

The Mongols and World History

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By Dr David Brophy

To discuss the world empire of the Mongols and Silk Road in the same context might seem slightly incongruous. After all, the two concepts have quite different connotations in the popular mind. The Silk Road conjures up thoughts of trade, intellectual exchange, and the breaking down of political and cultural boundaries—all things which fascinate us.

On the other hand, the name of the Mongols is synonymous with conquest, bloodshed, an image which the recent swashbuckler “Mongol” did little to challenge. When the Europeans first heard of the marauding Mongols, they latched onto the name “Tatar”—one of their leading tribes, and wondered if they were not in fact “Tartars” from Tartarus—a Latin word for “hell”. Thus the Mongols were identified as denizens of hell, and the name “Tartary” long remained in use for the dark and unknown regions of Inner Asia. Of course, the British Isles, let alone Australia, were never touched by the Mongolian armies, but the idea of the Mongols as ruthless and power-hungry left another trace on our language: when we refer to Kerry Packer as a media “Mogul”, we are drawing on the Persian form of the word “Mongol”.

Beyond the English-speaking world, the legacy of the Mongol conquests is still a touchy subject. In parts of the Middle East, the Mongols are still widely reviled as a national disaster. When the USA invaded Iraq in 2003, the comparison drawn by commentators in the Muslim world was naturally the sacking of

Baghdad and the destruction of the caliphate, by Chinggis Khan's (Genghis Khan's) grandson Hülegü in 1258. In Russia, the idea that for several centuries Russians suffered under the "Tatar yoke" has been invoked to explain Russia's slow development in relation to Western Europe, and its authoritarian political traditions. Some scholars have argued that the main reason that Europe won out in long-term economic competition with Asia was that it alone had been spared the devastation of the Mongol invasions. In the history of Eurasian cultural progress, therefore, the Mongols have often been a chapter that has been skipped over.

Yet the more impassioned polemics against the Mongols have subsided in recent decades, and with the increasing popularity of "World History" (approaches to history which take as their subject the world as a whole, or, in many cases, the Eurasian continent), scholars have begun to take a new look at the role of the Mongols. This "world historical" school has focused on long-distance connections between regions of the world at different stages of historical development. While this comparative approach was pioneered by economic historians, it is now just as commonly found among scholars of cultural history, and religion. In exploring the integration of Eurasia, therefore, people have been drawn to the Mongols, in the belief that their invasions and conquests increased it to an unprecedented degree.

There are a number of different ways to conceive of integration. Economic historians look at the ways in which supply and demand in one part of the world has influenced market conditions in another; i.e. the extent to which the world has been fragmented into isolated markets, or united into a single market. Politically we might speak in terms of the total territory under the authority of a single ruler, or a single dynasty, or more complex systems of loyalty. Cultural integration might refer to the similarity of ideas, tastes, and fashions between different regions. All of these phenomena can be witnessed to a greater degree than ever before in the thirteenth century, the century of the Mongol conquests, which has led some historians to speak of a "Thirteenth Century World System".

The degree of globalisation reached in this period was summed up colourfully by the historian Edward Gibbon, who noted that in 1238 that the price of herrings in England dropped dramatically. That year, anxiety at the campaign of Chinggis Khan's grandson Batu towards the Baltic had caused the German fishing fleet to stay in port. Gibbon noted with astonishment that the command of the Mongolian Khan, residing in his capital on the borders of China, should have so reduced the incomes of fishermen at Yarmouth!

The potential benefits of this level of integration have led to something of a rehabilitation of Chinggis Khan. This line of argument rests on the idea of a "pax Mongolica", which allowed the expansion of trade, leading to greater prosperity and cultural exchange. This is the position taken by Jack Weatherford, whose *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* remained on the New York Times best-seller list for several weeks.

How was such an empire created? The movie "Mongol" presents an image of continuous tribal feuding, with rival chiefs warring against one another until only one remained. The idea of tribal society locked in perpetual civil war is misleading, however. In fact, for most of their history, affiliations to a tribe, let alone submission to a Great Khan, has not been a feature of the everyday life of Mongolians. For subsistence on the steppe, small kin-based camping groups will suffice. How groups such as the Mongols made the transition from these isolated, relatively egalitarian, groups numbering a few households, to tribal confederations of tens of thousands of households, with a strict hierarchy reminiscent of a feudal aristocracy, is an intriguing historical question.

Explanations vary in terms of how much significance they give to external factors and internal factors. Among those who favour the former, an attractive model has been developed by Thomas Barfield, who

argued that nomadic powers arose in the steppe in direct proportion to the strength of the sedentary states to their south—primarily China. This view was premised on the notion of the “hungry” nomad: incapable of satisfying all their dietary needs through animal products, the nomad is forced to engage in trade or raiding to secure agricultural goods. Barfield argued that in circumstances when the frontier was porous, this could be accomplished relatively easily, without large-scale organisation. (All things being equal, peasants are no match for mounted nomads.) However, when a strong state arose in China, which was capable of defending its borders, extracting the necessary tribute required a stronger military threat. Hence the need to form larger confederations.

This argument works quite well for the confrontation between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu. For the Mongols, however, it doesn’t seem to fit. While Chinggis Khan was consolidating his rule, China was divided between three powers—the Jin Dynasty in the north, the Song in the south, and the Tibetan-speaking Tanguts in the northwest, today’s Gansu province. In fact, tribal groups were never completely nomadic, incapable of supplying themselves with agricultural products. Archaeology has turned up ample evidence of cultivation in steppe regions, and excavations in Mongolia and Siberia show that many nomadic powers chose to locate their centres far from the settled regions of northern China.

The idea of internal factors leading to the development of a militaristic aristocracy was favoured by Soviet historians, who sought explanations for the rise and fall of nomadic states in terms of class struggle. Critics of this view have argued that class formation is constrained in tribal society, where wealth is limited to moveable property. Furthermore, if feudalism refers to a system of land grants in return for military service, Mongol society cannot be made to fit the model, since loyalties were secured through the allocation of people and livestock. Nevertheless, extremes of wealth could be accumulated on the steppe, with slaves carrying out much of the day-to-day herding duties. Given that a leader’s authority over his subjects depended on his ability to bring military triumphs and riches, success in battle tended to lead to further, more ambitious campaigns. This dynamic has been put forward as an explanation for the explosive nature of steppe conquests.

The Mongol conquests were not the work of a single great conqueror, but rather a family enterprise, spanning several generations, with a number of generals leading armies in their own right. For much of his life, Chinggis Khan lived as an outsider, or in captivity. In fifteen years following his acclamation as khan he launched an initial campaign into Central Asia against the kingdom of Khorazm, and conquered the Tanguts of northwest China. It was his sons and grandsons who went on to conquer between eleven and twelve million square miles of territory, the largest empire ever created.



Despite the novelty of such an achievement, the Mongols remained loyal to their tribal traditions. When Chinggis Khan died, his realm was divided among his sons. The eldest son received the lands furthest from the home camp—thus the far-western territories were allotted to Jochi and his sons. The second son, Chaghatay, received the territory of the former Qarakhitay Empire (Central Asia); his third son Ögedei was appointed successor, and given Jungharia as his fiefdom, and the youngest, Tolui, was allotted the home territory of Mongolia. Such matters were deliberated at an assembly, called *quriltay*. The need to convene a *quriltay* in order to elect a successor sometimes acted as a brake on the unstoppable waves of conquest. This was probably what saved Europe from the western campaign of Batu, who returned to Mongolia when Ögedei died in 1241.

Of course, the reality of royal succession was rarely as smooth as the theory; in particular, controversy raged over the question of whether or not the throne was open to the best candidate from the entire family, or only to Ögedei's line. Thus in 1251 a coup was carried out, and Tolui's eldest son Möngke was acclaimed Great Khan. Rather than demoralising the dynasty, however, this transfer of power heralded a new period of expansion. Möngke's brother Hülegü conquered most of the Middle East, and established the Ilkhanate in Iran. Another brother Qubilai marched south into Sichuan, and attacked the Kingdom of Dali in Yunnan, effectively encircling the embattled Song Dynasty. Qubilai himself inherited the title Great Khan in 1260, and during his reign the capital of Qaraqorum was abandoned, moved to the new city of Dadu, known today as Beijing.

If we reckon that at this time the population of Mongolia numbered only around one million, with perhaps 100,000 men of fighting age, we can appreciate their skill in utilising manpower. Most of those who rode with the Mongols were in fact not Mongols, but speakers of various Turkic languages, belonging to tribes who had submitted to Chinggis Khan. Many of these tribal groups were broken up and dispersed, re-organised into a strict system of decimal military units (under commanders of 10, 100, 1000, and 10,000). Thus the linguistic legacy of the Mongol conquests was not an increased knowledge of Mongolian among their subjects (although in some places officials did learn Mongolian), but the further spread of Turkic languages throughout Russia and the Middle East.

Lacking modern systems of communications, it was naturally difficult for the various territories to function as a unified empire, but the Mongol domains were far more inter-linked than previous world empires. Apart from their home territories, each branch of the royal family possessed estates within the domains of the other branches, which were under their direct administration. This complicated system necessitated a

fast and reliable system of postal stations. Travelling between these posts, where fresh horses were always ready at hand, a messenger could carry a letter across the empire from Beijing to Tabriz in about a month. Safety on the roads was also improved: for example, with a single document issued by Qubilai in China, the Polos enjoyed safe passage from China, through the Middle East, as far as the Mediterranean—hard to imagine in today’s world of visas and border-crossings!

The Mongols were careful to make use of the more advanced technologies which they encountered among their sedentary subjects. Even in cases where cities resisted, and were singled out for destruction (e.g. Samarqand), the Mongols would spare the artisans and transport them for work elsewhere. In other circumstances this relationship could be more of an alliance, as in the case of the Uyghurs, living in the east of today’s Xinjiang (Hami, Turfan). The Buddhist Uyghurs were among the first of the Central Asian peoples to make peace with the Mongol invaders, and as a result of their much higher level of literacy they were entrusted with bureaucratic duties throughout the empire. Such was the reputation of the Uyghurs for written culture that the Mongols borrowed the Uyghur alphabet to write their own language. Later, much of China came to be governed by Central Asian Muslims, resulting in the spread of Islam into places like Yunnan, and the introduction to China of Islamic medicine and astronomy.



The Mongols moved people from place to place at will, resulting in extraordinary changes to the ethnic map of Eurasia. Travelling along the Ili River, which now flows out of Xinjiang into Kazakhstan, a papal mission to the Great Khan discovered there a community of German miners! When the same mission reached Mongolia, they found many Europeans already in attendance at the court of the Khan. Among these was a French engineer captured in Belgrade, Guillaume Boucher, who in 1253 constructed an elaborate alcohol-dispensing fountain, to quench the Mongols’ thirst for the exotic new wines and liquors which their conquests had exposed them to.

The Mongols received several missions dispatched by the Vatican, led by Franciscan and Dominican ministers. Some of these made the journey to Mongolia, others sought to gain audiences with Mongol

generals in the Middle East. Since the Mongol invasions coincided with the Crusades, some in Europe saw them as potential allies in their war with Islam. These hopes were bound up with a popular legend telling of a mighty Christian king in the East, Prester John—who became identified with the Mongol Khan. The fact that the (heretical) Nestorian church had made some headway in converting the Mongols in the previous century may have contributed to this identification. Thus these monks carried letters calling on the Mongols to desist from attacking Christians, and urging them to accept the Christian faith.

The Mongols were more than happy to accept the prayers of these missionaries, even to participate in their rituals of worship, but these dabblings reflected their spiritual eclecticism, rather than any prelude to conversion. Ruling over such a vast empire, it was imperative for the early Mongol rulers to remain above all faiths and sects, while taking out as much “spiritual insurance” as they could. In his later years, Chinggis Khan sought the council of a Daoist priest from China in his quest to find the elixir of life. Eventually, when the Mongols did adopt one or other of the faiths of their subjects, it was not Christianity, but Islam (in Iran and Russia) or Buddhism (in China).

The scale of the Mongol conquests provided a direct and indirect impetus to trade and exchange. Although most Mongols retained their nomadic way of life, they were no strangers to the benefits of commerce and taxation. The khans took measures to promote the flow of goods throughout the empire, allowing traders to make use of official postal stations, and granting them tax concessions. The Mongols also sponsored trading associations, called *ortogh*. Merchants belonging to an *ortogh* had access to low-interest loans, and shared the costs and profits of caravan journeys, thereby dispersing the risk to individuals if the caravan was lost.

Interactions between the various Mongol courts scattered around Eurasia saw a bewildering movement of foods and drinks, animal and plant species, fashions in clothing, hairstyles and etiquette, to name just a few categories. The more spectacular moments of exchange concern the movement of Chinese technologies to Europe, though in many cases conclusive evidence for these remains elusive. Speculation continues as to whether or not the conditions created by the *pax Mongolica* led to the introduction of moveable-type printing technology from Korea, through China, to Europe. Be that as it may, the idea of paper currency almost certainly traveled from China to the West at this time (as did printed playing cards!). Some uncertainty also surrounds the introduction of the compass to Europe, which was first used in France in the thirteenth century, a hundred and fifty years after its invention in China. The Mongols are often thought to have facilitated the transfer of Song advances in gunpowder technology to Europe, leading to the development of firearms in the fourteenth century.

We should keep in mind, however, that increased mobility is not always a good thing. At least one theory on the origins of the Black Plague holds that it was picked up by Mongolian horses from rodents during their invasion of Burma (according to some) or from the Issiq K l region of today’s Kirghizstan (according to others). From there, it was transferred to the steppe, and carried along with Mongolian armies to Europe. It is recorded that during the siege of Caffa in the Crimea in 1347, the Mongols catapulted plague-ridden corpses over the city walls, thereby infecting the citizenry. The Genoans who fled the city thus carried it with them to Europe, where it eventually claimed the lives of roughly half the population. (In China, an estimated 1/3 of the population succumbed.)

Geographically speaking, the Mongols redrew political boundaries and relocated centres of power, often with lasting consequences. There is a striking resemblance between the map of the Mongol empire and the political map of Eurasia today, with Iran, Russia, and China all corresponding to former khanates. In Yuan China, the Mongols ended centuries of separation into northern and southern dynasties, and extended the boundaries of China into Yunnan, Gansu, and, for the first time, Tibet. If we consider, too, that it was the Mongols who were responsible for shifting China’s capital to Beijing, we can appreciate

how formative the Mongol period was in Chinese history. A similar case can be made for the Mongol creation of Iran. There, the Mongols restored the borders of the former Sassanid Empire, and revived the use of the name "Iran" to denote a political entity. (Prior to this, Iran had been more commonly known by its Arabic designation of "Ajam".) In the Mongol chancery Persian triumphed over Arabic as the written lingua-franca, and the destruction of Baghdad and the abolition of the caliphate dramatically reduced the significance of its neighbour Iraq. Finally, in Russia, it was under the Mongols that political power transferred from Kiev to Moscow, laying the foundations for the rise of Muscovy.



One of the most enduring legacies of the Mongol period was the principle that authority belonged to the family of Chinggis Khan, who had been singled out by heaven for world-rulership. This theory of legitimacy remained particularly strong in Central Asia, but local elites as far off as the Crimea continued to advertise their descent from the Chinggisid house well into the nineteenth century. Even dynasties without proper Chinggisid lineage could not afford to ignore the principle entirely. When Temür (Tamerlane) ascended the throne in Samarqand, he adopted the lowly title of "son-in-law", indicating his marriage into the Chinggisid family, and maintained a puppet Chinggisid emperor at all times. His descendents, the Mughals of India, legitimated themselves in similar terms. In China, the Manchu Qing dynasty pressed their right to rule by claiming to have inherited a golden seal once belonging to Chinggis Khan.

The mixture of revulsion and fascination which the Mongols arouse today are thus nothing new. There can be little doubt that the impact of the Mongol conquests on certain regions was devastating. Many cities were destroyed, and much cultivated land in northern China and Iran was turned into pasture land, leading to a decline in population. Central Asia suffered heavily from warring between the Mongol khanates, and centres such as Samarqand and Bukhara never regained their prominent position in the Islamic world. Yet it is all too easy to demonise the Mongols, and use them to construct simplistic

explanations of contemporary geo-politics. A closer look presents a more balanced picture, which shows the Mongols combining both destructive and constructive forces, and pursuing both conservative and innovative policies. However we choose to appraise their role, there is no doubt that coming to terms with world history requires an appreciation of the rise and fall of the first truly world empire.

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Images

1. The Battle of Wadi al-Khazandar 1299. The Mongols under Ghazan defeated the Mamluks.
2. Nightwatchman's pass (paizi) of the Mongol empire
3. Conversion of the Mongols to Islam
4. Mongol coin minted at Jarjim Iran 1319

