**Fictional Plots, Non-events, and**

**The Historical Value of Medieval Chronicles**

Medieval chronicles can sometimes be treacherous historical sources due to their authors’ lack of knowledge or inherent biases. My talk today deals with two non-events reported by medieval chroniclers:

* First, the suspected Jewish-Mongol plot, as chronicled by Matthew Paris;
* And, second, the alleged French plot prior to the election of Pope Clement V, as chronicled by Giovanni Villani.

Beyond both reporting non-events, these two chroniclers inhabited different, indeed, perhaps even opposing spheres within the medieval world. Matthew Paris (1200–1259), the historian of St. Albans, who wrote the seminal *Chronica Majora*, one of the most important universal histories of thirteenth-century England, was a devoted member of the Benedictine Order, never leaving the confines of his monastery. Giovanni Villani (1276–1348), in stark contrast, was an Italian [banker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bank), businessman, and diplomat, who wrote the [*Nuova Cronica*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuova_Cronica) on the [history of Florence](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Florence). That they were both were contemporary to the non-events they reported intensifies the question about their motives.

**Matthew Paris and the Jewish-Mongol Plot**

In 1241, Mathew Paris offered up a mysterious tale, with elements combining the most dangerous “threats” to Christendom then: the Mongols – also known as Tartars – together with the age-old treacherous foe, the Jews. According to Paris, some Jews, having met secretly for the purpose of conspiring against the Holy Roman Empire, decided to procure as many arms as they could to facilitate the Mongol victory. Let us leave telling the story up to Paris:

*In order to conceal their treachery, securely stowed them* [the arms] *away in casks. Then, they openly told the Christian chiefs, under whose dominion they were, that these people, commonly called Tartars, were Jews, and would not drink wine unless made by Jews and of this they have informed us, and with great earnestness have begged to be supplied with some wine made by us, their brethren. We, however, desiring to remove from among us these inhuman public enemies, and to release you Christians from their impending tyrannical devastation, have prepared about thirty casks full of deadly intoxicating wine, to be carried to them as soon as possible.*

*The Christians therefore permitted these wicked Jews to make this wicked present to their wicked enemies. When, however, these said Jews had reached a distant part of Germany, and were about to cross a certain bridge with their casks, the master of the bridge…bored a hole through one of the casks, but no liquor flowed therefrom; and becoming certain of their treachery, he took off the hoops of the cask, and breaking it open, discovered that it was full of arms. At this sight he cried out, “Oh, unheard-of treachery, why do we allow such people to live among us* [*?*]*.”*

Paris took care to finish the story on a “happy” note since the Jews were condemned to perpetual imprisonment or, perhaps even more appealingly, to be slain with their own swords.

One should note the lack of any corroboration of this story in other sources, either Christian or Jewish, notwithstanding the attention the supposed plot and the grave punishment would have attracted had they truly occurred. Most historians therefore consider Paris’s report of the Jewish-Mongol plot as fiction, one of the many inaccuracies that plague the *Chronica Majora*. Still, as is also claimed by Matthew Paris’s biographer, Richard Vaughan, “as a mirror of his age, Matthew is second to none.” With this assessment in mind, the imaginary tale should be reevaluated, not as a historical fact, but as a reflection of an array of contemporary attitudes that included:

* A perception of Jews, fifty years before King Edward I expelled them from England, as perfidious and prone to treachery;
* A belief that the cunning Jews were after revenge and were diabolical plotters;
* Dissatisfaction with the tolerant policy of Christian rulers who permitted a Jewish presence in their kingdoms, thereby endangering their loyal Christian subjects; and
* A belief in the opportune intervention of divine providence, which safeguarded the Christians from the Jewish plot.

Even in light of these contemporary assumptions, there remain some questions. For instance, why would Paris imagine that the Jews, in pursuing revenge, would enlist the help of the Mongols? Were there any points of contact between these two populations that could justify such a belief? To try and answer these questions, let us turn to the main protagonists of his account.

Paris did not mince his words when describing the Mongols imperiling the borders of Christendom. In 1240 he wrote:

*The men are inhuman and of the nature of beasts, rather to be called monsters than men, thirsting after and drinking blood and tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and human beings…They have no human laws, know no mercy, and are more cruel than lions or bears*…(C.M. iv, 76–77).

The fears aroused by the string of Mongol victories were intensified by the inability of Christendom, its leaders in particular, to put forward a united front. Indeed, the Investiture Contest took much of the energies of both pope and emperor, who left the faithful to fend for themselves in the face of the Mongol threat. The weakness of Christendom in the face of the relentless advance of the Mongols, coupled with Christian leaders’ failure to find a suitable response, eventually drove people to escape into the world of myth. Medieval chroniclers, Matthew Paris among them, could readily find answers for their distress in a mythical, far more amicable, and less frightening world. The Jewish-Mongol plot of 1241 was part of this flight to the imaginary, initially prompted by a genuine search for details about the external threat. Frustrated in their efforts to find relevant information, chroniclers returned to familiar stereotypes that had proved effective in former crises. In parallel to the Mongol threat without, a scapegoat within was needed, and the “enemies of the true faith,” mainly Jews, were, as always, a convenient target. Paris’s testimony continues as follows:

*These Saracens* (sic) *the memory of whom is detestable, are believed to have been of the ten tribes, who abandoned the law of Moses and followed after the golden calves, and Alexander also endeavored to shut them up in the precipitous Caspian mountains… As in the time of the government of Moses, their rebellious hearts were perverted to an evil way of thinking…*

The casting of the Tartars as Saracens is significant. The term became polemical during the Crusading Period, with the lawlessness of the desert nomads ascribed to Muslims, the descendants of the biblical Cain. Though obscuring any clear differentiation between the polytheistic Mongols and the monotheistic Muslims, the message was rather clear: each could serve as an instrument of Providence in chastising a sinful Christendom. The myth of the ten lost biblical tribes also served as a means of comprehending the mysterious threat, which gradually became associated with medieval Jewry.

It should be noted that from the Jewish perspective, the timing of the Mongol invasion was meaningful. According to ancient tradition, the year AD 1240 (5000 in the Jewish calendar) was expected to witness the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. Paris further presents the first-hand testimony of a Hungarian bishop, according to whom the Mongols,

*…belong to Gog and Magog…they do not believe on anything but they have Jewish characters which they began to understand when they went on to conquer the world…They were taught these characters by ….Pharisees and Sadducees.* (C.M. *Additamenta,* vi, 75–76)

The alleged recourse to Hebrew characters by the Mongols thus encouraged the Jews to place their eschatological hopes in them. In a rather convoluted way, in the minds of European Jewry, Genghis Khan’s successors came to represent a powerful army sent by God to defeat the Christians. The Jews’ deep-rooted longing for the now impending redemption – strengthened by the Mongols’ advance – was well known to their contemporaries. Some chronicles indeed describe the Jews’ ecstasy in light of the imminent arrival of their Messiah, and several communities – Prague among them – collected money to ensure the Mongols’ final victory.

In this rather tortuous way, Paris’s report provides some keys for understanding the defense mechanisms both Christians and Jews developed in the face of the same external threat. The use of well-known symbols and images –perfidious Jews from the Christian perspective and, conversely, imminent redemption from the Jewish perspective, helped both communities escape the frightening reality of the Mongol threat. The centuries-old foes were now united in the world of fantasy. Moreover, albeit perhaps in a more ambiguous way, the Jewish-Mongol plot reflects Paris’s personal effort to understand the challenge presented by the Mongols’ repeated victories. In this context, the plot between the treacherous Jews at home and the mysterious Mongols from beyond the limits of Christendom could transform the enigmatic enemy into a more familiar and, as such, less frightening threat.

The second example I would like to speak about is a French plot reported by Giovanni Villani regarding an alleged agreement between Philip the Fair, King of France, and Bertrand de Got, Archbishop of Bordeaux, ensuring the archbishop’s election to the Apostolic See.

Villani recounts how Cardinal Niccolò Albertini da Prato, whom he portrays as a manipulative and sinister prelate, promoted Bertrand’s candidacy in the conclave. At first, the cardinal’s initiative seemed impracticable. Indeed, due to the damage the Capetians had inflicted on his family property, Bertrand’s animosity towards them make him less willing – if at all – to reach any compromise with the Court of France. On his part, Cardinal da Prato, considering Bertrand a man “lacking honor and nobility, since he was a Gascon, who are essentially rapacious,” urged the French king to reach an agreement with da Prato’s candidate even before the conclave. The cardinal’s advice supposedly led to a secret meeting between the king and archbishop in St. Jean d’Angély, where Philip presented the conditions for royal support:

* Reacceptance into the Church of the king and his supporters–a vital step for the *Rex Christianissimus*;
* A formal denunciation of Pope Boniface VIII’s memory;
* A five-year tithe to finance the war in Flanders;
* The nomination of cardinals friendly to France; and
* A “mysterious and great” secret clause to be communicated to the archbishop in due time. (This secret clause hints at the Templars, who Philip the Fair arrested two years later, and whose Order was disbanded by papal edict in the Council of Vienne.)

According to Vittani, Bertrand de Got’s obsequious response satisfied the king and ensured Philip’s support: “You will command and I will obey, and it will always be settled in this way.”

In fact, we have conclusive evidence that the supposed meeting between the king and the archbishop in St. Jean d’Angely never occurred. Nonetheless, most historians, have judged Clement V’s pontificate as having been subservient to the will and interests of Philip the Fair. Edgard Boutaric thus reflects a common view in his claim that, “*the pontificate of Clement V was ... a continuous chain of concessions to the endless exigencies of the king*.” Heinrich Finke echoes this premise, writing, “*no pope of the later middle ages was more subservient to a king*,” a conclusion shared by Joseph R. Strayer. Such evaluations reflect, in one way or another, Villani’s criticism of the alliance between *rex et sacerdos*, which he considered detrimental to the Church. In other words, despite the fictitious nature of Villani’s report, it succeeded in leaving its mark on medieval and modern historians. A difficult question, therefore, remains as to why this non-event had such a strong influence on the historiography of Clement’s pontificate.

Bertrand de Got was elected to the papacy on June 5, 1305, following an eleven-month interregnum. It was the cardinals’ inability to reach a consensus that eventually facilitated his election. Indeed, Bertrand’s good relations with both Boniface VIII and Philip IV made it easier for the opposing factions at the conclave to consider the archbishop as their own candidate. However, Bertrand’s election was not accomplished without external interference. Shortly after Clement’s death, Cardinal Napoleone Orsini confessed that he had asked for and eventually received the Capetian blessing for Bertrand’s candidacy. Only after obtaining a positive response from Philip the Fair did the Cardinal secure the election of the Archbishop of Bordeaux, who still received only ten of the fifteen votes, the bare minimum needed.

While recognizing that Bertrand de Got’s election represented a compromise of sorts, medieval chroniclers acknowledged the canonical validity of the procedure and, ultimately, even reported his election by unanimous vote.. However, the pro-French considerations in his papacy were known in the Italian peninsula and incited extreme reactions in light of his permanent absence from Rome, which ushered in the decades of the Avignon papacy. Villani’s report, then, while fictitious, faithfully reflects anti-French trends in the Italian peninsula. Dante Alighieri, for example, depicted St. Peter’s anger at his see being usurped by a Gascon, who had turned his sepulcher into a “*cloaca del sangue e de la puzza*.” Clement’s assiduousness in furthering his family’s interests, together with his personal instability and lust for power, gave rise to the claims that the papal curia had been subjugated to the worship of avarice. Comparing Clement to a “new Jason,” who had introduced pagan and venal practices into the Temple of the Lord, Dante also points to Clement’s worst vice – his total submission to the king of France.

A closer analysis of contemporary documentation, to which I devoted my book, offers a more complex picture of Clement V’s pontificate. The pope may have overtly supported the king of France, but he often followed an independent policy, based on his understanding of the political situation. Elected to the papacy only two years after the Anagni affair, when the French king’s emissaries held Pope Boniface VIII captive for three consecutive days, Clement was more conscious than his predecessors of the limitations the emerging national monarchies presented. While this lecture cannot address all the implications of Clement’s pontificate, I would like to clarify some crucial events. He successfully safeguarded papal plenitude of power against the Capetian efforts to damage Boniface’s memory. Furthermore, the Council of Vienne that he convened transferred the Templars’ patrimony to the Hospitallers, thus actually frustrating Philip’s plans while serving the needs of the Crusades. Whether in the election of Cardinals, the papal renunciation of the tithe, and the renewed concordat with the court of France, Clement tried to find a middle road between royal and ecclesiastical interests. Clement thus paved the way for the Church’s future support not in *Europa Christiana*,but among the emerging national kingdoms, France and England at their head, which were very protective of their independence.

To conclude, the plots reported by Matthew Paris and Giovanni Villani represent non-events that challenge scholars and which have yet to be deciphered. Regardless of whether Matthew failed while Villani succeeded in producing a reliable report, in both cases, they chronicled a non-event, and as such, these reports should arguably be discarded. However, I strongly believe that making sense of these sources is not only our duty, but would also prove to be a source of immense satisfaction. It is true that our medieval chroniclers were not the most successful heirs of Herodotus. But perhaps they nevertheless did follow in the footsteps of the Greek historian in their attempt to understand the inner logic of historical developments within the limitations imposed by their Catholic faith. Their reports of non-events should therefore be regarded and, consequently, evaluated as faithful reflections of the *zeitgeist* within which they were written.