

Abstract for “Multilingualism and Education in Pre-Modern Europe”

Czech Academy of Sciences & Romanian Academy

Prague, September 19-20, 2024

“Thesaurus spiritualis est, quod sancti homines religiosi et seculares... addiscerent diversa linguagia”: Latin Europe’s Methods and Strategies for Communicating with the Peoples of the Mongol Empire

Stephen Pow

Research associate

University of Calgary

2500 University Dr NW, Calgary AB T2N 1N4, Canada

Email: Lstephenpow@gmail.com

Abstract: Starting in the thirteenth century, Dominican missionary activity began to extend beyond European Christendom’s eastern frontiers to the pagan Cuman-Qipchaq people. Roughly coinciding with that development was the rapid expansion of the Mongol Empire. By 1241, the Mongols had launched devastating attacks on Poland, Moravia, and Hungary which drove right to the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. Though the Mongols pulled back into the Pontic Steppe, they remained a new and powerful neighbour of Christendom.

This paper explores how Western Christendom’s papal curia, royal courts, missionaries, diplomats, and ordinary merchants developed methods and strategies of effective communication with the Mongols and their Turkic speaking subjects from the western reaches of “Cumania” (Wallachia and Moldavia) all the way to the Mongol Empire’s capitals of Qaraqorum and Khanbaliq (modern Beijing). In early stages, this meant heavy reliance on the Mongols’ Slavic and Hungarian subjects, but increasingly the Mongols and Western Europeans worked out a step-by-step translation system, using teams of interpreters and intermediary languages, to ensure that messages were not miscommunicated. As for ordinary missionaries, the task of learning the Cuman-Qipchaq Turkic language proved increasingly important for proselytizing and even surviving in the Golden Horde. This led to Raymond Lull’s calls to see the papal curia fund an eastern languages institute of sorts. Such efforts were not totally successful, but ground-roots efforts at preparing missionaries linguistically led to the production of the *Codex Cumanicus*.