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## Excerpt from William of Rubruck's *Account of the Mongols*

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*At the behest of King Louis IX of France, friar William of Rubruck embarked in 1253 on a two-year journey that took him to Karakorum, the Mongol capital. His report relates detailed and vivid observations of the Mongols and their customs and is one of the masterpieces of medieval geographical literature.*

*Source: The Journey of William of Rubruck to the Eastern Parts of the World, 1253-1255, as Narrated by Himself. Translated by William Woodville Rockhill, London, Hakluyt Society, 1900.*

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### [YURTS AND THEIR FURNISHINGS]

Nowhere have they fixed dwelling-places, nor do they know where their next will be. They have divided among themselves Cithia [Scythia - the ancient kingdom of the western steppes], which extendeth from the Danube to the rising of the sun; and every captain, according as he hath more or less men under him, knows the limits of his pasture land and where to graze in winter and summer, spring and autumn. For in winter they go down to warmer regions in the south: in summer they go up to cooler towards the north. The pasture lands without water they graze over in winter when there is snow there, for the snow serveth them as water. They set up the dwelling in which they sleep on a circular frame of interlaced sticks converging into a little round hoop on the top, from which projects above a collar as a chimney, and this (framework) they cover over with white felt. Frequently they coat the felt with chalk, or white clay, or powdered bone, to make it appear whiter, and sometimes also (they make the felt) black. The felt around this collar on top they decorate with various pretty designs. Before the entry they also suspend felt ornamented with various embroidered designs in color. For they embroider the felt, colored or otherwise, making vines and trees, birds and beasts.

And they make these houses so large that they are sometimes thirty feet in width. I myself once measured the width between the wheel-tracks of a cart twenty feet, and when the house was on the cart it projected beyond the wheels on either side five feet at least. I have myself counted to one cart twenty-two oxen drawing one house, eleven abreast across the width of the cart, and the other eleven before them. The axle of the cart was as large as the mast of a ship, and one man stood in the entry of the house on the cart driving the oxen. Furthermore they weave light twigs into squares of the size of a large chest, and over it from one end to the other they put a turtle-back also of twigs, and in the front end they make a little doorway; and then they cover this coffer or little house with black felt coated with tallow or ewe's milk, so that the rain cannot penetrate it, and they decorate it likewise with embroidery work. And in such coffers they put all their bedding and valuables, and they tie them tightly on high carts drawn by camels, so that they can cross rivers (without getting wet). Such coffers they never take off the cart.

When they set down their dwelling-houses, they always turn the door to the south and after that they place the carts with coffers on either side near the house at a half stone's throw, so that the dwelling stands between two rows of carts as between two walls. The matrons make for themselves most beautiful (luggage) carts, which I would not know how to describe to you unless by a drawing, and I would depict them all to you if I knew how to paint. A single rich Mo'al or Tartar has quite one hundred or two hundred such carts with coffers. Baatu has twenty-six wives, each of whom has a large dwelling, exclusive of the other little ones which they set up after the big one, and which are like closets, in which the sewing girls live, and to each of these (large) dwellings are attached quite two hundred carts. And when they set up their houses, the first wife places her dwelling on the extreme west side, and after her the others according to their rank, so that the last wife will be in the extreme east; and there will be the distance of a stone's throw between the iurt of one wife and that of another. The ordu of a rich Mo'al seems like a large town, though there will be very few men in it. One girl will lead twenty or

thirty carts, for the country is flat, and they tie the ox or camel carts the one after the other, and a girl will sit on the front one driving the ox, and all the others follow after with the same gait. Should it happen that they come to some bad piece of road, they untie them, and take them across one by one. So they go along slowly, as a sheep or an ox might walk.

When they have fixed their dwelling, the door turned to the south, they set up the couch of the master on the north side. The side for the women is always the east side, that is to say, on the left of the house of the master, he sitting on his couch his face turned to the south. The side for the men is the west side, that is, on the right. Men coming into the house would never hang up their bows on the side of the woman.

#### **[THE MONGOLS' SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS AND CELEBRATIONS]**

And over the head of the master is always an image of felt, like a doll or statuette, which they call the brother of the master: another similar one is above the head of the mistress, which they call the brother of the mistress, and they are attached to the wall: and higher up between the two of them is a little lank one (macilenta), who is, as it were, the guardian of the whole dwelling. The mistress places in her house on her right side, in a conspicuous place at the foot of her couch, a goat-skin full of wool or other stuff, and beside it a very little statuette looking in the direction of attendants and women. Beside the entry on the woman's side is yet another image, with a cow's tit for the women, who milk the cows: for it is part of the duty of the women to milk the cows. On the other side of the entry, toward the men, is another statue with a mare's tit for the men who milk the mares.

And when they have come together to drink, they first sprinkle with liquor this image which is over the master's head, then the other images in order. Then an attendant goes out of the dwelling with a cup and liquor, and sprinkles three times to the south, each time bending the knee, and that to do reverence to the fire; then to the east, and that to do reverence to the air; then to the west to do reverence to the water; to the north they sprinkle for the dead. When the master takes the cup in hand and is about to drink, he first pours a portion on the ground. If he were to drink seated on a horse, he first before he drinks pours a little on the neck or the mane of the horse. Then when the attendant has sprinkled toward the four quarters of the world he goes back into the house, where two attendants are ready, with two cups and platters to carry drink to the master and the wife seated near him upon the couch. And when he hath several wives, she with whom he hath slept that night sits beside him in the day, and it becometh all the others to come to her dwelling that day to drink, and court is held there that day, and the gifts which are brought that day are placed in the treasury of that lady. A bench with a skin of milk, or some other drink, and with cups, stands in the entry.

In winter they make a capital drink of rice, of millet, and of honey; it is clear as wine: and wine is carried to them from remote parts. In summer they care only for cosmos. There is always cosmos near the house, before the entry door, and beside it stands a guitar-player with his guitar. Lutes and vielles [i.e. guitars] such as we have I did not see there, but many other instruments which are unknown among us. And when the master begins to drink, then one of the attendants cries with a loud voice, "Ha!" and the guitarist strikes his guitar, and when they have a great feast they all clap their hands, and also dance about to the sound of the guitar, the men before the master, the women before the mistress. And when the master has drunken, then the attendant cries as before, and the guitarist stops. Then they drink all around, and sometimes they do drink right shamefully and gluttonly. And when they want to challenge anyone to drink, they take hold of him by the ears, and pull so as to distend his throat, and they clan and dance before him. Likewise, when they want to make a great feasting and jollity with someone, one takes a full cup, and two others are on his right and left, and thus these three come singing and dancing towards him who is to take the cup, and they sing and dance before him; and when he holds out his hand to take the cup, they quickly draw it back, and then again they come back as before, and so they elude him three or four times by drawing away the cup, till he hath become well excited and is in good appetite, and then they give him the cup, and while he drinks they sing and clap their hands and strike with their feet.

#### **[MORE ON FOOD]**

Of their food and victuals you must know that they eat all their dead animals without distinction, and with such flocks and herds it cannot be but that many animals die. Nevertheless, in summer, so long as lasts their cosmos, that is to say mare's milk, they care not for any other food. So then if it happens that an ox or a horse dies, they dry its flesh by cutting it into narrow strips and hanging it in the sun and the wind, where at once and without salt it becomes dry without any evidence of smell. With the intestines of horses they make sausages better than pork ones, and they eat them fresh. The rest of the flesh they keep for winter. With the hides of oxen they make

big jars [J: bags], which they dry in admirable fashion in the smoke. With the hind part of the hide of horses they make most beautiful shoes. With the flesh of a single sheep they give to eat to fifty men or a hundred; for they cut it up very fine in a platter with salt and water, for they make no other sauce; and then with the point of a knife or a fork which they make for the purpose, like that which we used to eat coddled pears or apples, they give to each of the bystanders a mouthful or two according to the number of the guests. Prior to this, before the flesh of the sheep is served, the master takes what pleases him; and furthermore if he gives to anyone a special piece, it is the custom, that he who receives it shall eat it himself, and he may not give it to another; but if he cannot eat it all he carries it off with him, or gives it to his servant if he be present, who keeps it; otherwise he puts it away in his captargac, which is a square bag which they carry to put such things in, in which they store away bones when they have not time to gnaw them well, so that they can gnaw them later and that nothing of the food be lost.

### **[KUMISS (FERMENTED MARE'S MILK, CALLED COSMOS BY RUBRUCK)]**

This cosmos, which is mare's milk, is made in this wise. They stretch a long rope on the ground fixed to two stakes stuck in the ground, and to this rope they tie toward the third hour the colts of the mares they want to milk. Then the mothers stand near their foal, and allow themselves to be quietly milked; and if one be too wild, then a man takes the colt and brings it to her, allowing it to suck a little; then he takes it away and the milker takes its place. When they have got together a great quantity of milk, which is as sweet as cow's as long as it is fresh, they pour it into a big skin or bottle, and they set to churning it with a stick prepared for that purpose, and which is as big as a man's head at its lower extremity and hollowed out; and when they have beaten it sharply it begins to boil up like new wine and to sour or ferment, and they continue to churn it until they have extracted the butter. Then they taste it, and when it is mildly pungent, they drink it. It is pungent on the tongue like *râpé* wine [i.e., a wine of inferior quality] when drunk, and when a man has finished drinking, it leaves a taste of milk of almonds on the tongue, and it makes the inner man most joyful and also intoxicates weak heads, and greatly provokes urine. They also make *cara cosmos* that is "black cosmos," for the use of the great lords. It is for the following reason that mare's milk curdles not. It is a fact that (the milk) of no animal will curdle in the stomach of whose fetus is not found curdled milk. In the stomach of mares' colts it is not found, so the milk of mares curdles not. They churn then the milk until all the thicker parts go straight to the bottom, like the dregs of wine, and the pure part remains on top, and it is like whey or white must. The dregs are very white, and they are given to the slaves, and they provoke much to sleep. This clear (liquor) the lords drink, and it is assuredly a most agreeable drink and most efficacious. Baatu has thirty men around his camp at a day's distance, each of whom sends him every day such milk of a hundred mares, that is to say every day the milk of three thousand mares, exclusive of the other white milk which they carry to others. As in Syria the peasants give a third of their produce, so it is these (Tartars) must bring to the ordu of their lords the milk of every third day. As to cow's milk they first extract the butter, then they boil it down perfectly dry, after which they put it away in sheep paunches which they keep for that purpose; and they put no salt in the butter, for on account of the great boiling down it spoils not. And they keep this for the winter. What remains of the milk after the butter they let sour as much as can be, and they boil it, and it curdles in boiling, and the curd they dry in the sun, and it becomes as hard as iron slag, and they put it away in bags for the winter. In winter time, when milk fails them, they put this sour curd, which they call *gruit*, in a skin and pour water on it, and churn it vigorously till it dissolves in the water, which is made sour by it, and this water they drink instead of milk. They are most careful not to drink pure water.

### **[ANIMALS IN THE MONGOLS' DIET]**

The great lords have villages in the south, from which millet and flour are brought to them for the winter. The poor procure (these things) by trading sheep and pelts. The slaves fill their bellies with dirty water, and with this they are content. They catch also rats, of which many kinds abound here. Rats with long tails they eat not, but give them to their birds. They eat mice and all kinds of rats which have short tails. There are also many marmots, which are called *sogur*, and which congregate in one hole in winter, twenty or thirty together, and sleep for six months; these they catch in great numbers. There are also conies, with a long tail like a cat's, and

