

Gog and Magog in Medieval and Early Modern Western Tradition

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The publication in 1569 of Gerard Mercator's Map of the World for the use of seafarers (*ad usum navigantium*) marks a decisive step in the history of cartography.¹ It was the first map devised according to Mercator's discovery of a method for projecting the globe on a flat surface in such a way as to enable seafarers to represent the course of a ship following a constant compass bearing by a straight line on a map based on a grid of meridians and parallels. The map consisted of eighteen huge sheets fitting sideways together. One of the most salient features was the enormous polar landmass which, as a result of the new projection, occupied nearly the entire width of the map. A second aspect was the way Mercator had mapped those parts of the world about which virtually no information was available. The emptiness of the unexplored interior of North America was partly veiled by a panel explaining the map's purpose.

The easternmost regions of Asia presented a similar problem. About the arctic seas, Mercator had been able to gather some information, but for the east coast of Asia and its interior he had had to rely on the accounts of medieval travellers. On Mercator's world map the easternmost part of Asia is depicted as a bulging peninsula criss-crossed by several mountain ranges.² One of those, which follows a winding course more or less parallel to the east coast, is transected by another chain of mountains, which stretches roughly from east to west and is called *Belgian Mons*. According to an engraved legend, the country lying in the northwesterly quadrant confined by these two mountain ranges is called *Mongul quae a nostris Magog dicitur* ("Mongul, which we call Magog"). The country on the opposite side of the mountains is labelled *Ung quae a nostris Gog dicitur* ("Ung, which we call Gog").

On the top of the mountains lying north of Ung one can discern two tiny human figures blowing trumpets. The legend explains that they represent the bronze statues of two trumpet blowers which in all probability were erected here by the Tartars, in perpetual memory of the liberty they gained when they crossed over the highest of these mountains on their way to safer regions.³

1 See Crane: *Mercator*, pp. 229-37; Krämer: *Mercator*, pp. 236-48.

2 Mercator, *Weltkarte ad usum navigantium*, sheet 12 and the reproduction on p.8.

3 Hic in monte collocati sunt due tubicines aerei, quos verisimile est Tartaros in perpetuam vindicatae libertatis memoriam eo loci [lege: loco] posuisse, qua per summos montes in tutiora loca commigrarunt.

An attempt to sort out this information can best begin with the identification of the names *Mongul* and *Ung* as Magog and Gog. It has long been known that Mercator derived this identification from the travel account of Marco Polo. He describes a country in Central Asia, lying to the west of Cathay (which is his name for China), ruled by a Christian king called George, who is a descendant of the renowned priest-king Prester John. Nowadays, Marco adds, the people are subject to the Great Khan of the Mongols:

This is the place which we call in our language Gog and Magog; the natives call it Ung and Mungul. Each of these two provinces was inhabited by a separate race: in Ung lived the Gog, in Mungul the Tartars.⁴

By locating Gog and Magog somewhere in central Asia, Marco Polo deviates from an older tradition according to which Alexander the Great constructed a barrier in the Caucasus in order to shut out barbarian tribes (which in many accounts are identified with Gog and Magog). In fact, he mentions Alexander's construction of the Iron Gates earlier in his account, pointing out that the tribes involved were not Tartars, as the Alexander Book wrongly calls them, but Comanians, "because there were no Tartars at that time."⁵ For Marco Polo, writing about 1300, the Mongol conquest of Asia was a fact of recent history. He describes how the Tartars, who previously had been subject to Prester John, had migrated to the north and had eventually settled in the land of Chorchā, "a country of far-stretching plains, with no habitations in the form of cities or towns but with good pasturage, wide rivers, and no lack of water."⁶

Marco Polo goes on to relate how in the year 1187 the Tartars elected Chinghiz [Genghis] Khan to be their leader and how he succeeded in rallying a multitude of nations under his rule. According to Marco, the nations Chinghiz conquered were happy to join his following "when they saw his good government and gracious

4 The quotation is from Marco Polo, *The Travels*, transl. Latham, p.106. Some manuscripts add: "And therefore the Tartars are sometimes called Monguls." Mercator knew Polo's account by way of Ramusio's *Navigazioni e viaggi*, which had appeared in 1559. The present quotation can be found in Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, ed. Milanese, vol. 3, p.146.

5 Marco Polo, *Travels*, transl. Latham, p. 49; Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, vol. 3, p. 93 ("Ma non è vero che siano stati Tartari, perché a quel tempo non erano, anzi fu una gente chiamata Cumani, e di altre generazioni e sorti"). The editor, Marica Milanese, provides an interesting footnote.

6 Ibid, pp. 92-3 (the translator explains that Chorchā is in Manchuria); Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, vol. 3, p.132, mentions "Giorza e Bargu" (a footnote explains that both names refer to Mongol tribes, originally living in Manchuria and east of Lake Baikal).

bearing.” Throughout the *Travels*, Marco views the conquests of the Mongols in a remarkably favourable light. At the time of his travels in Asia, between 1271 and 1292, the great Mongol empire founded by Chinghiz had disintegrated into a loose structure of rival khanates. For travellers from the West, however, the overland trade routes from the Black Sea ports to the Far East still lay open, and travellers still enjoyed a modicum of protection by Mongol rulers. In fact, this ubiquitous Mongol presence was what had enabled Marco and his kinsmen to travel without undue hindrance through territories under Chinghizide control.⁷ This in part explains Marco’s attitude, which deviated from the negative judgement prevailing in the West.

In Europe, the sudden emergence of the Tartars – their Latin name suggested an association with Tartarus, the classical underworld – had evoked a variety of terrified speculations. Had Ezekiel not prophesied about Gog appearing from the north with an army of horsemen, “all of them clothed in full armour, a great company, all of them with shield and buckler, wielding swords”?⁸ Around the middle of the thirteenth century, however, the Mongols were usually no longer associated with apocalyptic expectations. Their dominance over the greater part of Asia (excluding Arabia, India and Indo-China) had become a political reality. At the courts of the Chinghizide empire, Christian communities of various denominations, along with Jews and Muslims, were tolerated. In 1345, Pope Innocent IV had even sent the Franciscan Friar, Giovanni di Piano Carpini, on a mission to the Great Khan with an offer of baptism. In the years 1253 to 1255, another Franciscan, the Fleming Willem van Rubroek (Willelmus de Rubruquis), had made the journey to Karakorum by order of King Louis IX of France.⁹ But after the fall of Acco in 1291, all hopes an alliance with the Tartars against the Moslems had gone up in smoke.

Two and a half centuries later, when Mercator devised his world map, the situation was very different. After the Chinghizide empire and its successor states had vanished, it had become virtually impossible to travel over land to the interior of Asia. On the other hand, the sea-routes explored by European seafarers reached in

7 That Marco Polo ever visited China is a matter of debate. See Wood: *Did Marco Polo go to China?*, but also Jackson: “Marco Polo and His ‘Travels’.”

8 Ezekiel, chapter 38, vs.1-5. In vs. 15 Ezekiel prophesies that Gog will come out of the remotest parts of the north (in the Latin Vulgate: a lateribus aquilonis). See also Revelation, chapter 20, vs. 7-8.

9 See *Itinera et relationes fratrum minorum* and Komroff: *Contemporaries of Marco Polo*. On Willem of Rubroek: Guillaume de Rubrouck, *Voyage dans l’empire mongol*.

Mercator's time no further than Japan. So he had been forced to fall back on the reports of travellers over land. He knew Polo's account in the version printed in Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Navigazioni e viaggi* of 1559. This provided him with the names of the Ung and the Mungul and their western equivalents Gog and Magog, giving him a rough idea of the whereabouts of these peoples. The story of the bronze trumpet blowers, however, does not occur in Marco Polo's book, nor in the other texts brought together by Ramusio. Mercator must have found it in some other source, which to my knowledge has not been identified as yet.¹⁰

The text of Mercator's engraved legend presents some puzzling features. It does not explain what kind of oppression the Tartars escaped by crossing the mountain range. Nor is it clear why a monument in remembrance of their exodus should have the form of two bronze trumpet blowers. These two problematic points are elucidated by a related version of the story which is found in the *Itinerarium* of Ricoldo da Montecroce.¹¹ Ricoldo was a Florentine Dominican friar who in 1288 was sent as a preacher to the Orient. Travelling via Acco, Erzurum, Tabriz and Mosul, he finally reached Baghdad, from where he returned around 1300 to Italy. His *Libellus ad nationes orientales* is a vigorous appeal to the peoples of the East, urging them to be converted to Christianity. In his *Itinerarium* (also known as *Liber peregrinationis*), Ricoldo describes his journey and his stay in the East, while giving due attention to positive aspects of Islamic society such as the hospitality and the dignity of his Muslim hosts. The story which I would like to compare with Mercator's notice about the bronze trumpet blowers in the Belgian mountains occurs in the account which Ricoldo gives of the origin of the Tartars.¹²

Ricoldo narrates that the Tartars once used to live beyond a range of inaccessible mountains in the Caucasus. The only pass by which the mountains could be crossed was guarded by a strong fortress, on the ramparts of which no defenders were to be seen. Everybody who ventured to come near the castle, however, was put to flight by the

10 Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog*, p. 85, mentions that trumpets are depicted on the Carta Catalana of 1375, with the inscription *Aquest son de metall, e aquests feu fer Alexandri, rey gran e poderos*. See also a Russian oral version of the legend summarized by Anderson on p.83: "Er [Alexander Makedonsky] habe ... zwölf ungeheuer grosse Trompeten verfertigen lassen und dieselben vor den Eingängen des Kaukasus so aufgestellt, dass, wenn der Wind hindurch geblasen, sie einen starken Ton von sich gegeben hätten."

11 See Laurent: *Peregrinatores medii aevi* and Monneret de Villard: *Il libro della peregrinazione*.

12 The story is told in Chapter XI (De exitu Tartarorum) of Ricoldo's *Liber peregrinationis*, p. 119 in Laurent's edition.

sudden outburst of an enormous tumult of horses and men accompanied by a terrifying din of trumpets (*maxime strepitus tubarum*). This tumult was artificially caused by wind-force; hence its description as an “artifice of the wind” (*artificium venti*). On a certain day, the story goes on, a Tartar hunter followed his dogs pursuing a hare. Looking for a refuge, the hare slipped into the fortress. The hunter, eager for prey, kept chasing after the hare, paying no heed to the tumult. Near the entrance, fear made him halt in his tracks. At that moment, an owl descended on the gate and began to screech. Then the Tartar hunter said to himself: ‘Where the hare is seeking refuge and the owl is screeching is not a dwelling of humans.’ And so he confidently entered the fortress and found it unoccupied. After he had inspected the fortress and had discovered how the tumult was caused, the hunter returned to his fellow tribesmen and proposed that he would act as their leader and lead them in safety through the fortress. Having gained their freedom in this way, they decided to honour the hare by depicting the animal on their shields and their tents. In the owl they saw an angel of God, assuming that God had called them. Therefore their principal dignitaries wear the feather of an owl in their head-dress.

Compared with this account, the legend on Mercator’s 1569 world map reads as a condensed and garbled extract. Ricoldo’s tumultuous *artificium venti* has been reduced to a pair of bronze trumpet blowers (who conceivably were thought to be activated by wind-force).

Unlike Marco Polo, Ricoldo has a very negative opinion of the Tartars, a view which probably reflects that of the Iraqi Muslims among whom he had lived for several years. He describes the Tartars as a horrible and monstrous people (*horribilem et monstruosam gentem*), differing from all other peoples in appearance, customs and religion. He is puzzled by the fact that no mention is made of so numerous a people in the Bible nor in the works of the ancient historians, and he wonders how it is possible that they have remained hidden for so long. Many authorities, Ricoldo observes, presume that they (the Tartars) originally were the ten tribes of Israel who were deported beyond the mountains of the Medes (*ultra montes Medorum*) by the Assyrian King Tiglath Pileser. When the dominion of the world was transferred to the Greeks, Alexander the Great miraculously closed the mountains so that these tribes were contained behind a barrier. According to Flavius Josephus and Methodius, they will break out at the end of the time (*circa finem mundi*) and wreak great havoc

on the human population (*magnam stragem hominum*). And this is why, Ricoldo remarks, it is widely believed that these apocalyptic raiders are the Tartars. Had the Tartars not emerged from the east, rushing over the mountains which are located at the end of the world (*circa finem mundi*)? Thus the expression *circa finem mundi* was taken to refer, in a spatial sense, to the edges of the known world, in other words: to the north-eastern regions of Asia.

Summarizing a contemporary debate about the origin of the Tartars, Ricoldo recalls two arguments which were adduced in support of the identification of the Tartars with the lost Jewish tribes.¹³ In the first place, it is a well-known fact that any mention of the name of Alexander makes Tartars fly into a blind rage, and secondly: the script the Tartars use is similar to that of the Chaldeans, the Chaldean (Syrian) language being closely related to Hebrew. Against this view, others point out that the Tartars do not seem to have any awareness of Mosaic law nor of the exodus of the Jews from Egypt. Their customs are indeed very different from those of the Jews. They themselves maintain that they are descended from Gog and Magog, and hence they call themselves *Mogoli*, a corruption of *Magogoli*. Was it conceivable, then, Ricoldo wonders, that Alexander had enclosed the Jewish tribes together with Gog and Magog, as Methodius had asserted? Ricoldo confesses that he is unable to solve the riddle: *Solucionem relinquo* (I give up).

Referring to the Tartars' emerging from the mountains "at the end of the world" (*circa finem mundi*), Ricoldo implicitly rejects the theory which located the place where Alexander had locked in the lost Jewish tribes somewhere in the Caucasus. One of the first medieval authorities to put forward this view is Petrus Comestor, the twelfth-century author of the *Historia Scholastica*, a work he finished in 1173 and which was to remain a standard account of sacred history for centuries.¹⁴ In his reworking of the Fourth Book of Kings, Comestor had explained how the Jewish tribes were deported by the Assyrian king to dwellings along the river Gozan beyond the mountains of the Medes and Persians (*iuxta fluvium Gozan ultra montes Medorum et Persarum*). Much later in the story, having progressed to the fifth chapter of the Book of Esther, Comestor narrates that Alexander the

13 Ricoldo da Montecroce, *Liber peregrinationis, chapter X (De errore Tartarorum)*, p.116-19 in Laurent's edition.

14 Petrus Comestor's *Historia scholastica* may be consulted in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 198, pp.1053-1644. The relevant passages are quoted by Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog*, pp. 64-66.

Great, having reached the Caspian Mountains (*ad montes Caspios*), received a delegation of the Ten Jewish Tribes imploring him to lift their containment. Learning that they had openly turned away from the God of Israel and that it had been prophesied that they would forever remain in captivity, Alexander rejected their plea and decided to enclose them still more firmly. Piling up enormous blocks of stone, he began to close off the only passage through the mountains. But seeing that human labour was not sufficient, he prayed to the God of Israel to complete the work, whereupon God moved the two sides of the mountain nearer to each other. This shows, Comestor concludes, that God did not wish them to get out (*non esse Dei voluntatem ut exeant*). It will only be at the end of time (*circa finem mundi*) that they will break out of their confinement and cause havoc among the population of the earth.

It is interesting to contrast Comestor's account with that of another important medieval authority, *viz.* the Dominican friar Vincent of Beauvais (*Vincentius Bellovacensis*), who completed his world history, *Speculum historiale*, around the year 1250. Vincent firmly rejects the idea that Alexander would have enclosed the Jewish Tribes in the Caspian Mountains. He refers to enquiries made by his brothers of the Dominican monastery at Triphelis (Tiflis) in Georgia. The Triphelis friars had established that no Jewish tribes were to be found living in the vicinity of the Caspian Mountains, and that among the Jews of Georgia, no stories were known about Alexander the Great enclosing Jewish tribes in the Caspian Mountains. According to these Jewish informants, their written histories confirmed that the peoples Alexander enclosed had been barbarian cannibals (*quosdam immundos et horribiles ... qui alios homines et etiam seinvicem comedebant*) living near the Caspian Mountains.¹⁵

From the middle of the thirteenth century onwards, the place where Alexander was thought by western authors to have enclosed the Lost Tribes shifted to a region north of the Caucasus, and eventually to some location in Central or North-Eastern Asia. The travel account of Sir John Mandeville may be quoted as an instance of this geographical transfer. Beginning to circulate in Europe from around 1360 onwards, Mandeville's book, in manuscript form or in printed editions, was to remain popular until far into the sixteenth century. The author purports to have lived for some time at the Sultan's court at Cairo. He

15 Vincentius Bellovacensis: *Speculum historiale*, lib. XXIX, cap. 89, quoted by Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog*, p.71.

describes how, after visiting the Holy Land, he went on to travel through the various countries of the East, including China and the Land of the Christian priest-king known as Prester John. As most of the geographical and anthropological information the book contains was shown to have been borrowed directly from the reports of authentic travellers, Mandeville was long considered to have been a plagiarist who had presumably never left his home country. Fairly recently, we have begun to see that the author used a literary device which was not uncommon in his time: the introduction of a *persona* in an otherwise impersonal account. He has enlivened a description of the world, based on available geographical information, by passages in which a traveller recounts his personal reactions and experiences.¹⁶

According to Mandeville, the Jews of the Ten Lost Tribes, who are locally known as Gog and Magog, are shut up in the Caspian hills, which are called *Uber* (or, in other manuscripts, *Ubera*). This clearly refers to the *Ubera Aquilonis*, the 'breasts of the north wind,' which are usually located in the Caspian Mountains, but often much farther north. Mandeville locates Alexander's wall near the Caspian Sea, which he described as the biggest lake in the world, but which he situates in a country lying beyond Cathay (China). According to his account, the enclosed Jews pay tribute to the queen of the Amazons, who "has those hills guarded very well so that they do not cross into her country." People living in that region say that "in the time of the Antichrist" the Jewish tribes "will sally out and do much harm to Christian men." In case his readers are curious to know how they will get out, Mandeville provides them with what he "once heard said":

In the time of Antichrist a fox will make his earth in the very place where King Alexander had the gates of the hills shut up, when he enclosed this people. And this fox will dig for so long in the ground that at last he will emerge among those people. When they see him, they will marvel at him greatly, for they never before have seen an animal like that. [...] they will pursue him until they come to the hole whence he came out. Then they will dig after him for so long that they will come to the gates that

16 See Deluz, *Le livre de Jehan de Mandeville*, Bennett, *Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville*, and Moseley's introduction to his translation of Mandeville's *Travels*. Tzanaki, in *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, studies the medieval reception of the book.

Alexander had stopped up with great stones and cement, and then they will break down these gates and find the way out.¹⁷

Mandeville's fox looks like a reincarnation of Ricoldo's hare. The two stories are essentially the same, their main difference lying in their temporal point of view. Ricoldo looks back on an event in the past, whereas Mandeville refers to a apocalyptic future. Most late medieval versions adopt the same point of view as Mandeville, with or without the anti-semitic bias betrayed by the role which is attributed to the Lost Jewish Tribes at the coming of the Antichrist.

At the beginning of this article I quoted the world map published by Gerard Mercator in 1569. Following the account of Marco Polo, Mercator associated two peoples inhabiting the easternmost regions of Asia with Gog and Magog, whom he identified with the Tartars. He indicated the place where the Tartars had crossed a nearby mountain range on their way to liberty and world power. In 1570, one year after Mercator's world map *ad usum navigantium*, his friend and fellow-cartographer Abraham Ortelius published at Antwerp a collection of maps brought together in one big folio volume, entitled *Theatrum orbis terrarum*. In the history of cartography, Ortelius' *Theatrum* is known as the first atlas. Among the maps in the volume, there is one of *Tartaria sive Magni Chami regnum* (Tartary or the realm of the Great Khan). This map depicts the northern part of Asia including its northeastern extensions (as Ortelius imagined them to be). According to the detailed legends he provided on the map, these regions were the dwelling-places of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Their original domain had been Arsareth; from there they had migrated to a pointed peninsula extending far to the north. Here Ortelius inscribed the names of the tribe of Neftali and, even more to the north, that of Dan. The names of Gog and Magog are not to be found on Ortelius' map of Tartary.

Ortelius had derived his knowledge about the Lost Tribes living in the Asian Far-East from the works of the visionary Renaissance scholar Guillaume Postel (1510-1581). Postel had published his *De la République des Turcs, et là ou l'occasion s'offrera, des meurs et loy de tous Muhamedistes* in 1560. In the second part of this book,¹⁸ he had expounded his theory about the Tartars. According to him, the

17 Mandeville, *Travels*, transl. Moseley, pp.166-67.

18 The second part of this book is entitled: *Histoire et consideration de l'origine, loy, et costume des Tartares, Persiens, Arabes, Turcs, et tous autres Ismaelites ou Muhamediques, dits par nous Mahometains ou Sarrazins*. See also Postel, *Thresor des propheties de l'univers*, pp.182-83.

Tartars, like the Turks, were originally Jews, descendants of the Ten Tribes. Gog and Magog belonged to the tribe of Dan, Rachel's eldest son. Preparing for the coming of the Antichrist, Satan was keeping them in readiness near the North Pole ...

Considered in a wider context, it seems that the tradition of Gog and Magog in its western manifestations reveals an archetypical fear harboured by medieval and early modern Europeans. In its various forms, the tradition represents the myth of an evil people contained somewhere in the East which one day will break loose from its confinement and wreak havoc all over the civilised part of the world. Stories of this type have at least two things in common: they explain how the people in question came to be shut in and how one day they will succeed in breaking out. Thus the combination of elements from the Alexander legend and Ezekiel's eschatological prophesy produced the phantom of Gog and Magog that would continue to haunt the imagination of the West for many centuries.

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