travelling merchant, he mastered various languages beyond Italian, including French.[5] Indeed, it was in French that *Le Devisement du Monde* was written in 1298 by Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa, his cellmate during the Venice–Genoa war.[6]

Why Rustichello wrote the text in Old French when both Marco Polo and he were Italians has not been definitively established.[7] However, what is key for us is to remember that the choice of writing in the vernacular at this time contrasts markedly with the long tradition of writing in Latin. Giovanni di Piano Carpini, the Franciscan monk sent in 1245 by Pope Innocent IV to make contact with Ögödei, the Great Khan, in order to seek peace with him, wrote a *Historia Mongalorum* which describes the manners and habits of the Mongols with great precision.[8] The book is written in Latin. Only a few years later, in 1252–55, William of Rubruck, a Franciscan monk close to King (Saint) Louis IX, went to Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol empire with fact finding and evangelistic purposes. His *Itinerarium* takes the form of a letter to Saint Louis in

[4] *Ibid.*, vol. i: 130–31 (Chapter 15–16).

[5] On language proficiency amongst late-medieval merchants, see, for example, Fouquet, 'Kaufleute auf Reisen'.

[6] Their mode of collaboration is still the subject of controversy: One hypothesis holds that Marco Polo dictated the story; alternatively, Rustichello might have written down their conversations later on, since the language and style of the narrative retain a sense of orality. The inclusion of meticulous details, names and numbers in the text might argue in favour of the fact that Marco Polo recounted his story from notes. The text's chronological order, interrupted only by occasional flashbacks, makes ulterior changes and editing unlikely. The widespread scholarly consensus seems to hold that Marco Polo played an important part in the drafting and writing of this book, and that Rustichello faithfully transcribed what the Italian traveller narrated. Given that the polyglot Venetian merchant was very likely to read, verify and amend Rustichello's French manuscript, I have thus chosen here—as most critics do—to consider Marco Polo as the author of the text.

[7] On this question, see Gaunt, *Marco Polo's 'Le Devisement du Monde'*.

[8] Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*. On thirteenth-century (and later) travelogues and their representation of the Mongols see, for example, Reichert, *Begegnungen mit China*; Schmieder, *Europa und die Fremden*.

Latin.[9] Odorico of Pordenone[10] and Giovanni di Marignolli[11] travelled in Mongolia, respectively, between 1318–30 and 1342–46 (i.e., after Marco Polo's journey); they also wrote their travel stories in Latin. In all of these cases, the choice of language can be explained by the fact that Latin was the language of learning and of government of the time. Furthermore, it also reflects the status of the authors (all clerics: Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans and Augustinians) and of their official functions whilst travelling: Giovanni di Marignolli was, for example, a papal legate.[12]

Marco Polo's choice of French thus distinguishes his work within a tradition of travelogues that was becoming denser at that time.[13] As mentioned above, this choice might be explained in large measure by his status as a member of the middle-class bourgeoisie and a merchant. For his part, Rustichello da Pisa—though a cleric—had already written books in the vernacular, mostly compilations of fiction related to the Arthurian tradition.[14] Later, in 1356, when Jean de Mandeville (or rather the mysterious compiler of the book that went by his name) wrote his *Livre des merveilles du Monde*, he justified his choice of the French vernacular with the argument that this helped to guarantee the veracity of his narrative, since any reader could verify what he had written was true.[15] And even though Marco Polo did not directly comment on the choice of language for his text, we will see below that he attached importance to the language in which he expresses himself: it will become clear that he is able to use Mongolian words with exactitude, and that he is concerned that his readers understand that these words are important and need to be expressed in their original form before they are translated. In fact, it is because he attached such importance to his choice of language and to certain words that we can look more closely at his choice of terminology around the concepts of 'empire', 'imperial' and

[9] William of Rubruck, 'Itinerarium'; English translation in Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*: 87–220.

[10] Odorico da Pordenone, 'Relatio'.

[11] Johannes de Marignola, 'Relatio'.

[12] On his life and career, see briefly Muldoon, 'John of Marignolli'.

[13] The choice of language can also be considered an important factor in the extraordinary success of a book that became accessible to a wide public (noblemen, merchants and lower classes). On the reception of the work in the European Middle Ages, see now Gadrat-Ouerfelli, *Lire Marco Polo*; Guéret-Laferté, *Sur les routes de l'Empire Mongol*.

[14] See Bogdanow, 'A New Manuscript'.

[15] Jean de Mandeville, *Le Livre des merveilles du Monde*: 6: 'Sachez que je voulais écrire ce petit livre en latin, pour m'exprimer avec concision. Mais beaucoup comprennent mieux

'emperor'. However, before examining Marco Polo's choice of words in his qualification and description of the territory dominated by the Khan, we will first analyse the latter's general characteristics.

When Marco Polo first encountered and subsequently described it, the Mongolian empire was at its political and economic zenith under the reign of Kubilaï. Its territory stretched from Eastern Europe (the borders of Poland) to Far East Asia, from Novgorod to southern Iran or even Tibet.[16] Kubilaï's realm thus included extremely diverse lands and peoples with different skin colours, religions, social customs, dietary habits (allegedly even including cannibals), sexual traditions, etc. This realm represented as diverse a kingdom under one ruler as the world has ever known. It is under the reign of Kubilaï Khan that the empire reached its apex as far as its territorial extent and the Khan's power are concerned.[17]

The basis for this development was laid by Temüjin, Kubilaï's ancestor, who converted the nomadic Mongolian peoples into an organised state in the first decade of the thirteenth century. He had a clear idea of the state he wanted to build: he gathered the chiefs of different tribes in 1206 at a *diet* and founded what he called the *mongol ulus* (the Mongol State), at the same time taking the title of 'Genghis Khan' (*Cinggis-qan*)—literally meaning 'oceanic ruler' or, by extension, 'universal ruler'. In the following years, Mongolian rule enjoyed a period of strong economic growth, political and military power and cultural development during Genghis Khan's rule; after his death, however, it went into decline.[18]

The 'Reality' of Kubilaï Khan's Empire

From the outset, as can be inferred from the name 'Genghis Khan', the Khans' claim to rule was meant to be universal, encompassing the whole

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le roman que le latin, j'ai donc écrit en roman, pour que chacun le comprenne et que les seigneurs, les chevaliers et les autres nobles personnes qui ne savent que peu ou pas le latin et qui ont été outre-mer vérifient si je dis vrai ou non, et si je me trompe dans mon propos, par défaut de mémoire ou pour toute autre raison, qu'ils puissent me redresser et corriger.'

[16] Buell, *Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire*: xliii.

[17] Rossabi, 'Vision in the Dream': 216. See in the same volume the illustrations: 164 (Fig. 22.2), 204 (Fig. 27.2).

[18] Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*: 206–31 (Chapter 8: Decline of an Emperor). See also Jackson, *The Mongols*: 31–57.

world. Genghis Khan himself extended the *güre'en* system (a traditional mode of encampment and, later, of temporary fortified camps) to the entire Mongolian society, which was in turn organised into *mingan* or 'thousands', tribal units, each of which was capable of fielding approximately a thousand warriors:[19]

> Once Cinggis-qan had united the steppe under his banner, expansion was inevitable. The new empire required booty to continue to exist. The *qan* had now become the chief figure in a sophisticated system for enriching his family and rewarding an ever-expanding number of followers through booty distribution.[20]

Marco Polo does not dwell on the expansionism of the Khan he knows, Kubilaï, except in reference to the war he waged against Caïdou. Here the Venetian mentions that Kubilaï could 'only' assemble 360,000 horsemen and 100,000 infantrymen, since his armies 'which were innumerable, out of all proportions, [had been sent] on his orders to conquer different territories and foreign lands'.[21] Although raiding smaller communities must be considered a traditional feature of Mongolian culture, other practices were novel in Kubilaï's realm, like the 'conversion of the Mongolian steppe empire into one that embraced sedentary societies as well. Also new was the attempt to govern, not just exploit these new subjects and territories.'[22] Indeed, according to Marco Polo, the Mongol 'empire' encompassed many fortified towns with layouts that included bridges, cobblestone streets and bathhouses.[23]

These developments raise the question of the way in which we characterise Mongolian rule in this period: was it, from a modern perspective, 'imperial' and did Kubilaï rule an 'empire'? The fact that Mongolian expansionism during Genghis Khan's rule was accompanied by a complementary strategy of inculcating sedentariness among nomad

[19] Buell, *Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire*: 12–13.

[20] *Ibid*.: 17.

[21] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 60 (Chapter 77): 'Il fist si poi de gent pour ce qu'il estoient en son ost qui li estoient entour, car de ses autres granz [osts] qui estoient si loins ne les peüst il pas avoir eus si tost, qu'i estoient genz sans nombre et sanz fin qui estoient alé en estranges contrees et provinces conquester par son commandement.'

[22] Buell, *Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire*: 17.

[23] See, for example, the extensive description of the city of *Quynsay* (today Hangzhou) in Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. v: 114–21 (Chapter 151).

communities aligns with one of the key characteristics Jean Tulard regards as defining an 'empire'.[24] Although modern definitions of 'empire' are not our primary concern, Tulard's definition provides a useful framework within which to consider the pertinent characteristics of the Mongol world in this period. He opens his synthesis on occidental empires by establishing a picture of modern research on the notion of 'empire', highlighting five characteristics in particular: the (territorial) extent of the rule, a common policy and fiscal framework, a centrally organised state, the conviction of superiority and the fact that every empire actually has a date of birth and an end that can be clearly identified. The last of these characteristics certainly poses the least problem in our case, since the beginning of organised Mongolian rule can clearly be identified, as does its end (or at least descent) after the reign of Kubilaï. Tulard's third criterion for the definition of 'empire' is the centrally organised state. To what extent can this be said to have existed?

In fact, the system of legal and military centralisation already established by Genghis Khan saw its fullest expansion under Kubilaï: during his reign, the Khan divided military command in a strict order. Those in command of a hundred men were to obey those who commanded a thousand, and who themselves took orders from those who commanded 10,000 men. The most important leaders controlled no less than 100,000 men.[25] In recognition of their merit and authority, the latter were awarded command plaques that were made from precious metal and whose weight and complexity were commensurate with their rank.[26] The Khan himself benefited from a particularly well-organised contingent of bodyguards: the 12,000 riders that made up the guard took turns protecting the palace in groups of 3,000 men for four days and four nights.[27] These soldiers were offered very rich uniforms of a particular colour that matched the Khan's during each of the 13 feasts that structured the year.[28]

The organisation of the army was even reflected in the way hunting parties were structured, since hunting was one of the Khan's favourite

[24] Tulard, *Les Empires Occidentaux*: 11–12.
[25] Buell, *Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire*: 14–15.
[26] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 66–67 (Chapter 80).
[27] *Ibid.*: 76 (Chapter 85).
[28] *Ibid.*: 82–83 (Chapter 88).

pastimes. According to Marco Polo, two officers would each have 10,000 men under their command; each group wore a different colour and was equipped with no less than 5,000 dogs. These large hunting parties would then proceed in a coordinated manner, one group going to the right and the other to the left. In the end, all of the men would walk together to drive the game 'so as to fully occupy an entire field so that no beast would escape capture'.[29] When the Khan hunted with falcons, he would surround himself with 10,000 men, divided into groups of two. They would then criss-cross the surrounding land and thus find all of the fowl therein. The most emblematic element of the centralised hunting system, the *boulargouci* (literally the guardian who has no master) would be in the middle of the hunting area, usually on a hill, holding an easily identifiable flag. It was to him that others would report—under penalty of death—any bird, horse or lost object; in addition, the *boulargouci* was also central to the retrieval of anything that had gone astray.[30]

As already indicated, the administrative and legal organisation was based on a similar system: every province had several clerks, gathered under the authority of a judge, who himself had to render account to 12 ministers chosen by the Khan. These ministers constituted a high court called the 'Cheng'. They had complete authority over 34 provinces, though ultimately their decisions had to be ratified by the Khan.[31] As we can see, the courts—much like the kingdom itself—were organised and operated under a strict and centralised organisation that were part of a clear and stratified hierarchy, which could ultimately be supervised by one person: the Khan himself.

The fourth criterion in Tulard's model consists in a common policy and fiscal framework: in fact, all the peoples conquered by the Khan were submitted to a general legal code that followed the model of the first system of laws enacted by Genghis Khan, called the 'Great *Jasagh*'.[32] In order to strengthen his position in China, Kubilaï later on

> commissioned Chinese and Mongolian legal scholars to fashion a legal code for China that, at least on paper, would appear more flexible and lenient than

[29] *Ibid.*: 86 (Chapter 91): 'Il vont tuit l'un dejouste l'autre, si que il tiennent bien unne [sic] journee de terre touz ensemble comme je vous ai dit et ne treuvent nulle beste qui ne soit prise.'

[30] *Ibid.*: 88 (Chapter 92).

[31] *Ibid.*: 99 (Chapter 96).

[32] Rossabi, 'Genghis Khan': 106; Jean de Plancarpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*: 97 n. 47.

traditional Chinese laws while incorporating Mongol practices such as allowing criminals to pay a fine in order to avoid a prison sentence.[33]

The Khans also unified the country economically and geographically. Marco Polo described in quite some detail the monetary system, a fiduciary currency based on notes made from the bark of the mulberry tree, and how the size of banknotes was proportional to their value.[34] His description underlined that it was forbidden to refuse this currency, or to use any other, in the territories that were under the authority of the Khan—once again under penalty of death. Upon arrival in the empire, all traders had to exchange their material wealth for these notes.[35] The extent of the monetary system's efficiency is reflected throughout the *Devisement du Monde*: when Marco Polo describes the customs of a people, he often points out that 'they use the currency of the Great Khan, their lord'.[36] Being a merchant himself, Marco Polo seems to have been quite overwhelmed by a currency that weighed almost nothing, provided universality of trade throughout the empire and did so at guaranteed exchange rates. He also recognised the Khan's astuteness, which produced and forced the use of a currency that cost him nothing, and for which he received all of the riches of the empire and neighbouring countries in return.[37]

Marco Polo also points out how the unification of the kingdom was achieved by the construction of reliable, tree-lined roads that kept travellers from getting lost.[38] Furthermore, he observed how rapid communication was ensured by the establishment of a horse relay network, with well-outfitted stations every 25 miles, even in the most remote locations.[39] There were also villages every 3 miles, where riders would be at the ready to relay a message—they would wear belts covered in bells so that, as they approached a village, the next rider would ready himself to relay his colleague as quickly as possible. Marco Polo underlined that 'they race the equivalent of a hundred days travel in just ten days, which is a quite

[33] Rossabi, 'Vision in the Dream': 212.
[34] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 96–97 (Chapter 95).
[35] *Ibid.*, vol. iii: 97 (Chapter 95).
[36] *Ibid.*, vol. iv: 100 (Chapter 129): 'Et ont monnoie du Grant Caan leur seigneur'.
[37] *Ibid.*, vol. iii: 96–98 (Chapter 95); see Buenger Robbert, 'Il Sistema Monetario'.
[38] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 96, 98 (Chapter 95).
[39] *Ibid.*: 105 (Chapter 99).

an accomplishment!'[40] With this system, the Khan could quickly receive information from all of his territories and react with remarkable speed and efficiency. It is important to note that the Venetian's comments were by no means idiosyncratic, but are actually corroborated by the descriptions of other travellers of his time.[41]

Lastly, the Khan's desire to unify his realm through the establishment of a common language should be emphasised, although the actual attempt failed.

> Kubilaï, who conceived of himself as a universal ruler, commissioned the *Phags-pa lama* to devise a script that could be used with the languages found throughout the Mongol domains [… the] *Phags-pa* script experiment failed, but it revealed Kubilaï's aspiration to be a Great Khan who ruled the vast Mongol domains, not simply China.[42]

Marco Polo did not mention this particular detail. His silence might be explained with different reasons: either he omitted the attempt because it failed, or because he simply did not learn about it during his travels. In any case, all of these initiatives attest to the Khan's wish to unify his people through unified and centralised power and communication structures as well as shared cultural practices. The last element of Tulard's definition is the belief in his own superiority. Put simply, the Mongol view of the world entailed the conviction that the world and the Mongol empire were identical, a belief that can be derived in its clearest form from a letter sent by the Khan Güyüg to Pope Innocent IV through Giovanni di Piano Carpini (1247).[43] According to Giovanni

[40] *Ibid.*: 102 (Chapter 97): 'Car aussi bien vont il courant la nuit comme le jour si que, quant il a besoing, il viennent de. C. journees en. X. jours, qui est. I. grant fait.'

[41] See Gazagnadou, 'Les postes à relais de chevaux chinoises'.

[42] Rossabi, 'Vision in the Dream': 212–13.

[43] Morgan, 'John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck': 150–51; the letter is reproduced *ibid.*: Figure 20.2. For French translation, see Jean de Plan Carpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*, 211–12. The preamble of this letter ('Par la force de Dieu, l'empereur de tous les hommes au grand pape, ce message authentique et digne de foi' resp. 'By the Strength of God, the Emperor of all men to the Pope, this authentic and credible message') was written in Turkish, while the rest of the letter was in Persian. Thomas Tanase, the editor, underlines the significance of Turkish as the medium in which the Mongols' ideology of imperial domination was conceived and developed.

di Piano Carpini, who put it in his own words: 'Intentio Tartarorum est sibi subicere totum mundum si possunt, et de hoc a Chingiscan habent mandatum, sicut superius dictum est.'[44] This conviction is equally echoed in Riccold de Monte Croce's travel writings, which date from the end of the thirteenth century:

> They [i.e. the Tartars] claim to be the true masters of the earth. God had created the earth merely for their sake so that they should exercise their rule and enjoy it. According to the Mongols even the birds of the air report that they are the masters of the world and that the whole earth pays them tribute perforce. They maintain that even the birds of the air and the wild animals in the desert eat and drink only by the grace of their emperor.[45]

The ideological position of the Mongols seemed relatively complex: while they felt that the world was theirs to conquer and to rule, this very idea did not necessarily seem to have resulted in a contempt for foreign peoples. Quite the contrary, they proved able to enrich their own culture by integrating the contributions of conquered territories and peoples. On a very practical level, for example, Genghis Khan forbade his troops to kill artisan prisoners, and thus put more than 30,000 of them at the service of his own kingdom.[46]

Quite early on, the Khan surrounded himself with advisors of multiple cultural and religious backgrounds.[47] But, as has been underlined by Rossabi:

> […] perhaps Genghis's most audacious, yet positive, legacy was recruitment of foreigners. Early in his career, he recognized that the Mongols lacked expertise in various fields. For example, they initially had no experience in besieging cities and did not have the proper equipment to do so.[48]

[44] Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*: 293.

[45] Riccold de Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte*: 78–80: 'Dicunt enim se esse ueros dominos mundi; dicunt etiam quod Deus fecit mundum solum propter eos ut ipsi dominentur et gaudeant. Dicunt etiam quod aues celi nuntiant hominibus de eis quod ipsi sunt domini mundi et quod totus mundus debet eis facere tributum, et portare exenia; dicunt etiam quod aues celi et bestie deserti comedunt et bibunt de gratia imperatoris canis.' See also Spuler, *History of the Mongols*: 26–27.

[46] Rossabi, 'Genghis Khan': 108.

[47] Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*: 14–17.

[48] Rossabi, 'Genghis Khan': 108.

It has to be noted, though, that this openness towards foreigners—which included Buddhists as well as Christians from Europe—did not extend to the Chinese.

> Kubilaï divided the population into four classes and allocated positions and privileges commensurately. Mongols comprised the first-class; non-Chinese Muslims and a few other foreigners constituted the second class; northern Chinese were the third tier; and southern Chinese the fourth. The lower two classes could not reach the highest levels in the military or some of the leading posts in government.[49]

In Marco Polo's text, no allusions to any Mongol claim to fundamental superiority can be found; however, our author insists on the fact that the Khan is worshipped as a god,[50] to the point that even a lion that is given to him bows, as if recognising his overwhelming power.[51]

Based on the descriptions of the Mongols and Mongol rule furnished by Marco Polo and other sources (historical and otherwise), it appears that there did indeed exist a Mongolian 'empire', at least if we apply the criteria put forward by Jean Tulard. Yet we have to realise that Marco Polo rarely uses the word 'empire' when he refers to the vast Mongol territory under the Khan's dominance. Does this force us to conclude that Marco Polo did not recognise the Mongolian realm to be an empire by the standards of his own time? Or did he himself hold a more restrictive definition of empire? In the following pages, we want to explore these two alternatives.

Was the Khan an Emperor?

Our focus lies on the actual use of the terms 'emperor' to designate the Khan and of 'empire' to designate the territory under Mongol rule. This lexicographical study will allow us to develop a more nuanced approach to these concepts as they were applied by Marco Polo and other travellers of his time who visited Mongolian territory. To start with, we know that

[49] Rossabi, 'Vision in a Dream': 210.

[50] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 81 (Chapter 87): 'il enclinent tout maintenant et meittent leurs testes en terre et font leur oroison vers le Seigneur et l'aourent aussi comme se il fust dieu, et en telle maniere l'aourent par. IIII. fois.'

[51] *Ibid.*: 83 (Chapter 88).

the term 'emperor' was used very early on by Latin-speaking travellers in their descriptions of Genghis Khan and his immediate successor. In fact, it is this very word they used to translate the Mongolian notion 'Khan', as indicated in Giovanni di Plano Carpini's text: 'ubi elegerunt Cuyuccan Imperatorem in presencia nostra, qui in lingua eorum dicitur Chan.'[52] In addition to this direct translation, the term was often qualified by an extension: Benedict of Poland, for example, called the Khan the *Imperator Thartarorum.*[53] We also find the phrase 'emperor of the Tartars' both in Giovanni di Marignolli[54] and Marco Polo.[55] In using the notion of emperor, both authors insist, primarily, on the sovereign nature of his authority, stressing how it extends over a people before spreading over a territory. Moreover, later travellers from Latin Europe mention that the word *Imperator* equally figured in the legend of the Khan's seal and on official documents.[56] The word was doubtlessly written in Mongolian and the writers in question provide us with a translation.

The notion of 'translation' is of particular significance in this context, since the travellers in question were confronted with a large number of

[52] Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*: 93–94: 'Unde noverint universi quod, nobis existentibus in terra Tartarorum, in solempni curia, que iam ex pluribus annis indicta erat fuimus, *ubi elegerunt Cuyuccan Imperatorem in presencia nostra, qui in lingua eorum dicitur Chan*. Qui Cuyuccan predictus erexit cum omnibus principibus vexillum contra Ecclesiam Dei et romanum imperium, et contra omnia regna christianorum et populos occidentis, nisi forsan facerent ea que mandat domino Pape et potentioribus ac omnibus christianorum populis occidentis.' (my underlining)

[53] Benedict of Poland, 'Relatio': 141: 'Ipsi autem fratres ad occidentem progrediebantur et apud Coloniam transito Rehno reversi sunt ad dominum Papam Lugdunum, *litteras Imperatoris Thartarorum* eidem presentantes quorum tenor per interpretationem factam talis est' (my underlining).

[54] Johannes de Marignola, 'Relatio': 526: 'Kaam, summum omnium Thartarorum Imperatorem.'

[55] The very term 'Tartar' was in fact the result of a double misconception on the part of European travellers: first, they confused the Mongols and the Tatars (who were actually a people subjected to the ruling Mongols); second, they identified the Tatars and the Tartarus, the underworld abyss from Greek mythology. This shift towards a semantic field related to the underworld must be understood in the context of the Mongol incursions into Eastern Europe in the first half of the thirteenth century, which caused considerable devastation; cf. Schmidt, *Trauma und Erinnerung*. However, already Klopprogge, *Ursprung*: 158, raised doubts on this theory. On the confusion between the Tatars and the Mongols, see Jean de Plancarpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*: 15, 225–26.

[56] Giovanni di Pian di Carpine, *Storia dei Mongoli*: 293: 'Iccirco eorum imperator sic in litteris suis scribit: "Dei fortitude, omnium hominum imperator", et in superscriptione

languages they had to practice in order to make themselves understood and to understand their interlocutors. In the letter addressed by Khan Güyük to Pope Innocent IV, for example, the Khan is called 'the emperor of all men'.[57] But this letter was first written in Mongolian, then translated in 'Saracen language', that is, Persian. In fact, the Persian letter is still conserved in the Vatican archives.[58] As we know today, the process of translation involved two high-ranking Nestorian dignitaries of Güyük's chancellery, Qadaq and Chinqai: the two of them read the Mongolian version to Giovanni de Plano Carpini and Benedict of Poland, his travelling companion, translated it into Russian for Giovanni, who took notes in Latin.[59] It seems only natural that in the course of such a complex process many nuances of the vocabulary have been lost. European travellers would have been inclined to use the word that seemed the most accurate and adequate to convey an idea of the Khan's status and power that they observed. Now how did Marco Polo, who lived more than 15 years in Mongolia, proceed? The name 'Khan' represents in fact the highest title in the Mongolian social hierarchy: the Khan is the person who commands all the other lords, as Marco Polo already indicated in the basic definition that he gives of the word. He also indicates that the name can be used as a direct translation of 'emperor':

> Now, I want to begin to tell in our book the great deeds and the great marvels of the great Khan who reigns nowadays, who is called *Cublay Khan*, which

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sigilli sui est hoc: "Deus in celo et Cuyuccan super terram, Dei fortitudo omnium hominum imperatoris sigillum".' This seal is also mentioned at the beginning of the fifteenth century by Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, *Embajada a Tamorlán*: 247: 'E las qu'el Tamurbeque tiene son tres letras redondas, así como oes, fechos d'esta guisa: oes, que quiere dezir que significava que era señor de las tres partes del mundo. E esta devisa mandava fazer en su moneda e en todas sus cosas que él fazía.' According to Marco Polo, the word 'emperor' was also carved on the precious metal tag that soldiers received as safe conduct, see Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 67 (Chapter 80): 'Par la force du grand Dieu et de la grande grâce qu'il a faite à notre empereur que le nom du Khan soit béni! Et que tous ceux qui ne lui obéiront pas meurent anéantis!'

[57] Jean de Plancarpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*: 211.

[58] *Ibid.*: 7, 211–12 (translation of the letter); for a transcription of this document, see Pelliot, 'Les Mongols et la Papauté'. A Latin translation was also included in Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, vol. i: 313–14.

[59] Jean de Plancarpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*: 20–21.

> would be in French the equivalent of the great Lord of Lords, and Emperor of the Lords.[60]

Marco Polo, who actually spoke Mongolian by the time he dictated his text, thus translated the word 'Khan' by the means of two equivalents: the hyperbolic term 'lord of lords' and the word 'emperor'. But after this initial definition and translation of the title, the author consistently uses the Mongol word, when he refers to Kubilaï, throughout the remainder of the book—with the sole exception of the designation as 'seigneur' (lord).

In *Le Devisement*, the word 'Khan' is in fact mostly used as the political title, while the notion 'seigneur' tends to identify the social function of the same person. In the description of the rivalry between Kubilaï and his uncle Naian, for example, the notion 'seigneur' actually refers to three of the protagonists: Kubilaï's rebellious uncle—and subject—is designated as a 'great Tartar Lord (*seigneur*) whose name was Naian and who was uncle to the aforementioned Lord Kubilaï Khan and who was lord over many lands and many provinces'.[61] In the same paragraph, the word is also used for Naian's accomplice, 'the great Tartar lord who was called Caïdou—who was a great Lord (*seigneur*), powerful […]',[62] and for Kubilaï himself: 'he [i.e. Caïdou] was a rebel and he wished failure upon his lord (*seigneur*) the Great Khan whose uncle he was'.[63] All three protagonists are thus referred to according to their social function: they are 'lords' (*seigneurs*) who rule over people and territories. This usage of the word *seigneur* can indeed be observed throughout the entire book. Even if Kubilaï is sometimes called 'Grand seigneur', in order to distinguish him from the other lords, the word still primarily targets his social function and should not be interpreted as a political title. Only when Kubilaï is called the *seigneur des seigneurs* (lord of lords) this hyperbolic address can be understood as a title, since it openly underscores his political influence over other rulers and their peoples and

[60] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 57 (Chapter 75): 'Or vous veul commencier a compter en nostre livre a conter les granz faiz et toutes les granz merveilles du Grant Caan qui ore regne, qui Cublay Caan est appelez, qui vaut a dire en françois comme le grant seigneur des seigneurs, et des seignours empereour.'

[61] *Ibid.*, vol. iii: 59 (Chapter 76): 'un grant sires tartars qui avoit a non Naian et estoit oncles au dit seigneur Cublay Caan et estoit seignour de maintes terres et de maintes provinces.'

[62] *Ibid.*, 'Grant Seignour tartar qui se nommoit Caydu—qui estoit grant sires et poissant.'

[63] *Ibid.*, 'Il estoit revelez et vouloit grant mal a son seigneur le Grant Caan qui son oncle estoit.'

territories. One of these occurrences can be seen in a passage that offers no less than a complete description of Kubilaï as a sociocultural and historical character: it includes his appearance, his family and his political court.[64] It seems consistent that Marco Polo would use this term in the specific context of a passage that introduces and presents the Khan to his readers. In fact, the Khan is explicitly defined by our authors, French and Latin alike, as a ruler who has complete power over all other lords, as the one who has no peer. The distinction that Marco Polo makes between *seigneur* and 'Khan' moreover perfectly reflects the distinction in use in the Mongolian court between *qan* and *qa'an.*

The Mongolian chancellery doubtless used the two titles at the same time—the current and usual title of the tribal *qan*, in order to indicate the unity of the peoples of the Mongolian steppe around the Khan, and the title of *qa'an*, reserved to more solemn occasions, in order to designate the sovereign of a universal empire that consisted of numerous vassal peoples.[65]

The author's use of the titles and names therefore demonstrates his clear understanding of the different titles that can be given to the same person and of the importance of the context of use.

Seen in an overall perspective, in *Le Devisement du Monde*, Marco Polo chooses to refer to Kubilaï as 'Khan' or *seigneur* rather than as 'emperor'. In order to explain this choice, I would like to propose three reasons: Marco Polo's own personal history, the connotation of the word 'emperor' in its common use in the Latin Middle Ages and lastly Marco Polo's ideological convictions.

Conceptualising Emperor and Empire: Marco Polo's Perspective

The first reason why Marco Polo might have preferred to use the word 'Khan' is cultural: as we have seen, our author had spent many years in Mongolia

[64] *Ibid.*: 68–69 (Chapter 81).

[65] Jean de Plan Carpin, *Dans l'Empire Mongol*: 18 n. 10: 'La chancellerie mongole devait sans doute utiliser les deux titres à la fois, le titre courant et habituel de *qan* tribal, pour indiquer l'unité des peuples de la steppe mongole autour du khan et le titre de *qa'an*, reserve à des occasions plus solennelles, pour designer le souverain d'un empire universel constitué de nombreux peuples vassaux.' See also Rachewiltz, *Secret History of the Mongols*, vol. iii: 130–31.

and to the best of our knowledge had become quite fluent in their main languages. From his own perspective, it is thus hardly surprising that he would use a Mongolian word that probably sounded more accurate to him than any equivalent or translation in Latin or the vernacular. Furthermore, by the time he narrated his experiences to Rustichello, Marco Polo had lived half of his life in the East, and his perspective on the Mongolian court was far from typically 'occidental':[66] he understood all the connotations of the word 'Khan' and very likely made a conscious choice to use one term over another, specifically for meaning's sake. In fact, it should be noted that in many other occasions in his book, Marco Polo chose to use a Mongolian term to refer to a reality far from his experiences in the East, followed by its translation. When he described the close guard, for example, he explains: 'You ought to know that the Great Khan is, for his prestige, guarded by 12,000 horsemen, called *quesitan*, which means in French "knights loyal to their lord".'[67] The fact that Marco Polo offered a translation from Mongol to French demonstrates that he paid close attention to terminology in general. His subsequent use of mainly the Mongolian word expressed his intent. In the most recent and authoritative edition of the *Devisement du Monde*, the editors underline that 'it appears that all the names provided by Marco Polo (*bulargusi*, *toscaor*, *cunicy*, …), as distorted as they might have been by successive copyists, are all to be taken very seriously and have all been confirmed.'[68] By using Mongolian terms, Marco Polo was also responding—consciously or not—to the expectations of a readership in search of exoticism.

The second reason that can be given for Marco Polo's choice can be derived from linguistic practices in contemporary Europe: in Latin as well as in most of the vernaculars of that time, the word 'emperor' was mostly used to refer to the ruling heirs of the Roman Empire. Marco Polo himself uses the word twice in that sense: the prologue of the *Devisement*

[66] On this, see, for example, Larner, *Marco Polo*: 85.

[67] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 76 (Chapter 85): 'Or sachiez que le Grant Caan se fait par sa grandesce garder a. XII.M hommes a cheval et s'appellent "quesitan", qui vallent a dire en françois "chevalier feel au seigneur".'

[68] *Ibid.*: 48 (Introduction): '[…] il apparaît que tous les noms fournis par Marco Polo (*bulargusi*, *toscaor*, *cunicy*…), tous déformés qu'ils puissent avoir été par les copistes successifs, sont à prendre très au sérieux et se trouvent tous confirmés.' The word *quesitan* can also be found in Oderic of Pordenone and in the Mongolian Chronicle, see *ibid.*: 125 n. 85, 3 and Chavannes, 'Inscriptions et pièces de chancellerie': 429 n. 3.

du Monde states that the first manuscript was offered to 'His Lordship of Valois, Charles, Son of the King of France and heir to the throne of Constantinople through his wife'.[69] In this dedication, Marco Polo also used the word *empereris* (Empress) for Catherine de Courtenay and the word *empire* for Constantinople.[70] This very standard use of the term in order to designate Constantinople relied on the idea that this realm was considered to be a continuation of the Roman Empire, but also a powerful economic, cultural and military force.

In the *Devisement du Monde*, the word 'empire' appears for a second time, somewhat later in the text, in the chapter that describes how Marco Polo's father and uncle arrive for the first time at the court of the Great Khan. Temüjin, who was Khan at that time, interrogates them quite intensively about the political organisation of their world:

> When they arrived at the court of the Great Khan, he received them with honour, welcomed them warmly, seemed very happy at their arrival and asked them many questions: first about the emperors, how they ruled their empire and their lands, how they made war, etc.[71]

Well aware of the existence of large sedentary societies in the West, the Khan sought more information about them, possibly in order to organise his own territories according to these models. If Marco Polo used the plural (*empereurs*) in this passage, this might rely on the existence of two empires in Europe at that time—the Eastern Roman Empire and the Roman–German Empire in the West. This argument can actually build on the text itself, since the quoted passage continued: 'And

[69] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. i: 115–16: '[…] pour l'onneur et reverence de tres excellent et puissant prince monseigneur Charles, filz du roy de France et conte de Valois, bailla et donna au dessusdit seigneur de Cepoy la premiere coppie de son dit livre […] pour Monseigneur de Valoiz et pour madame l'empereris sa fame […].' The passage refers to Thibaut de Chepoy, who had been sent to Greece as governor for Charles of Valois and his wife; the authorship of this brief prologue is unclear.

[70] *Ibid.*: 116. On the interior and exterior perception of the Latin empire of Constantinople in the thirteenth century, see the contribution by Filip van Tricht in this volume.

[71] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. i: 121 (Chapter 5): 'Quant il furent venu au Grant Caam, il les reçut a grant hounour et leur fist moult grant feste et moult grant joie de lor venue et lor demanda de maintes choses: premierement des empereres et comment il maintiennent lor seignourie et lor terre en justice et comment il vont en bataille et de tout leur afaire et aprés leur demanda des roys et des princes et des autres barons.'

afterwards, he asked them questions about the kings, the princes and other barons',[72] thereby implying that the Khan actually was clearly conscious of the difference and the hierarchy between emperor, kings, princes and barons.

Even though we cannot ascertain the exact words used by the Khan (or whether the narrator took any liberties in translating them), the overall construction of this passage clearly expresses Marco Polo's knowledge of the existence of two Christian empires in the Greek East and the Latin West. This very knowledge, we might hypothesise, could largely have contributed to Marco Polo's apparent reluctance to use the word 'emperor' when he talks about the Khan, aside from its use as translation, when it serves to furnish an explanatory equivalent.

Finally, we can deduce that calling Kubilaï 'Khan' and not 'emperor' allowed Marco Polo to invest the term 'Khan' with a superior, more complex and nuanced meaning than emperor ever could: the text of the *Devisement du Monde* clearly expresses its author's great admiration for the Mongol people in general, and the Khan in particular. It celebrates their physical resilience and their cultural ascent alike:

> And they are the people in the world who have endured the most difficulties, who spend the least and who are best fit to conquer other lands and kingdoms. And it is so true as you have heard, and as your will hear in this book, that from slaves they have now become lords of the world.[73]

In this sense, it is quite telling that, when he first introduces the Khan by using the word 'emperor', Marco Polo explains that

> [I]t is right that he has this name [i.e. emperor], for everyone must truly understand that he is the most powerful man who has ever existed in our world, from the time of Adam, our first father, to our own day, as far as people, land and treasure are concerned.[74]

[72] *Ibid.*

[73] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. ii: 33 (Chapter 69): 'Et sont la gent du monde qui endurent plus grant mesaises et qui mains veulent de despens et qui miex sont pour conquester terres et regnes. Et il leur pert bien, si comme vous avez oÿ et orrez en ce livre, que des sers sont ore seigneurs du monde.'

[74] *Ibid.*, vol. iii: 57 (Chapter 75): 'Et il a bien ce non a droit pour ce que chascuns sache en verité que c'est le plus puissant homme de gens et de terre et de tresor qui oncques fust au monde ne qui orendroit soit du temps d'Adam nostre premier pere jusques au jour d'ui.'

Through descriptions like this, the author crafted an image of the Khan that celebrated the richness of his personality and the superior administration of his territory and people, often by alluding to his superiority over his Western counterparts: when Marco Polo praised the road network and the system of inns that allowed messengers to cross the entire country quickly, he concluded: 'surely, it is the most fitting source of pride that a king or an emperor can ever have',[75] thereby implying that—in this respect—the Khan's control and achievements clearly surpassed those in Europe. He is even more explicit later on:

> The sixth [Khan] is Kubilaï, who is greater and more powerful than the five others who came before him; if these five could come together, they would not be as powerful as him. Moreover, I tell you that *if all the Christians of the world, emperors and kings, got together, and the Saracens with them, they would not be as powerful as him* and could not do as much as Kubilaï, the Great Khan could.[76]

These and other examples tentatively establish a contrast between the terms 'Khan' and 'emperor' that ultimately qualify the former term.[77] We might thus hypothesise that, for Marco Polo, Kubilaï deserved the exalted name 'Khan', because he claims and actually exercises a kind of truly universal authority. In this perspective, the editors of the *Devisement du Monde* rightfully speak of Kubilaï Khan's 'amazing sovereignty over the cosmic order'.[78]

[75] *Ibid.*, vol. iii: 101 (Chapter 97): 'Et certes, ce est bien la greigneur haultesce que oncques eust roy ne empereres.'

[76] *Ibid.*, vol. ii: 29–30 (Chapter 68): 'Le sixte est Cublay Caan, qui est le plus grant et le plus poissant des autres. V. qui furent devant lui, car se tuit li autres. V. fussent ensamble, n'avroient il tant de pooir comme cestui a. Encore vous di plus que se tuit li Crestien du monde, empereours et roys, fussent touz ensamble et li Sarrazin n'aroient pooir a lui ne tant ne porroient faire comme cestui Cublay le Grant Caan porroit, lequel est seignour de touz les Tartars du monde et de ceulz du Levant et de ceulz de Ponent car touz sont si homme et souget a lui. Et son grant pooir vous mosterrai en cest livre apertement' (my underlining).

[77] Even if Marco Polo does not mention this explicitly, one should not forget that Kubilaï was the first Mongol leader to become 'Emperor of China' (*Tien Tse* or Son of Heaven) and founder of the Yuan dynasty, see Prawdin, *The Mongolian Empire*: 325.

[78] Marco Polo, *Le Devisement du Monde*, vol. iii: 46: 'L'étonnante souveraineté d'ordre cosmique du Grand Khan.'

Empire and Lineage

After this all too brief discussion of the connotations of the term 'emperor' in its intrinsic relation to the idea of one or several Christian empires, but also in its relation to the notion of 'Khan', we want to conclude with a brief examination of the word 'empire' in Marco Polo's work: this more abstract term is most often used as part of a set phrase, namely either as an adjective (imperial) or a genitive (of empire). In both cases, the terms are systematically associated with the idea of lineage and serves to designate the family of the Khan. Both aspects distinguish it from analogous notions, all the while delimiting its very nature. In order to illustrate these effects, one can refer to a choice of exemplary passages: during banquets, for example, the Khan's table is said to be so high that even the people of 'imperial lineage are seated beneath the great lord's feet',[79] and when his extended family comes to pay homage to the Khan for the festivities to celebrate the New Year, they enter his court in a ceremonial order: first come the sons, nephews and further people of the *lignage emperial*, then the rest of the nobility in hierarchical order.[80] Furthermore, in his description of Genghis Khan's struggle to conquer the Mongolian throne, Marco Polo explicitly states: 'His brothers and relatives wanted to keep him from it, but he earned it thanks to his great prowess, and because by law and by reason, he ought to have it as rightful heir from the imperial lineage.'[81] This statement illustrates both Temüjin's noble parentage and his primacy among his peers, thus focusing attention on the overwhelming authority invested into the newly established title of Khan. Additionally, when Kubilaï defeats his uncle Naian—and thus establishes his claim to the Mongolian dynasty—he has his adversary strangled, so as 'not to shed blood from the imperial lineage'.[82] Finally, Marco Polo unequivocally states that 'this Kubilaï is

[79] *Ibid.*: 76 (Chapter 85): 'Et de la destre partie, auques plus bas, sieent ses filz et ses neveux et ses parens, tous de l'imperial lignie, et sont si bas que leurs chief viennent auques prez des piez du Grant Sire.'

[80] *Ibid.*: 81 (Chapter 87): 'Et sont tuit ordené en tel maniere: tout premierement sont ses filz et ses neveux et ceulz de son lignage emperial. Aprés sont les rois, et puis les dus, et puis chascun l'un aprés l'autre selonc son degré qui lui est couvenable.'

[81] *Ibid.*: 58 (Chapter 76): 'Et ses freres et si parens li deffendoient, mais il l'ot par sa grant prouesce et grant vasselage et pour ce que par droit et par raison il la devoit avoir si comme il qui drois hoirs estoit de l'emperial lignie.'

[82] *Ibid.*: 64 (Chapter 79): 'il ne vouloit que li sans [i.e. of the lineage] de son empire fust espandus.'

from the straight lineage of the emperor Genghis Khan, the first Lord'.[83] The meaning of this formula seems to be clear: through his foundational act, Genghis Khan created nothing less than an imperial lineage.

Ultimately, it becomes clear that the notion of empire, whenever it is used in the *Devisement du Monde*, is always employed in relation to the family of the emperor, and not to designate his territory; for the latter, Marco Polo consistently used the words *regne* or *seigneurie*. One might deduce from this practice that the author was actually more concerned with the nature of the Khan's imperial power than with the materiality of his imperial rule.

More specifically, in the author's eyes, the use of the term 'empire' in the text seems to have been justified exclusively when he referred to the royal lineage of Kubilaï—as if the Mongol empire should primarily be understood neither as an aggregate of peoples or of territories, nor as a centralised organisation of government, but first and foremost as the promise of lineal transmission of power and of a cohesive familial community around a ruler. Given the rareness of the use of the word 'empire' in Marco Polo's text, two very specific instances in the *Devisement du Monde* can help confirm our hypothesis. In a first example, the notion refers to the legacy that the eldest son of Kubilaï will receive upon the death of his father;[84] the second example, which can be found in the chapter that immediately follows, is part of a short passage about the other sons of the Khan. The text gives a very laudatory description of Kubilaï:

> You should know that their father, the Great Khan, is the wisest man and the man who is equipped with most things and the best chief of an army and the best leader of people and of empire and of the greatest valiance who ever existed in all the generations of the Tartars.[85]

This laudatory description is part of a section in which the Khan is actually presented as a father who transmits both a material and a moral legacy to

[83] *Ibid.*: 58 (Chapter 76): 'Voirs est que cil Cublay est de la *droite lignie des emperiaus* de Chingins Chaan, le premier seigneur, quar de cele lignie doivent issir [les seigneurs de] touz les Tartars du monde' (my underlining).

[84] *Ibid.*: 68 (Chapter 81): 'Et le greingneur fil que il a […] doit estre par raison seingnour de l'empire quant le pere est mort.'

[85] *Ibid.*: 70 (Chapter 82): 'Sachiez que leur pere, le Grant Caan, est le plus sage homme et le plus pourveu de toutes choses et le meilleur cheivetainne d'ost et le melleur meneeur de gens et d'empire et de greingneur vaillance qui onques fust en toutes les generations des Tartars.'

his children. And it is in this context that the term 'empire' is mentioned. It denotes the idea of a hereditary rule, related to a family, which should be rational and absolute. Only to a second degree does it refer to the territory that is governed.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the *Devisement du Monde*, Marco Polo scarcely used the word 'emperor', preferring instead the word 'Khan'. I demonstrated that this can be explained with a range of arguments. In all cases, we have to remember that Marco Polo did, on the one hand, come from the Latin West, but, on the other, became a proficient speaker of Mongolian. As a consequence, we can surmise that he had certain inclinations to use the 'correct' titles, all the while being conscious of the implications of the word 'emperor' when describing a foreign ruler. I have demonstrated that Marco Polo's underlying intent was to imply that the Khan was a superior ruler, even when compared to the emperors who existed in the West.

As to the word 'empire', Marco Polo used it in two distinct types of contexts: to identify historical European empires and as a set phrase that referred to the lineage of Kubilaï. He never used it, though, to designate the territory or the peoples ruled by the Khan, unless he mentioned his empire as a heritage—material, legal and moral.

These observations force us to underline the distinction between the notions of 'empire' and of 'emperor', since the first seems to convey stronger historical–political connotations. However, when he used these words, Marco Polo participated in a long tradition of traveller–explorers who visited the Far East and who slowly—though subconsciously—assigned imperial authority to both the Mongol kingdom and its rulers in a time when the use of the notion of empire seems to have been very specific in Latin–Western contexts. Finally, we should be aware that even though I am proposing that Marco Polo consciously used the concept of imperial/empire in a specific way and within a specific context, the wide diffusion of his text throughout Europe resulted in the 'opening up' of the idea behind this practice beyond the long-established context of the Roman–German Empire.

By establishing both a distinction and a complementarity between the terms Khan and emperor within a differentiated notion of imperial power,

the Venetian traveller and Mongolian ambassador sought to approximate the idea of imperial authority that he had become familiar with in the West to the ruler of the Mongol court—thus making the latter comprehensible to his readers—only to transcend astutely its very conventionality. *Le Devisement du Monde* can thus be read less as a travel narrative of empire than a treatise on the understanding of the nature of imperial power.

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