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The Mongol khanates

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Dear reader,

This is a first draft of the chapter on the Mongol khanates for the textbook on the history of international relations that I'm working on. Chapters on the India, Africa, Europe and the Americas will follow. Since this is a draft I'm very keen to hear your comments. Get in touch: erik@ringmar.net

The book will be published by Open Book Publishers, out of Cambridge, hopefully next year. It will be freely downloadable as a pdf but you can also buy it as a regular book. All the material I have written so far is available at <http://www.irhistory.info/>

yours,

Erik

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The Mongol khanates

In the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries, the Mongols created the largest empire the world has ever known. In 1206, Temüjin, an orphan and a former slave, united the many feuding clans which occupied the steppes north of China and declared himself "Genghis Khan," meaning "fierce ruler." Once this feat was accomplished he turned to military conquests abroad. The Mongols armies were spectacularly successful. Their soldiers, consisting only of cavalry, were fast, highly disciplined and well organized, and they wielded their bows and lances while still on horseback. Since most land between Europe and Asia was sparsely populated and quite unprotected, the Mongols quickly overran enormous areas while most of the actual warfare consisted of sieges of towns. Once they had mastered the art of siege warfare, the cities too fell into their hands. But the Mongols fought in the jungles of Southeast Asia too, they built a navy, and tried to invade both Java and Japan. In 1241 they completely obliterated the European armies that had gathered against them and in 1258 they besieged, sacked and burned Baghdad. At the height of their power, the Mongols controlled an area stretching from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean, northward to Siberia, eastward and southward into the Indian subcontinent, Indochina and Iran, and westwards as far as the Arabian peninsula and the coast of the Mediterranean. It was a territory about the size of the African continent, considerably larger than North America, and although the Mongols counted only about one million people at the time, the lands they once controlled today comprise a majority of the world's population.

The Mongols were known as merciless warriors who destroyed the cities they captured, sparing no humans and occasionally killing also their cats and dogs. Yet apart from their military superiority, they had nothing much to impart to the rest of the world. The Mongols made no technological breakthroughs, founded no religions, built no buildings, and their craftsmen had not even mastered simple techniques such as

weaving, pottery or bread-making. Rather, by conquering such a vast territory, and by unifying it under the same law, they managed to connect parts of the world which previously never had been connected, or not connected as closely and efficiently. The results were profound and revolutionary. Throughout their empire, the Mongols guaranteed the security of travelers and they encouraged trade by reducing taxes and facilitating travel. Indeed, during the so called *Pax mongolica*, the “Mongol peace,” exchanges along the caravan routes of Central Asia became more intense than ever. This was when the Mongol court in Karakorum would exchange diplomats with the pope in Rome; when Persian businessmen would go to China on regular visits; and when Ibn Battuta, the celebrated Moroccan globetrotter, would travel everywhere it was possible to go.

The Mongol empire lasted only some 150 years. The empire began to crack already by the middle of the thirteenth-century and in the early fourteenth-century it was disintegrating. In 1368, the Mongols lost control over their most prized possession – China. The cause of this decline had less to do with external enemies than with domestic strife. When Genghis Khan's grandchildren by the middle of the thirteenth-century were ready to take over the realm, the question of succession turned out to be impossible to settle. The outcome was a civil war which turned brothers against each other and eventually resulted in the division of the empire into four separate parts – the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Yuan dynasty in China, and the Chagatai khanate in the traditional Mongolian heartlands. Although these entities were intimately related to each other in various ways, there were also constant conflicts between them. The Black Death, a contagious disease which spread quickly along the caravan routes in the fourteenth-century, decimated the population and made travel and exchange into deadly activities. At the end of the fourteenth-century, the Mongol empire was once again a small kingdom confined to the steppes north of China and its last remnant was swallowed up by the Qing dynasty in 1635. Other vestiges lived on, most successfully in

the form of the Mughal empire in India, founded in 1526 by Babur who counted himself as a direct descendant of Genghis Khan.

From Temüjin to Genghis Khan

The boy who was to become Genghis Khan was born in 1162, not far from the current Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, and given the name Temüjin. As legend would have it, he was born with a clot of blood in his hand, a sign that he was to become a great conqueror. *[Read more: The Secret History of the Mongols]* Like all Mongolian boys, Temüjin learned to ride a horse at a very early age, to tend the family's animals and to hunt. His father was a chieftain, and well respected within the society of nomads, but there were many chieftains on the steppes and they were often in conflict with each other. Indeed, the people we call the Mongols were only one of many nomadic tribes, and there were several others – Merkits, Naimans, Keraites, Tatars and Uyghurs. Each group was divided into clans and lineages, and many of the groups were in constant conflict with each other – over grazing rights, horses, women and treasure. They traded with each other to be sure, but they also raided each other's camps looking for women to take as wives and concubines or for children to capture and keep as domestic slaves. Indeed kidnapping was a common way to obtain a wife, especially for those who were too poor to be considered eligible husbands. The able-bodied men were usually the first to flee if a camp was under attack since they ran the highest risk of being killed and since the future of the group depended on their labor. Yet as a rule this constant, low-intensity, warfare did not result in many casualties. The object was to obtain resources, not to kill people or to conquer land. In fact, land mattered to the nomads only as pasture for grazing, and even the best pasture had to be given up once the animals were ready to move on.

Then disaster struck. Temüjin's father was killed, and when Temüjin was only eight he and his mother and siblings were cast out by their clan who decided that they did not

have enough food to feed them. Instead they were forced to eek out a living gathering plants on the steppe and hunting in the forests. Remarkably the family survived, although their camp too was raided and when Temüjin was a teenager he was taken prisoner and made into a slave. After he managed to escape he got married to a girl, Börte, to whom he had been betrothed already while his father was still alive. Yet Börte was soon abducted by a rivaling tribe. Together with a small band of followers, Temüjin successfully attacked the kidnappers and took back his wife. He meted out a terrible revenge on the perpetrators by killing the men who had offended against him and by enslaves their women and children.

His skills as a successful raider soon attracted wider attention and before long Temüjin concluded an advantageous treaty with a one of the traditional chieftains which gave him access to a far larger contingent of men. This was the band of warriors which he leveraged into an ever-increasing force as every successful raid attracted ever more of a following. The people who were loyal to him, he treated as members of his own family while those who crossed or betrayed him were treated without mercy. In 1206, Temüjin called a *kurultai*, an assembly of the leading chieftains, and here he was elected *khagan*, the khan of khans. He took the name "Genghis Khan," meaning "fierce leaders," and the people he united came to be called "Mongols" after the name of his own tribe. Genghis Khan was now the supreme leader of perhaps one million people and some 15 to 20 million horses, sheep and goats.

Once in power Genghis Khan put in place a legal and institutional framework which would help break the cycle of violence in Mongol society and prevent the kinds of events that had wreaked havoc with his own life. One aim was to abolish the time-honored divisions into tribes, clans and lineages. Genghis Khan did this by doing away with aristocratic titles and by promoting people according to merit. He was also keen to advance the careers of people from other tribes than his own – or indeed, once the foreign conquests had begun, of other people than Mongols – and in fact most of his

inner circle of advisers were not members of his own family. Genghis Khan also decimalized the army, as it were. He divided the men into *arban*, groups of ten men drawn from different sections of Mongol society, and the *arban* were ordered to live and fight together as loyally as brothers. That is, they were treated as families and thereby as the new units not only of military but also of social life. The ten-groups were then multiplied by 10 to produce groups of 100, 1,000 and 10,000 soldiers. A group of 10,000 soldiers was known as a *tumen*.

A new legal code, the *yassa*, was also established which made a long range of actions into criminal offenses, in particular those which Genghis Khan knew to be a cause of conflict. Thus the abduction of wives, and the sale of women, were declared illegal together with the enslavement of fellow Mongols. Theft of cattle or horses was made a capital crime and anyone who found a lost animal was obliged to return it or be condemned to death as a thief. There were further laws against raiding and looting and regulations for where and during which times of the year animals could be hunted. All children, moreover, were regarded as the legitimate offspring of their parents regardless of the circumstances under which they had been conceived and born. Freedom of religion was official recognized by the Mongol authorities. Although Genghis Khan himself was a Tengrist, there were Muslims, Christians and Buddhists among his fellow Mongols, and, as Genghis Khan realized, only complete freedom of religion could prevent conflicts among them. *[Read more: Tengrism]* The rules of the *yassa* were enforced by trials which were held in public and all Mongols, including Genghis Khan himself, were in theory bound by the letters of the law. All important matters, including matters of succession and of foreign policy, were to be discussed and decided on in a *kurultai*, the parliament of chieftains.

What more than anything brought the Mongols together, however, was the decision to embark on military conquests abroad. Foreign conquests directed their attention outward and united them against common enemies. Yet in line with Mongol traditions

these were not wars as much as raids, and the object was not the occupation of land or the killing of enemies, but instead loot – of horses and slaves at first, and later of grain, treasure, and all kinds of productive resources. This more than anything was how Genghis Khan built support for his regime. He was an extraordinarily successful military commander and as such he was always able to provide for his people. Every city they captured was looted according to a set formula, with shares for everyone, from the 10 percent given to Genghis Khan and his family down to shares for orphans and widows. Yet the demands of the Mongol people seem to multiply over time and no one was ever satisfied with what they already had acquired. This is what set the Mongols on the path to loot the whole world.

To the south of the Mongols, between themselves and the Song dynasty in China, were a number of northern tribes who had managed to establish kingdoms of their own. The most successful of these were the Jürchen who had made war on the Song dynasty and forced them to move their capital to Hangzhou in the south of China. Another neighbor were the Tanguts, a kingdom of Tibetan-speaking people, and the Khanate of Kara-Khitani, a kingdom located further west on the steppes towards Russia. Genghis Khan took on these kingdoms and their armies one by one and before long he had defeated them all – the Tanguts in 1210, the Jürchen in 1214 and Kara-Khitani in 1218. There were rich spoils of war to be had from these conquests, in particular from the kingdom of the Jürchen who controlled some of the trading routes which brought Chinese merchandise to Central Asia and beyond.

These military successes put the Mongols in contact with the Khwarazmian Empire in the far west. The Khwarazmians were the rulers of Persia, but also of present-day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and much of Afghanistan. Yet the Khwarazmians were a city-based empire, not a band of nomads, and they laid claims to all the resources and the historical heritage of the Persian states of antiquity. From the Khwarazmian point of view, the Mongols were nothing but an annoyance and initially Genghis Khan was

convinced that the Khwarazmians indeed were too powerful to attack. Instead he dispatched a delegation of merchants and diplomats to their court asking for the right to trade. When some of the envoys were killed and others were returned to Mongolia with their faces mutilated, Genghis Khan was outraged. He dispatched another delegation which was treated in much the same manner. After this Genghis Khan felt he had no choice but to attack. After an exceptional ride through the deserts of Central Asia, his mounted warriors descended on the city of Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan, and caught the Khwarazmians by surprise. Genghis Khan gathered the local potentates in the city's biggest mosque and explained to them that he was God's punishment for their sins. Then he killed them all and thoroughly looted the city. The neighboring city of Samarkand was captured in the same manner and as news of these spectacular attacks reached other parts of the empire, the Khwarazmians lost their self-confidence. Genghis Khan gave them an ultimatum – to surrender without a fight or to be annihilated. Within a year the entire empire was in Mongol hands.

After this spectacular victory the Mongols were no longer simply a loose federation of horsemen but a proper empire in control of some of the richest cities in the world. They had possessions and thereby responsibilities. They were also suddenly a Middle Eastern power and before long they continued their raids with attacks on the Caucasus – Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan – and Georgia, a Christian kingdom, was to become a particularly loyal ally. And once the Mongols were established in the Caucasus, they came into contact with the Kievan Rus, the fledgling Russian state in present-day Ukraine. However, in 1227 an unexpected uprising among the Tanguts, just south of the Mongol heartlands, forced Genghis Khan to return to the east, and this is where he died 65 years old under rather mysterious circumstances. Some say that he was wounded in a battle, others that he fell off his horse or perhaps that he was killed by a Tangut woman he had taken as a concubine. In any case, his body was carried back to Mongolia and buried in a grave without markings according to the customs of his tribe. Legend has it

that the site was trampled by horses to make it impossible to find, that a forest was planted on top of it, or that a river was diverted to cover the spot. By the time of his death the Mongols controlled the center of the entire Eurasian landmass – from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea. *[Read more: Genghis Khan in today's Mongolia]*

How to conquer the world

The key to the military success of the Mongols was their extraordinary army which consisted entirely of cavalry – soldiers on the back of fast Mongolian horses. Although all men up to the age of 70 were conscripted, the army comprised no more than 100,000 men and often they were divided into several armies that operated independently of each other. What they lacked in numbers, however, they made up for in terms of speed and mobility. For one thing, they had no supply train. Instead the soldiers carried strips of dried meat and curd with them in their saddle bags which they would eat while on the move. Each soldier had access to several horses which he could switch between. The horses would graze on the land which they covered and they could themselves be eaten by the soldiers, milked, or tapped for blood to drink. Dead soldiers would simply be left to decompose where they fell and be picked at by wild animals, in accordance with Mongol custom. In addition the Mongols had no slow-moving engineering corps. Instead the engineers built what they needed – bridges or assault machines for attacking city walls – with the help of whatever material they found on the spot. The Mongol armies were used to fighting in winter when most other armies took time off; they could wade rivers at night; and their horsemanship was of course second to none. As nomads they had been on horseback since they were toddlers and the Mongol warriors were particularly notorious for their ability to fire off arrows, or use their lances, while in full gallop towards the enemy.

The Mongols used different battlefield tactics too. They fought sneakily and with no regard for chivalric conduct or fair play. A favorite ruse was to feign defeat and to beat a

retreat. As the enemies came in pursuit of them, they would be ambushed and picked off one by one. Another ruse was to make an assault at night, and make fires which made the army look far larger than it was – and then to attack from all directions at once. The Mongols were also notorious for using hostages as human shields by marching them in front of their own forces. Battlefield tactics such as these required discipline and a high level of coordination among the troops. These skills were initially honed during the hunts, known as *nerge*. The chieftains would organize vast hunting parties, comprising thousands of participants, which encircled herds of deer and other prey, driving the animals before them as they gradually tightened the circle. As each man quickly learned, any failure of discipline and coordination allowed the prey to escape. On the battlefield these lessons were adapted to military use by commanders who relied on torches, whistling arrows and flags to direct their troops. The chief aim of the Mongol generals was to strike terror in the enemies. To loot a city in a spectacular manner was not only a way of getting one's hands on treasure, but also, and above all, a way of sending a message to the people in the next town that all resistance was futile. *[Read more: Matthew Paris on the Mongols]* However, in relation to the cities that surrendered peacefully the message was equally clear: as long as you behave yourselves, and faithfully pay a ten percent tax, your assets will be safe and your inhabitants protected.

After Genghis Khan's death in 1227, his sons and grandsons continued these conquests. In 1235, his son, Ögedei, who replaced him, called in a *kurultai* to decide on the future direction of their foreign conquests. After some debate it was decided to make a move on Russia and Europe. Subutai, the leading general, had been the first to discover Europe in the 1220s. He had already tested the military capabilities of the Russians and found them wanting. When the new campaign began in 1236, Subutai set his sight on the Volga river, inhabited by the Bulgars, and this was where a three-year long campaign began. The Mongols quickly discovered that the Russian city-states were divided amongst themselves, and moreover that they were only weakly defended. In

accordance with their custom, they began by dispatching envoys, asking the Russians to willingly submit. Few cities took up the offer, however, and those that did not were attacked. Ryazan, 200 kilometers southeast of Moscow, was the first in line and in December, 1237. the city was thoroughly looted and sacked. From here the Mongols moved on to Kiev, the main city in Russia at the time. The city was captured in December, 1240. "Kiev had been a very large and thickly populated town," Giovanni de Plano Carpini, a diplomatic envoy, reported back to Rome in 1246, "but now it has been reduced to almost nothing, for there are at the present time scarce two hundred houses there and the inhabitants are kept in complete slavery." In the end only a few towns, such as Novgorod and Pskov in the north, survived the onslaught. One long-term consequence was that Kiev lost influence throughout Russia and that Moscow gained. The prince of Muscovy, who sided with the Mongols, acted as an intermediary between the foreign invaders and the various leaders of the Russian city-states.

The Mongol armies, meanwhile, continued on into Europe. In the spring of 1241, in a two-pronged attack, they simultaneously moved into Poland in the north and Hungary in the south. The Europeans, like everyone else, was entirely taken by surprised but eventually a combined army of Czech, Polish and German knights was assembled against them. They met at Legnica in Poland on April 9, 1241, and at Mohi, Hungary, two days later, and in both battles the European armies were destroyed. *[Read more: The Mongol invasion of Europe]* The Mongols continued swiftly across eastern Europe and into the lands of the Holy Roman Empire, and the scouts which preceded them came right up to the city walls of Vienna. This was when news reached them from Mongolia that Ögedei Khan had died and that a *kurultai* once again was to be assembled to elect a new leader. Since Ögedei's brothers all recently had died too – either in battle or under some distinctly suspicious circumstances – it was clear that the title of *khagan* this time around would be given to one of Genghis Khan's grandchildren. Since several of the candidates were engaged in the European campaign they had quickly to return to fight for the

position. Despite the brilliantly executed campaign and their decisive victories, the Mongols left Europe never to return. Perhaps Europe was too far away, perhaps there was not sufficient forage for the horses, or perhaps there was simply not enough treasure to loot in a Europe which was poor compared to other parts of the world.

In Russia the Mongols maintained a presence in the new capital they built for themselves on the Volga, named Sarai, which quickly became one of the largest cities in the world with some 600,000 inhabitants. This was where the princes of Russia showed up to pledge allegiance and to receive their *jarlig*, a tablet which identified them as legitimate rulers recognized by the Mongol khan himself. In the latter part of the thirteenth-century this Russian part of the Mongol empire, known as the Golden Horde, came increasingly to assert its independence, and they began to come into conflict not only with external enemies but also with other parts of the Mongol lands. But it would take until 1480 before the various Russian princes finally assembled a united army that was strong enough to be able to defeat them. Even then, however, instead of simply disappearing, the Golden Horde broke up into smaller political units which soon took their place among the Russian city-states. In 1556, Sarai was conquered and burned, but the successor-states lived on, in particular the Mongol khanate on the Crimea peninsula which was annexed by the Russian state only in 1783. The last descendant of Genghis Khan to rule a country was Alim Khan, the emir of Bukhara, who was deposed by the Soviet Bolsheviks in 1920, exactly seven hundred years after his celebrated ancestor first occupied the city. *[Read more: Alim Khan and Russian imperialism]*

The Tului war and its aftermath

Once the Mongol princes returned from Europe in 1241, a prolonged struggle ensued over succession which pitted Genghis Khan's grandchildren against each other and which for a while resulted in an open civil war between them. During the coming decade, the Mongols were too occupied with this domestic strife to pay much attention to their

empire. It was only with the election of Möngke Khan in 1251 that the foreign conquests resumed. This time around the first target were the Muslim caliphates in the Middle East. *[Read more: Rashid al-Din Hamadani]* Although Persia had been conquered already by Genghis Khan himself, the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, despite its military weakness, had not been subject to sustained attacks. It was Hülëgü, Möngke's brother, who was in command of these armies and in accordance with the traditions of Mongol diplomacy he began by dispatching envoys to Baghdad with a list of grievances and demands. In November 1257, when the caliph refused to provide him with the answer he wanted, Hülëgü marched on the city. Baghdad was besieged and, once gunpowder had been used to undermine the walls, it surrendered. Baghdad was probably the richest city in the world at the time, and the loot lasted for a full seventeen days. In the end the caliph was rolled up in a carpet and trampled to death by horses, and in the confusion the attackers set fire to the city. The destruction of Baghdad, 1258, is remembered to this day as the event which put an end to the "golden age" of the Muslim caliphates.

Their presence in the Middle East put the Mongols in contact with the Ayyubid caliphate in Cairo, defended by their army of Mamluks. The Mamluks were slaves in the service of the sultans and they were soldiers who in several respects resembled the Mongols themselves. Many of them were descendants of nomadic tribes from Caucasus and the area north of the Black Sea who were used to fighting on horseback, and they were as highly trained and disciplined as ever the Mongols. In September 1260, at Ain Jalut, near the Sea of Galilee in what today is Israel, the Mongols were defeated by the Mamluks. Although they had lost battles before, the Mongols would always come back to avenge their losses and exact a terrible punishment on their enemies. This did not happen after Ain Jalut and the Mongols never made it to Cairo. Instead the empire had found its westernmost frontiers.

Their presence in the Middle East also put the Mongols in contact with the *Faranj*, the armies of Catholic Europe that set off on a series of crusades to recapture the lands

which their religious scriptures regarded as holy. That is, the Crusaders were in the Middle East to make war on the armies of the Muslim caliphates. To the Europeans, the Mongols seemed at first to be heaven sent. Any enemy of the Muslims, they argued, must be a friend of theirs, and in this case the forces in question were most likely those of Prester John, that legendary Christian ruler who was said to have founded a mighty kingdom somewhere in the far east. *[Read more: Prester John and Nestorian Christians]* Even once they realized that this was not the case, the Crusaders were keen to form an alliance with a powerful military force that could attack their Muslim enemies from the east. The Europeans, represented by the pope in Rome or by the king of France, first communicated directly with the Great Khan in Mongolia and envoys were dispatched to Karakorum on the occasion of Güyük's assumption of the khanship in 1246. *[Read more: Theological dispute at the Khan's court]* Güyük Khan reciprocated by sending envoys to Rome. Soon enough, however, diplomatic dispatches were instead directed to the Mongols in Persia since they were the ones who were directly in charge of the Mediterranean wars. Several missions were conducted back and forth, with Mongol envoys sharing communion with the pope in Rome and even traveling as far as to London to meet the English king. *[Read more: Rabban Bar Sauma, envoy to the pope]* These exchanges all followed the same pattern: first the Europeans asked the Mongols to convert to Christianity, then the Mongols responded with demands for submission and tribute. Not surprisingly perhaps no agreement was ever reached, although several Christian kingdoms in the Middle East, such as the Crusader state of Antioch submitted to the Mongols and paid regular tributes. Although Hülëgü's armies invaded Syria several times, they never coordinated their attacks with the Crusaders in a meaningful fashion. In the end not only the Mongols but also the *Faranj* were defeated by the Mamluk armies.

Soon enough the Mongols who conquered the Abbasids came to think of themselves as a separate political entity, and their leader, Hülëgü, to think of himself not as a general

or a governor working for the Great Khan in Mongolia but as a khan with a khanate of his own. This realm, made up of Persia and big parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, came to be known as the "Ilkhanate," or "subordinate khanate." Much as the Arabs who conquered these lands before them, the Ilkhanate khans and their courts came to be heavily influenced by the local, essentially Persian, culture. That is, in a radical transformation of their own ways of life, the Mongols got off their horses and became sedentary. After Hülëgü's own time, Islam was adopted as the official religion of the state and the khans became great supporters of scholarship and the arts. The most celebrated example is the astronomical observatory at Maragheh which in addition to astronomers had mathematicians, philosophers and medical doctors in residence. Much as in the case of the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate began to fall apart in the first half of the fourteenth-century, and eventually it was broken up into a number of small successor states. The most famous successor was the state which Timur, or Tamerlane, in the fourteenth-century once again for a short while turned into an empire. *[Read more: Tamerlane and the astronomers of Bukhara]*

The only neighbors the Mongols had not successfully attacked were the Chinese, and this is surprising given both how relatively close China was and how singularly wealthy the country. Already Genghis Khan had, as we saw, successfully occupied the nomadic buffer states located between the Mongols and China – the Jürchen, the Tanguts and Kara-khitan – but he made no sustained attacks on China itself. It was only once Möngke was elected *khagan* in 1251 that China came into focus. China at this time was equivalent to the Song dynasty, 960–1279 CE. The Song is one of the most celebrated dynasties of China, responsible for economic prosperity, rapid technological advances, and some of the best ink paintings in the history of Chinese art. Militarily, however, they were weak and the Jürchen had successfully put pressure on them since the early twelfth-century. In order to defend themselves the Song emperors moved their capital to the southern city of Hangzhou, close to today's Shanghai. Although this move

constituted an embarrassment to be sure, the Song continued to thrive economically, and they still controlled some sixty percent of China's population. Hangzhou, amazed visitors reported, had the most beautiful women in the world and no fewer than 12,000 bridges across its canals.

Möngke Khan had picked his brother Kublai to be in charge of the invasion of China, but Kublai was far too fat to ride a horse and he had no aptitude for war. He moved only reluctantly against the Chinese, complemented by the generals who Möngke himself dispatched. The strategy was to attack the Song court in a diversionary pattern, starting with an invasion of Sichuan to the west and Yunnan to the south-west. If the Mongols gained control of these areas, went the plan, they could attack the Song from all sides at once. Yet the death of Möngke Khan in 1259, and the subsequent struggle over succession, meant that China once again became a less important concern. Although the wars eventually resumed, it took another twelve years before Kublai Khan could declare himself emperor of China, and another ten years after that before he decisively had defeated the last of his remaining adversaries. The last Song emperor, an 8-year-old boy, committed suicide together with his prime minister and 800 members of his family. From 1279, China was again united and Kublai Khan the holder of the mandate of heaven and the emperor of a new dynasty, the Yuan. In fact, Kublai was not only emperor of China but he continued to claim the title of *khagan* of all Mongols, although his right to this title was disputed by his brothers.

While the attacks on China were going on, the Mongols successfully invaded the Korean peninsula where the kings quickly submitted themselves and agreed to pay regular tributes. Kublai Khan also tried to invade Japan, and he assembled an army of some 100,000 men for the purpose, but the ships which they constructed were not quite seaworthy and besides the invaders were unlucky with the weather. *[Read more: The kamikaze]* A first invasion in 1274 had to be aborted and a second invasion in 1281 failed miserably. Japan, as a result, was never occupied. Cut off from China by the

presence of the Mongols, Japan came to depend far more on its own domestic resources. Kublai Khan also tried to invade Java, in today's Indonesia, and his armies conducted campaigns in Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. But the weather in Southeast Asia was hot and humid, the expeditions were hampered by disease, and the tropical terrain was not suitable for soldiers on horseback.

Kublai Khan's favorite wife died in 1281, and his favorite son and chosen successor died in 1285. After that he grew increasingly despondent and withdrew from the daily business of government. He fell ill in 1293 and died himself in 1294. The last years of the Yuan dynasty were marked by struggle, famine and distress among ordinary people. The reigns of the later Yuan emperors were short and marked by intrigues and rivalries. Uninterested in administration, they were separated both from the army and from people at large. The Yuan dynasty was eventually defeated by the Ming, a native Chinese dynasty, which replaced them in 1368. The Mongols retreated to Mongolia, forming what is known as the "Northern Yuan dynasty," 1368–1691 CE, but they never rescinded their claims to the Chinese empire. They ruled Mongolia until 1635 when they were deposed by the Manchus, descendants of the Jürchen tribes which Genghis Khan had defeated so easily four hundred years earlier. The Manchus went on, in 1644, to become the new rulers of all of China.

An international system of khanates

In the first part of the thirteenth-century the Mongols invaded next to the entirety of the Eurasian landmass, yet already by mid-century their empire began to disintegrate. As long as Genghis Khan's descendants could agree on the election of a *khagan*, khan of khans, the empire can be described as united, but after the death of Möngke Khan in 1259 no such consensus could be reached. Möngke's brothers – Hülëgü, Kublai and Ariq Böke – began fighting with each other and the conflict soon escalated into a civil war – the Toluid Civil War, named after Tolui, their father – which resulted in four separate

Mongol khanates being established: the Golden Horde in Russia, led by Batu Khan; the Ilkhanate in Persia, led by Hülegü Khan; the Chagatai Khanate, comprising the traditional heartland of the Mongols, led by Chagatai Khan; and the Yuan dynasty in China, led by Kublai Khan. As we saw, these entities had asserted their independence for some time already, and the outcome of the Tolui War only confirmed the situation on the ground. And yet, although there were conflicts between them, the Mongol khanates were also united by personal ties and a shared commitment to a Mongol identity. The result is an international system with quite distinct characteristics. Perhaps we could talk about “the international system of the Mongol khanates.”

One distinct feature was the fact that Genghis Khan's descendant had strong economic interests in the countries they ruled. The ten percent share they received of all loot soon came to constitute considerable economic assets, and what they owned was not just treasure but productive resources as well – men, animals, fields, factories and ships. Before long they developed extensive personal stakes in the economic activities, and in the economic well-being, of the entirety of the Eurasian landmass. The khans, from this perspective, were more like leaders of a multinational corporation than leaders of armies or states. Yet this particular multinational cooperation was also a family business, and at the *kurultai* not only military matters were discussed but also questions of how the family assets should be invested and managed. When the empire came to be divided, the economic stakes were impossible to divide in the same fashion and for that reason all khans maintained large assets – known as *khubi*, “shares” – in each other's realms. Thus Hülegü Khan in Persia owned twenty-five thousand households of silk workers in China which was ruled by his brother Kublai, but he also owned entire valleys in Tibet and had claims on furs and falcons from the steppes of the Golden Horde. In addition, he had the title to pasture, horses and men in his native homeland of Mongolia. Such cross-cutting ownership was duplicated in the case of the other khans and their families, creating an intricate pattern of economic interdependence. This

interdependence reduced the risk of war and helped restore peace if conflicts broke out. Since all members of the family were dependent on each other, no one was in the mood to play tit-for-tat.

Although the khanates became ever-more rooted in the societies they ruled, they did maintain a distinct Mongolian identity. Or at least, they made considerable efforts to do so. This shared sense of descent helped integrate the khanates even as they increasingly asserted their independence. They insisted for example on using Mongolian in communications with officials and adopted a version of the Uyghur alphabet in order to use the language in their official correspondence. Meanwhile knowledge of Mongolian was forbidden to non-Mongols — although the princes of Muscovy must have ignored the ban since speaking Mongolian became very popular at their court. When Kublai Khan moved his capital to Khanbaliq, or Beijing, in 1264, he reserved a large area in the center of the city — corresponding roughly to what today is known as the “Forbidden Palace” — where he and his court set up their *gers*, their tents, which they continued to prefer to regular buildings. There were hills in the enclosure too and animals which members of the court could hunt in the traditional Mongol fashion. Although Kublai indeed may have preferred the Mongol lifestyle, it seems likely that he also was trying to send a message to his brothers. In 1260, Ariq Böke had called a *kurultai* where it was decided that he, Ariq Böke, was to become the new khan of khans. One reason that Kublai was mistrusted by other members of the family was that he had his own court in Shangdu — the city which Europeans knew as Xanadu — south of the Gobi desert. *[Read more: The dream of the emperor's palace]* Yet to traditionalists, Shangdu was located too close to China and the Mongols were bound to become affected by Chinese — that is to say “bad” and “soft” — habits. China should be exploited, they insisted, but the center of their world must remain in Mongolia. Kublai Khan eventually won the battle with Ariq Böke and moved his capital even further south, but perhaps the city of *gers* in the middle of Khanbaliq can be seen as a concession to traditionalists' demands for Mongolness.

The key aspect of this identity were the experiences which all Mongols shared as nomads on the steppes of northern Asia. The logic of nomadic societies differs from the logic of sedentary societies in crucial respects, in particular in relation to how land is conceptualized and used. Nomads need pasture where their animals can graze and they continuously move with their animals to places where they can find it. Grass grows naturally, it does not have to be planted, only carefully managed, and land has no meaning apart from what it can yield. Land is not the property of anyone in particular and it can be used by anyone who needs it. Farmers, on the other hand, invest labor in their land, together with seeds and fertilizer, and they put up fences which limit access by outsiders in order to protect what they own. Fences, to nomads, is an abomination since they block their ability to move around and thereby to feed their animals and themselves. Not surprisingly, the Mongols would often destroy the fences they found in the lands they occupied, not only in order to punish the civilian population but also to return the land to what they regarded as its natural use. By making pasture out of farmland they would have more grass for their horses next time they passed through the same place. This is also why they inverted the way social classes traditionally had been ranked in Chinese society. According to Confucian rhetoric, farmers should be considered as the most important social class since they produce the food which feed all other social classes. Merchants, by contrast, are the least important since their labor contributes nothing which does not already exist. To the Mongols this made no sense. As their own example clearly demonstrated, the farmers' way of life was nowhere near as important as the Confucians pretended. It was obviously possible to feed a nation which did not farm or put stakes into the ground. Thus the Mongols demoted farmers to one of the lowest ranks in society, below prostitutes but above beggars.

This understanding of, and relationship to, the land had implications for both warfare and trade. As nomads, the Mongols were interested in booty but not in territorial acquisition. They would consequently take what they could get their hands on and then

move on. They did not occupy land as much as pass through it, and as a result they often had to reinvade land which they had invaded earlier. This is also why their empire left no monuments in the form of buildings. The Mongols did not build things since buildings cannot move. This applies even to their own capitals. In fact, during Genghis Khan the Mongols did not have a proper capital. Instead Genghis would take his court and his advisers with him in a *ger* mounted on a cart which was pulled by a set of particularly strong horses. They toured the country, and the world, accompanied by their capital. It was only during Ögedei's reign, in 1235, that Karakorum became more than a collection of *gers*, but even then the city was used mainly for storing the treasures that the soldiers brought back home. Europeans who visited the city – such as William of Rubruck, a Flemish friar who came here in 1254 – were duly impressed of course, yet at the time Europeans were inordinately impressed with everything they discovered in the East. Besides Rubuck's account of the Great Khan's palace does not mention the buildings as much as the wealth they contained, such as the magical fountain made in the form of a tree in silver where spouts would present visitors with a continuous supply of fermented mare's milk. The Mongols left a very light footprint on the land they occupied, we could say, and as a result there is not much left of the empire for us to see today. Even Karakorum and Shangdu have only left traces which you have to be an archaeologist in order to appreciate.

The only thing they built were bridges. Bridges were crucial in order to move an army along and to give merchants free passage, and the Mongols built them whenever they were needed. They were also experts at breaching walls. They recruited Chinese engineers who taught them how to construct assorted siege engines, and before long they were able to build their own catapults, trebuchets and battering rams. Indeed, the Mongols were quick to make innovations of their own – siege warfare being the only area in which they made true technological advances. The siege of the city of Ryazan in Russia provides an example. Here the Mongols built a city wall of wood outside of the

stone walls built by the defenders. The only difference was that the Mongol wall was slightly higher and allowed them to fire down on the inhabitants who now were trapped. Before the thirteenth-century the defenders had usually had the advantage during a siege, but after the Mongol invasions this was no longer the case. And the advantages were not only technological but also psychological. Since they never cared much about land the Mongols never had to defend a fixed position. There was no military difference to them between attack and retreat and they were as happy to defeat an enemy who pursued them as they were to defeat an enemy when they themselves were on the attack.

What the Mongols did was instead to connect various places to each other. They built bridges and breached walls also metaphorically speaking and thereby helped facilitate communication and interaction. Historians have often referred to the period after the Mongol invasion and before the disintegration of the empire as the *pax mongolica*, the "Mongol peace." It was during *pax mongolica*, we are told, that the Europeans first acquired a taste for Asian luxury items and that Chinese inventions first reached Europe. Yet this description is too simplistic and too much focused on Europe itself. For one thing, the trade routes of Central Asia predated the Mongol empire by at least one thousand years and many Chinese inventions reached Europe far earlier, for example via the Arab caliphates. Secondly, the trade routes continued to operate also after the Mongols were gone, even if Europe was disconnected from them. The routes, that is, were not primarily a way of connecting Europe with Asia but instead of connecting various Asian locations with each other. Finally, peace in itself is not a guarantee of a flourishing trade. What it takes is instead a trade-friendly infrastructure, and this more than anything was what the Mongols provided. The flourishing exchange was an achievement of the Mongols, not just an unintended consequence of the peace.

The most obvious part of this trade-friendly infrastructure was physical. Although the various routes which made up the Silk Road had been in place for a long time

already, the Mongols radically improved them, making travel easier, safer and quicker. The Mongols referred to the system as *örtöö* – or what in the Golden Horde was called *yam* – a network of interconnected relay stations, or *caravanserais*, where travelers could stop to rest and replenish their supplies, change horses, engage in trade, or swap information and gossip. The stations were set approximately thirty kilometers apart, and each station required about twenty-five families to maintain and operate it. Although goods traveled far along this network, most merchants only traveled shorter distances, but there were also individuals who explored the whole width and breadth of the system. *[Read more: Ibn Battuta, the greatest traveler of all time]* The network was used for government officials too and for communicating with generals and administrators throughout the empire. Important travelers would carry an imperial seal, known as a *paiza* – a small tablet made from gold, silver or wood – which assured them protection, accommodation and transportation but also exemption from local taxes and duties. The *paiza* worked as a combination of a passport and a credit card.

In addition to the physical infrastructure, the Mongols provided legal and institutional infrastructure. One example is the standardization of weights and measurements. By making sure that goods were weighed and measured in the same fashion throughout the empire, the Mongol authorities would make it easier to compare prices and this facilitated trade. Money was standardized too. In 1253 Möngke Khan created a department of monetary affairs which issued paper money of fixed denominations. This made it possible to pay taxes in cash instead of in kind, and this vastly improved the state's finances. Even time itself was standardized, or at least the days and months of the year. At observatories in both the Ilkhanate and in China, calendars were produced which showed the same astronomical data. This made it possible not only to determine the time and day with precision but also in the same fashion throughout the empire.

But it was not only people and goods that traveled along the *örtöö* network but also diseases. *[Read more: The Black Death]* In the latter part of the fourteenth-century, the

bubonic plague hit first China, then the Mongols, the Arabic world and finally Europe in a series of waves. It is estimated that some 75 million people died worldwide and that China lost between one-half and two-thirds of its population and Europe perhaps half. The disease had a profound and immediate impact on commerce and on the Mongol empire itself. Although contemporaries had no notion of epidemiology they understood that the disease was spread through contagion and that people who suddenly appeared in their midst from were potential carriers. As a result, people became suspicious of travelers, merchants, foreigners and mendicant monks, and with a sharp reduction in trade, the complex *örtöö* network largely collapsed.

The Mongols have had a singularly bad press in the rest of the world – in Europe, China, Persia and the Middle East. They are known as bloody-thirsty barbarians who annihilated entire cities, killing all the inhabitants, including their cats and dogs. And the Mongols did indeed use terror as a means of defeating their enemies, but it is not clear that their way of making war was substantially more cruel than that of other people at the time – or, indeed, more cruel than wars fought today. Some numbers for the people they supposedly killed are clearly exaggerations. Another question concerns the long-term impact on the societies they invaded. In China, Russia and the Middle East the Mongols have often been blamed for causing economic and cultural stagnation. Arab scholars have pointed to the Mongol destruction of Baghdad as the event that ended their “golden age” – right at the time when the revival of learning was making Europe increasingly intellectually vibrant. Chinese scholars have similarly faulted the Mongols for ending the Song dynasty – during which China came tantalizingly close to embarking on an industrial revolution of their own. Some Russian scholars, meanwhile, have blamed the Golden Horde for the fact that Russia never managed to keep up when the rest of Europe was modernizing. Yet apart from the direct destruction they wrought, it is not at all clear that the impact of the Mongols was negative, and certainly not in the longer term. The opposite case can certainly be made – that the Mongols spurred commerce

and innovation by transmitting goods, services and ideas. In the anti-Mongol propaganda it is easy to detect the traditional prejudices which sedentary people always have had against nomads. Yet not everyone shares these prejudices. One brand of Russian nationalists – sometimes known as “Eurasianists” – have insisted that the Mongols helped save their country. In the thirteenth-century, the Eurasianists explain, Russia was under attack from aggressive armies of knights coming from Western Europe, and if the Mongols had not come to their rescue, Russia would surely have been invaded. Russia, they argue, is not a European as much as an Asian country, that is, a country deeply influenced by the traditions of nomadic ways of life. *[Read more: Lev Gumilev and Eurasianism]*