

Rabban Sauama in Christendom, Thirteenth Century

Rabban Sauma was a Nestorian Monk who traveled west from Beijing starting in 1275 on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Upon entering Persia, he was hired as a diplomat by a Persian ruler where he then traveled to Constantinople, Rome, and through other Christian regions. He never did reach Jerusalem. In these passages, he describes his encounters with Christians, particular officials of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.

And Rabban Sawma set out on his journey, and there went with him a number of excellent men from among the priests and deacons of the Cell of the Catholicus. And he arrived at Beth Rhomaye [i.e., the territory of the Romans] on the borders of the Sea of Meka [the Black Sea?], he saw the church that was there, and [then] went down [i.e., embarked] in a ship and his companions were with him. Now there were more than three hundred souls in the ship, and each day he consoled them with [his] discourse on the Faith. Now the greater number of those who dwelt in the ship were Romans (i.e., Byzantine Greeks), and because of the savour of his speech they paid him honour in no small degree.

And after [some] days he arrived at the great city of Constantinople and before they went into it he sent two young men to the Royal gate (Sublime Porte) to make known there that an ambassador of King Arghon had come. Then the king commanded certain people to go forth to meet them, and to bring them in with pomp and honour. And when Rabban Sawma went into

the city, the king allotted to him a house, that is to say, a mansion in which to dwell. And after Rabban Sawma had rested himself, he went to visit the king Baeiaet'e [Andronicus II] and after he had saluted him, the king asked him, "How art thou after the workings of the sea and the fatigue of the road?" And Rabban Sawma replied, "With the sight of the Christian king fatigue hath vanished and exhaustion hath departed, for I was exceedingly anxious to see your kingdom, the which may our Lord establish!"

And after they had enjoyed food and drink Rabban Sawma asked the king to be allowed to see the churches and the shrines [or tombs] of the Fathers [i.e., Patriarchs], and the relics of the saints that were therein. And the king handed Rabban Sawma over to the nobles of his kingdom and they showed him everything that was there.

First of all he went unto the great church of . . . , [i.e., the Church of Divine Wisdom], which has three hundred and sixty doors [i.e., pillars] all made of marble. As for the dome of the altar it is impossible for a man to describe it [adequately] to one who hath not seen it, and to say how high and how spacious it is. There is in this church a picture of the holy Mary which Luke, the Evangelist, painted. He saw there also the hand of Mar John the Baptist, and portions [of the bodies of] Lazarus, and

Mary Magdalene, and that stone which was laid on the grave of our Lord, when Joseph the . . . brought Him down from the Cross. Now Mary wept on that stone, and the place hereon her tears fell is wet even at the present time; and however often this moisture is wiped away the place becometh wet again. And he saw also the stone bowl in which our Lord changed the water into wine at Katne (Cana) of Galilee; and the funerary coffer of

one of the holy women which is exposed to public view every year, and every sick person who is laid under it is made whole; and the coffer of Mar John of the Mouth of Gold (Chrysostom). And he saw also the stone on which Simon Peter was sitting when the cock crew; and the tomb of King Constantine, the Conqueror, which was made of red stone (porphyry?); and also the tomb of Justinian, which was [built of] green stone; and also the Beth Kawma (resting place) of the Three Hundred and Eighteen [orthodox] Bishops who were all laid in one great church; and their bodies have not suffered corruption because they had confirmed the [True] Faith. And he saw also many shrines of the holy Fathers, and many amulets of a magical character (*talismata*) and image[s] in bodily form made of bronze and stone (Eikons?).

And when Rabban Sawma went [back] to King Baeiaet'e he said, "May the king live for ever! I give thanks unto our Lord that I have been held worthy to see these things. And now, if the king will permit me, I will go and fulfil the command of King ARGHON, for the command to me was to enter the territory of the *Progaye* [i.e., Franks]." Then the king entreated him with great kindness, and gave him gifts of gold and silver.

Rabban Sawma in Italy and in Great Rome And he departed from Constantinople and went down to the sea. And he saw on the sea-shore a monastery of the Romans, and there were laid up in its treasure-house two funerary coffers of silver; in the one was the head of Mar John Chrysostom, and in the other that of Mar Papa who baptized Constantine. And he went down to the sea [i.e., embarked on a ship] and came to the middle thereof, where he saw a mountain from which smoke ascended all the day long and in the night time fire showed itself on it. And no man is able to approach the neighbourhood of it because of the stench of sulphur [proceeding therefrom]. Some people say that there is a great serpent there. This sea is called the "Sea of Italy." Now it is a terrible sea, and very many thousands of people have perished therein. And after two months of toil, and weariness, and exhaustion, Rabban Sawma arrived at the sea-shore, and he landed at the name of which was Napoli (Naples); the name of its king was Irid Shardalo [= Il Re Charl Du or, the King Charles II?]. And he went to the king and showed him the reason why they had come; and the king welcomed him and paid him honour. Now it happened that there was war between him and another king, whose name was Irid Arkon [= the King of Aragon, James II?]. And the troops of the one had come in many ships, and the troops of the other were ready, and they began to fight each other, and the King of Aragon (?) conquered King Charles II, and slew twelve thousand his men, and sunk their ships in the sea. [According to Chabot this naval engagement took place in the Bay of Sorrento on St. John's Day, June 24, 1287, and the great eruption of Mount Etna on June 18]. Meanwhile Rabban Sawma and his companions sat upon the roof the mansion in which they lived, and they admired the way in which the Franks waged war for they attacked none of the people except those who were actually combatants. And from that place they travelled inland on horses, and they passed through towns and villages and marvelled because they found no land which was destitute of buildings. On the road they heard that Mar Papa [Honorius IV who died in 1287] was dead.

And the Cardinals said unto him, "For the present rest thyself, and we will discuss the matter together later"; and they assigned to him a mansion and caused him to be taken down thereto.

Three days later the Cardinals sent and summoned Rabban Sawma to their presence. And when he went to them they began to ask him questions, saying, "What is thy quarter of

the world, and why hast thou come?" And he replied in the selfsame words he had already spoken to them. And they said unto him, "Where doth the Catholicus live? And the Cardinals. And thus they did, and [their act] was pleasing to those Cardinals. And when Rabban Sawma went into their presence no man stood up before him, for by reason of the honourable nature of the Throne, the twelve Cardinals were not in the habit of doing this. And they made Rabban Sawma sit down with them, and one of them asked him, "How art thou after all the fatigue of the road?" And he made answer to him, "Through your prayers I am well and rested." And the Cardinal said unto him, "For what purpose hast thou come hither?" And Rabban Sawma said unto him, "The Mongols and the Catholicus of the East have sent me to Mar Papa concerning the matter of Jerusalem; and they have sent letters with me." And the Cardinals said unto him, "For the present rest thyself, and we will discuss the matter together later"; and they assigned to him a mansion and caused him to be taken down thereto

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The Belief of Rabban Sawma, Which the Cardinals Demanded From Him

"I believe in One God, hidden, everlasting, without beginning and without end, Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit: Three Persons, coequal and indivisible; among Whom there is none who is first, or last, or young, or old: in Nature they are One, in Persons they are

three: the Father is the Begetter, the Son is the Begotten, the Spirit proceedeth.

"In the last time one of the Persons of the Royal Trinity, namely the Son, put on the perfect man, Jesus Christ, from Mary the holy virgin; and was united to Him Personally (*parsopaith*), and in him saved (or redeemed) the world. In His Divinity He is eternally of the Father; in His humanity He was born [a Being] in time of Mary; the union is inseparable and indivisible for ever; the union is without mingling, and without mixture, and without compaction. The Son of this union is perfect God and perfect man, two Natures (*keyanin*), and two Persons (*kenomin*)—one *parsopa* (. . .)"

The Cardinals said unto him, "Doth the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father or from the Son, or is it separate?" Rabban Sawma replied, "Are the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit associated in the things which appertain to the Nature (*keyana*) or separate?" The Cardinals answered, "They are associated in the things which concern the Nature (*keyana*) but are separate in respect of individual qualities." Rabban Sawma said, "What are their individual qualities?" The Cardinals replied, "Of the Father, the act of begetting: of the Son the being begotten: of the Spirit the going forth (proceeding)." Rabban Sawma said, "Which of Them is the cause of that Other?" And the Cardinals replied, "The Father is the cause of the Son, and the Son is the cause of the Spirit." Rabban Sawma said, "If they are coequal in Nature (*keyana*), and in operation, and in power, and in authority (or dominion), and the Three Persons (*kenome*) are One, how is it possible for one of Them to be the cause of the Other? For of necessity the Spirit also must be the cause of some other thing; but the discussion is extraneous to the Confession of faith of wise men. We cannot find a demonstration resembling this statement of yours.

"For behold, the soul is the cause both of the reasoning power and the act of living, but the reasoning power is not the cause of the act of living. The sphere of the sun is the cause of light and heat, and heat is not the cause of light. Thus we think that which is correct, namely, that the Father is the cause of the Son and the Spirit, and that both the Son and the Spirit are causations of His. Adam begot Seth, and made Eve to proceed [from him], and they are three; because in respect there is absolutely no difference between begetting and making to go forth (or proceed)."

Then the Cardinals said unto him, "We confess that the Spirit proceedeth from the Father and the Son, but not as we said, for we were only putting thy modesty [or, religious belief?] to the test." And Rabban Sawma said, "It is not right that to something which is one, two, three, or four causes should be [assigned]; on the contrary I do not think that this resembleth our Confession of Faith." Now though the Cardinals restrained his speech by means of very many demonstrations, they held him in high esteem because of his power of argument.

Then Rabban Sawma said unto them, "I have come from remote countries neither to discuss, nor to instruct [men] in matter of the Faith, but I came that I might receive a blessing from Mar Papa, and from the shrines of the saints and to make known the words of King [Arghon] and the Catholicus. If it be pleasing in your eyes, let us set aside discussion, and do ye give attention and direct someone to show us the churches here and the shrines of the saints; [if ye will do this] ye will confer a very great favour on your servant and disciple."

Then the Cardinals summoned the Amir of the city and certain monks and commanded them to show him the churches and the holy places that were there; and they went forth straightway and saw the places which we will now mention. First of all they went into the

church of Peter and Paul. Beneath the Throne is a naos, and in this is laid the body of Saint Peter, and above the throne is an altar. The altar which is in the middle of that are, temple has four doorways, and in each of these two folding doors worked with designs in front; Mar Papa celebrates the Mass at this altar, and no person besides himself may stand on the bench of that altar. Afterwards they saw the Throne of Mar Peter whereon they make Mar Papa to sit when they appoint him. And they also saw the strip of fine [or thin] linen on which our Lord impressed His image and sent to King Abhgar of Urhai (Edessa). Now the extent of that temple and its splendour cannot be described; it stands on one hundred and eight pillars. In it is another altar at which the King of their Kings receives the laying on of hands [i.e., is consecrated and crowned], and is proclaimed "Ampror (Emperor) King of Kings," by the Pope. And they say that after the prayer Mar Papa takes up the Crown with his feet and clothes the Emperor with it, that is to say, places it upon his own head [to show], as they say, that priesthood reigneth over sovereignty [or kingship].

And when they had seen all the churches and monasteries that were in Great Rome, they went outside the city to the church of Mar Paul the Apostle, where under the altar is his tomb. And there, too, is the chain wherewith Paul was bound when he was dragged to that place. And in that altar there are also a reliquary of gold herein is the head of Mar Stephen the Martyr, and the hand of Mar Khananya (Ananias) who baptized Paul. And the staff of Paul the Apostle is also there. And from that place they went to the spot where Paul the Apostle, was crowned [with martyrdom]. They say that when his head was cut off it leaped up thrice into the air, and at each time cried out Christ! Christ! And that from each of the three places on which his head fell there came forth waters which were useful for healing purposes, and for giving help to all those who were afflicted. And in that place there is a great shrine wherein are the bones of martyrs and famous Fathers, and they were blessed by them.

And they went also to the Church of my Lady Maryam, and of Mar John the Baptist, and saw therein the seamless tunic of our Lord. And there is also in that church the tablet [or slab] on which our Lord consecrated the Offering and gave it to His disciples. And each year Mar Papa consecrates on that tablet the Paschal Mysteries. There are in that church four pillars of copper [or brass], each of which is six cubits in thickness; these, they say, the kings brought from Jerusalem. They saw also there the vessel in which Constantine, the victorious king, was baptized; it is made of black stone [basalt?] polished. Now that church is very large and broad, and there are in the nave (*haikla*) one hundred and forty white marble pillars. They saw also the place where Simon Kipa [i.e., Simon the Rock] disputed with Simon [Magus], and where the latter fell down and his bones were broken. From that place they went into the church of Mart Maryam, and [the priests] brought out for them reliquaries made of beryl (crystal?), wherein was the apparel of Mart Maryam, and a piece of wood on which our Lord had lain when a child. They saw also the head of Mattheh the Apostle, in a reliquary of silver. And they saw the foot of Philip, the Apostle, and the arm of James, the son of Zabhdah! (Zebedee), in the Church of the Apostles, which was there. And after these [sights] they saw buildings which it is impossible to describe in words, and as the histories of those buildings would make any description of them very long I abandon [the attempt].

After this Rabban Sawma and his companions returned to the Cardinals, and thanked them for having held him to be worthy to see these shrines and to receive blessings from

them. And Rabban Sawma asked from them permission to go to the king who dwelleth in Rome; and they permitted him to go, and said, "We cannot give thee an answer until the [new] Pope is elected."

And they went from that place to the country of Tuszkan (Tuscany), and were honourably entreated, and thence they went to Ginoh (Genoa). Now the latter country has no king, but the people thereof set up to rule over it some great man with whom they are pleased. And when the people of Genoa heard that an ambassador of King Arghon had arrived, their Chief went forth with a great crowd of people, and they brought him into the city. And there was there a great church with the name of Saint Sinalornia (San Lorenzo), in which was the holy body of Mar John the Baptist, in a coffer of pure silver. And Rabban Sawma and his companions saw also a six-sided paten, made of emerald, and the people there told them that it was off this paten from which our Lord ate the Passover with His disciples, and that it was brought there when Jerusalem was captured. And from that place they went to the country of Onbar, [according to Bedjan, Lombardy] and they saw that the people there did not fast during the first Sabbath of Lent. And when they asked them, "Wherefore do ye do thus, and separate yourselves from all [other] Christians", they replied, "This is our custom. When we were first taught the Gospel our fathers in the Faith were weakly and were unable to fast. Those who taught them the Gospel commanded them to fast forty days only."

The Monk of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China; or The History of the Life and Travels of Rabban Sauma, Envoy and Plenipotentiary of the Mongol Khans to the Kings of Europe and Markos who as Yahbh-Allaha III Became Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Asia. (London: The Religious Track Society, 1928, Chapters 7-12).