

# The Travels of Bar Sauma

**Sources:** Patricia Kellogg, Marco Polo in China @ [nationalgeographic.com](http://nationalgeographic.com)  
<http://chass.colostate-pueblo.edu/history/seminar/sauma.htm>

**Introduction:** Bar Sauma (also known as Rabban Sauma or Sauma the Monk) was born in Northern China in the first half of the 13th century (probably about 1240). His family were Turks who were allies of the Mongols. By the age of twenty-five, Sauma had taken vows to become a Christian monk. About 1275, Sauma and his student, Markos, left on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. After arriving in Persia, they settled in a local monastery. In 1287, the local Mongol governor sent Sauma to Christian Europe to secure agreements from Roman Catholic and Byzantine leaders for a unified campaign with the Mongols against Muslim control over the Holy Land. Sauma traveled to Rome, where he met with Pope Nicholas IV, and Paris and Bordeaux where he met with the Kings of France and England. Sauma returned to Persia in 1288 and died there in 1294. While Sauma never made it to Jerusalem, he is the first person known to have traveled from Beijing in China to Paris in Western Europe. Sauma kept a journal of his travels. This passage is from chapter VII and tells about Sauma's trip to Europe.

## Activities

1. Read "The Travels of Bar Sauma."
2. Locate the places named in this chronicle and trace the travels of Bar Sauma on a map.
3. Make a list of what you learned about European and Christian societies in this time period.
4. Make a list of questions you have about European and Christian societies in this time period.
5. In your opinion, why would the Mongols want to join with the Christian kingdoms of Europe in a battle against the Arabs and Islam?

1. Arghon (the King of Persia) loved the Christians with his whole heart. And Arghon intended to go into the countries of Palestine and Syria and to subjugate them and take possession of them, but he said to himself, "If the Western Kings, who are Christians, will not help me I shall not be able to fulfil my desire." Thereupon he asked the Catholicus (the leader of the Christian Church in Baghdad) to give him a wise man, "one who is suitable and is capable of undertaking an embassy, that we may send him to those kings." And when the Catholicus saw that there was no man who knew the language except Rabban Sauma, and knowing that he was fully capable of this, he commanded him to go [on the embassy].

2. Then Rabban Sauma said, "I desire this embassy greatly, and I long to go." . . . And Rabban Sauma 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 [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 [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 (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 Sauma went into the city, the king allotted to him a house, that is to say, a mansion in which to dwell. And after Rabban Sauma had rested himself, he went to visit the king . . .

3. And after they had enjoyed food and drink Rabban Sauma asked the king to be allowed to see the churches and the shrines [or tombs] of the Fathers [Patriarchs], and the relics of the saints that were therein. And the king handed Rabban Sauma over to the nobles of his kingdom and they showed him everything that was there. . . . And he departed from Constantinople and went down to the sea. . . . And after two months of toil, and weariness, and exhaustion, Rabban Sauma arrived at the sea-shore, and he landed at the name of which was Napoli (Naples); the name of its king was Irid Shardalo [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 [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. Meanwhile Rabban Sauma 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.

4. 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 (The Pope) [Honorius IV who died in 1287] was dead. . . . Three days later the Cardinals sent and summoned Rabban Sauma 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 Rabban Sauma 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." . . . The Cardinals said unto him, "Where is the Throne of the Catholicus?" He said to them, "In Baghdad. . . . Know ye, O our Fathers, that many of our Fathers have gone into the countries of the Mongols, and Turks, and Chinese and have taught them the Gospel, and at the present time there are many Mongols who are Christians. For many of the sons of the Mongol kings and queens have been baptized and confess Christ. And they have established churches in their military camps, and they pay honour to the Christians, and there are among them many who are believers. Now the king [of the Mongols], who is joined in the bond of friendship with the Catholicus, hath the desire to take Palestine, and the countries of Syria, and he demandeth from you help in order to take Jerusalem. He hath chosen me and hath sent me to you because, being a Christian, my word will be believed by you. . . ."

5. Then Rabban Sauma 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. . . ."

6. Afterwards they went to the country of Pariz (Paris), to king Fransis [Philippe IV le Bel]. And the king sent out a large company of men to meet them, and they brought them into the city with great honour and ceremony. Now the territories of the French king were in extent more than a month's journey. And the king of France assigned to Rabban Sauma a place wherein to dwell, and three days later sent one of his Amirs to him and summoned him to his presence. And when he had come the king stood up before him and paid him honour, and said unto him, "Why hast thou come? And who sent thee?" And Rabban Sauma said unto him, "King Arghon and the Catholicus of the East have sent me concerning the matter of Jerusalem." And he showed him all the matters which he knew, and he gave him the letters which he had with him, and the gifts, that is to say, presents which he had brought. And the king of France answered him, saying, "If it be indeed so that the Mongols, though they are not Christians, are going to fight against the Arabs for the capture of Jerusalem, it is meet especially for us that we should fight [with them], and if our Lord willeth, go forth in full strength."

7. And they went forth from that place, that is to say, from Paris, to go to the king of England,. . . . And having arrived in twenty days at their city [Bordeaux], the inhabitants of the city went forth to meet them, and they asked them, "Who are ye?" And Rabban Sauma and his companions replied, "We are ambassadors, and we have come from beyond the eastern seas, and we are envoys of the King, and of the Patriarch, and the Kings of the Mongols." And the people made haste and went to the king and informed him [of their arrival], and the king welcomed them gladly, and the people introduced them into his presence. . . . And King Edward gave us many gifts and money for the expenses of the road. And from that place we came to the city of Genoa, in order to pass the winter there. And when we arrived there we saw a garden which resembled Paradise; its winter was not [too] cold, and its summer is not [too] hot. Green foliage is found therein all the year round, and trees, the leaves of which do not fall, and which are not stripped of their fruit. There is in the city a kind of vine which yields grapes seven times a year, but the people do not press out wine from them.

8. At the end of the winter there came from the country of Almadan (Allemagne) a man of high degree, who was the "Visitor" of Mar Papa, and who was on his way to Rome. And when he heard that Rabban Sauma was there, he went to visit him and salute him. And when he entered [his house] they gave each other "Peace!" and they kissed each other in the love of Christ. And the Visitor said unto Rabban Sauma, "I have come to see thee. For I have heard concerning thee, that thou art a good and wise man, and also that thou hast the desire to go to Rome." And Rabban Sauma said unto him, "What shall I say unto thee, O beloved and noble man? I have come on an embassy from King Arghon, and the Catholicus of the East to Mar Papa on the subject of Jerusalem. Behold I have been a year of days [since I came], and a Pope hath not sat. When I go back what shall I say and what answer can I make to the Mongols? Those, whose hearts are harder than flint, wish to take the Holy City, and those to whom it belongeth never allow the matter to occupy their minds, and moreover, they do not consider this thing to be of any importance whatsoever! We shall go and say we know not." Then the Visitor said unto him, "Thy words are true. I myself will go and show in their integrity the Cardinals all the words which thou hast spoken, and will urge them to appoint a Pope."

9. And that Visitor departed from him and went to Rome, and he explained the matter to the king, that is to say Mar Papa, and that same day the Pope sent a messenger to Rabban Sauma and his companions [bidding] them to go to him. And as soon as ever the messenger had arrived, they set out for Rome with the greatest readiness and they arrived there in fifteen days. . . . And when they arrived Mar Papa sent out a Metropolitan bishop and a large company of men to meet them. And starightway Rabban Sauma went into the presence of Mar Papa, who was seated on his throne. And he drew nigh to the Pope, bowing down to the ground as he did so, and he kissed his feet and his hands, and he withdrew walking backwards, with his hands clasped [on his breast]. . . .

10. And he (the Pope) gave to Rabban Sauma a small piece of the apparel of our Lord Christ, and a piece of the cape that is to say, kerchief of my Lady Mary, and some small fragments of the bodies of the saints that were there. And he sent to Mar Yahgh-Allaha a crown for his head which was of fine gold and was inlaid with precious stones; and sacred vestments made of red cloth through which ran threads of gold; and socks and sandals on which real pearls were sewn; and the ring from his finger; and a "Pethikha" or Bull which authorized him to exercise Patriarchal dominion over all the Children of the East. And he gave to Rabban Sauma a "Pethikha" which authorized him to act as Visitor-General over all Christians. And Mar Papa blessed him and he caused to be assigned to him for expenses on the road one thousand, five hundred mathkale of red gold. And to King Arghon he sent certain gifts. And he embraced Rabban Sauma and kissed him and dismissed him. And Rabban Sauma thanked our Lord who had held him to be worthy of such blessings as these.

11. And Rabban Sauma returned. He crossed the seas which he crossed when he came, and he arrived in peace at the place where King Arghon was, sound in body, and with soul safely kept. And he gave to him the Letter of Blessings, and the gifts which he had brought from Mar Papa and from all the kings of the Franks. And he showed him how they had welcomed him with love, and how they had hearkened gladly to the Pukdane (or Royal Dispatches) which he had carried [to them], and he related the wonderful things which he had seen, and the power of [their] kingdom[s].