

The international system of the Mongol 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 Toluid 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 Hülëgü in the Ilkhanate 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 insisted on an exclusive right to control of all assets within their territory. Absolute sovereignty would have been to everyone’s disadvantage.

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 this 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. 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. Perhaps the city of gers in the middle of Khanbaliq were Kublai's concession to the 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 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 populations

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 produced the food which feed all other social classes. Merchants, by contrast, were the least important since their labor contributed nothing which did not already exist. To the Mongols, however, 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 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. 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. 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 Rubruck'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.

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 goods and that Chinese inventions first reached Europe. The most obvious part of this trade-friendly infrastructure was physical. *[Read more: The Silk Road]* 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. They referred to the system as *örtöö*, 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 relay 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 Mongol-run 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 to determine it in the same fashion throughout the empire.

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 infected lands 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 temporarily 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. *[Read more: Lev Gumilev and Eurasianism]*