

## Some further notes on Marco Polo's Tatar Gods

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Marco Polo's travelogue, *Devisement dou monde* 'the description of the world'<sup>1</sup> is a very important source for understanding the marvels and misteries of the - at that time - still rather unknown Orient, especially with regard to the Ta(r)tars i.e. the Mongols.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the spiritual world of the Ta(r)tars, besides a high and celestial God, known from other sources as *tenggeri*,<sup>3</sup> Marco Polo offers a detailed description of another deity.

The relevant passages are reported below from Ramusio's 1559 version:<sup>4</sup>

*Of the celestial and terrestrial deities of the Tartars, and of their modes of worship, of their dress, arms, courage in battle, patience under privations, and obedience to their leaders.*

The doctrine and faith of the Tartars are these. They believe in a deity whose nature is sublime and heavenly. To him they burn incense in censers, and offer up prayers for the enjoyment of intellectual and bodily health. They worship another likewise, named *Natigay*, whose image, covered with felt or other cloth, every individual preserves in his house. To this deity they associate a wife and children, placing the former on his left side, and the latter before him, in a posture of reverential salutation. Him they consider as the divinity who presides over their terrestrial concerns, protects their children, and guards their cattle and their grain. They shew him great respect, and at their meals they never omit to take a fat morsel of the flesh, and with it to grease the mouth of the idol, and at the same time the mouths of its wife and children. They then throw out of the door some of the

<sup>1</sup> Further names in use to designate Marco Polo's travelogue are: *The travels of Marco Polo*, *The Book of the marvels of the World and*, in Italian, *Milione*.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview on the Marco Polo manuscript tradition, see: [http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/books/Ramusio/main/intro\\_02.html](http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/books/Ramusio/main/intro_02.html) and Simion (2017). Editions include (alphabetically): Benedetto (1928), Charignon (1924-1928), Eusebi & Burgio (2018), Kappler (2004), Marsden (1818), Ménard (2001-2009), Milanese (1980), Moule & Pelliot (1938), Pauthier (1865), Simion (2019), Yule & Cordier (1929); in Mongolian Dorj et al. (1987), and Bat-Uchral & Ragagnin & Simion (2019); further see [http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/books/Ramusio/main/biblio\\_02\\_ediz.html](http://virgo.unive.it/ecf-workflow/books/Ramusio/main/biblio_02_ediz.html).

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of *tenggeri*, corresponding to Old Turkic *teŋri* – documented in the Orkhon inscriptions (VIII c.) – is still debated; see Georg (2001) for a possible paleosiberian origin.

<sup>4</sup> On the importance of Ramusio's version, see Ragagnin & Simion (in print).

liquor in which the meat has been dressed, as an offering to the other spirits. This being done, they consider that their deity and his family have had their proper share, and proceed to eat and drink with out further ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

(Marsden 1818: 209-210)

Natigay also occurs in R II 26 1-2. This chapter is attested only in R and, partially, in Z 45 10-13.

*Of the religion if the Tartars, of the opinions they hold respecting the soul; and of some of their customs.*

As has already been observed, these People are idolaters, and for deities, each person has a tablet fixed up against a high part of the wall of his chamber, upon which is written a name, that serves to denote the high, celestial, and sublime God; and to this they pay daily adoration, with incense burning. Lifting up their hands and then striking their faces against the floor three times, they implore from him the blessings of sound intellect and health of body; without any further petition. Below this, on the floor, they have a statue which they name *Natigai*, which they consider as the God of all terrestrial things, or, whatever is produced from the earth. They give him a wife and children, and worship him in a similar manner, burning incense, raising their hands, and bending to the floor. To him they pray for seasonable weather, abundant crops, increase of family, and the like.<sup>6</sup>

(Marsden 1818: 381)

<sup>5</sup> Original Ramusio's passage in Italian: *La legge et fede de' Tartari è tale: dicono esservi il Dio alto, sublime et celeste, al qual ogni giorno col torribolo et incenso non dimandano altro se non buon intelletto et sanità; ne hanno poi un altro che chiamano Natigay, ch'è a modo di una statua coperta di feltre o vero di altro, et ciascheduno ne tiene uno in casa sua. Fanno a questo dio la moglie et figliuoli, et pongongli la moglie dalla parte sinistra et li figliuoli avanti di lui, quali pare che li facciano riverenza. Questo dio lo chiamano dio delle cose terrene, il quale custodisce et guarda i loro figliuoli et conserva le bestie et le biade, al quale fanno grande riverenza et honore; et sempre quando mangiano tolgono della parte delle carni grasse, et con quelle ungono la bocca del dio, della moglie et de' figliuoli; dappoi gettano del brodo delle carni fuor della porta agli altri spiriti. Fatto questo, dicono che'l loro dio con la sua famiglia ha havuto la parte sua, et poscia mangiano et bevono a lor piacere.* (R I 46 1-4)

<sup>6</sup> Original Ramusio's passage in Italian: *Et come habbiamo detto di sopra, questi popoli sono idolatri, et per suoi dei tutti hanno una tavola posta alta nel pariete della sua camera, sopra la qual è scritto un nome che rappresenta Dio alto, celeste et sublime: et quivi ogni giorno con il thuribulo dell'incenso lo adorano in questo modo, che, levate le mani in alto, sbattono tre volte i denti, pregandolo che li dia buon intelletto et sanità, et altro non li dimandano. Dappoi, giuso in terra, hanno una statua che si chiama Natigai, qual è dio delle cose terrene che nascono sopra tutta la terra, et li fanno una moglie et figliuoli, et l'adorano nell'istesso modo, con il thuribulo et sbattendo i denti et alzando le mani, et a questo li dimandano temperie dell'aere et frutti della terra, figliuoli et simil cose.* (R II 26 1-2)

Further variants of the theonym *Natigai* attested in other Polian versions are respectively: *Nacygai* (F); *Nacigay* (Fr); *Versigay* (K); *Nacigay* (L); *Nacigai* (P); *Natigai* (TB); *Nagani* (V); *Nacigai* (VA); *Natagai* (VB), e *Naçagay* (Z).

As already pointed out by Mostaert (1957) the most correct Polian form is *Načigai* attested in (F) and (P). Formally, it corresponds to *Načigai eke* ‘Mother Earth’ documented in a buddhist fragment from 1312 belonging to the Turfan collection of Mongolic documents preserved in Berlin; see Haenisch (1954). The Polian forms displaying *-ti-* clearly are paleographic errors, where *t* was misspelled for *c*; therefor see Cardona (1975: 678) and Barbieri (2004: 225). Furthermore, it should be pointed out that there are no etymological relations among *Načigai*, Turkic *Ötüken*<sup>7</sup>, Mongolic *Etügen*<sup>8</sup>, and the teonym *Itoga*, documented in Giovanni da Pian del Carpine’s *Historia Mongalorum* in the section dedicated to the religious practices, sins, divinations, purification and death ceremonies of the Mongols (III 10).<sup>9</sup>

The problem that remains to be solved concerns the fact that Marco Polo’s *Načigai* is described as a male God, whereas Mongolic *Načigai* is unmistakably a goddess.

His masculinity and the fact that *Načigai* has a wife and children would seem to be the result of confusion on the part of the Venetian traveler. Marco Polo probably had confused memories of various forms of *ongyon* he had seen among the Mongols.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he may also had received further information on similar animistic customs and beliefs of populations neighboring the Mongols who, perhaps, may have worshipped an earthly male divinity.

In this regard it should be mentioned that in the Siberian pantheon there are male deities whose description corresponds to a *Tellus Pater* i.e. “Father Earth” (cf. Harva 1938: 243, 247). For instance, the Turkic Altai people of southern Siberia believe in *Ülgän* or *Bai Ülgän*, a God of good, antagonist of *Erlık*, the God of the underworld. Eliade (1964: 198) pointed out that *Ülgän*, although endowed with celestial attributes, is not exactly a supreme uranic divinity. He is distinct from *Tengere Kairakan* the Altai supreme Uranian God corresponding to *Tenggri* ‘Heaven God’, the supreme Uranian God of the Turkic and Mongol peoples. *Ülgän* rather has the characteristics of a God of the atmosphere and fertility, and has a consort and numerous offsprings. Its function is to protect the fertility of the flocks and the abundance of crops.

<sup>7</sup> The toponym *Ötüken* occurs in various passages of the Old Turkic Orkhon inscriptions, without precise geographical indications. In Mahmūd al-Kāšyarī’s encyclopedic work *Dīvān Luḡāt at-Turk* (Compendium of the Turkic dialects) the *Ötüken* is the name of a place in the deserts of the Tatār near Uighur (Dankoff & Kelly 1982: 159). Also cf. de Rachewiltz (2004: 1004).

<sup>8</sup> On *Etügen*, see Lot-Falck (1956).

<sup>9</sup> As for the etymological trajectory of *Itoga*, most likely it originated from Turkic *ıduq* ‘holy’, a deverbal nominal formation from *ıd-* ‘to send’. Although the literally meaning of *ıduq* is ‘sent’, already in Old Turkic sources it meant ‘dedicated to God’ and ‘holy’ (Clauson 1972: 46). Thus, the adjective *ıduq* both signifies ‘holy’ and ‘holy thing/something holy’. Worth noticing in this respect is that the Mongolic term *udayan* ‘shamaness’ seems to be connected with the same Turkic form. Therefore cf. Janhunen (1986: 101). Further also see Ragagnin (2018).

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, also see Yule (1921: 258).

### Abbreviations

F = XIV c. Franco-Italian version, handed down by the manuscript fr. 1116 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France and by a fragment, signed f, in a private collection

L = XIII c. Latin summary handed down by 6 manuscripts

LT = XIV c. Latin version resulting from the contamination of TA and P, handed down only by the manuscript lat. 3195 held in the Bibliothèque de France in Paris

P = Francesco Pipino OP' early XIV c. Latin translation of VA; it is handed down by around 60 versions

TA = early XIII c. Tuscanian version, handed down by 5 manuscripts

V = late XIV c. Venetian version handed down only by the manuscript Hamilton 424 held in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin

VA = Medieval northern vernacular Italian version, handed down by five manuscripts

VB = XV c. Venetian humanistic rehash handed down by two codices and one fragment

Z = Latin version handed down by the Zelada ms. 49.20 (second half of XV c.) preserved in the Archivo y Biblioteca Capitulares of Toledo

LT = contaminated version which uses TA and P simultaneously. It is preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (ms. Lat. 3195)

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