

Introduction

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In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Chinggis Khan and his heirs established and ruled the largest contiguous empire in world history, an empire that, at its height, extended from Korea to Hungary, and from Iraq, Tibet, and Burma to Siberia. Ruling over roughly two-thirds of the Old World and profoundly impacting also regions beyond its reach, the Mongol Empire created remarkable mobility across Eurasia, with people, ideas, and artifacts traversing vast geographical distances and cultural boundaries. The exchange of goods, people, germs, and more had far-reaching consequences for the Eurasian political, cultural, and economic dynamics. Introducing new commercial, diplomatic, and intellectual networks, but also revitalizing ancient ones, the Mongol Empire significantly advanced the integration of the Old World.

At the center of these transformations were the Silk Roads, the various trade routes—continental and maritime—that connected East Asia mainly to the Islamic world and Europe, and flourished under Mongol rule. Although the term “Silk Road” was introduced only in the late nineteenth century,¹ the various roads that crisscrossed the Old World, from east to west and north to south, were used, in changing constellations and volumes of traffic, already in prehistorical times.²

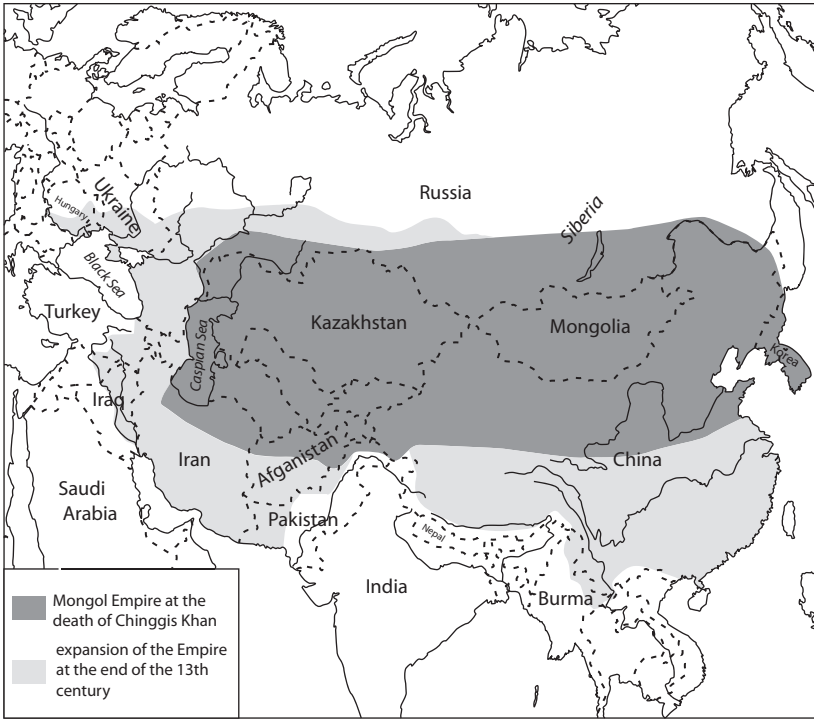
The Mongol era marked a new stage in the history of the Silk Roads, due not only to the growth in volume and scope of the traffic that they channeled. Prior to the Mongol conquests, trade on the Silk Roads was mainly relay trade. Merchants did not travel themselves the entire distance

from eastern to western Eurasia; rather, trade was carried out in shorter circuits, eventually linking East Asia and the Islamic world or Europe. Under the Mongols, however, for the first time in history, individual merchants and travelers could, and did, travel the entire distance themselves, from Europe to China and vice versa. The prominent presence of European merchants along the Silk Roads was another innovation of the Mongol period, though Muslim trade networks remained dominant in most of Mongol-ruled Eurasia. In addition to the rise in the number of travelers, their diversity was equally if not more remarkable; in addition to diplomats, soldiers, and merchants, experts in various fields—medicine, astronomy, entertainment, religion, and military affairs, to name just a few—also spanned the continent. Moreover, a considerable group of those who traversed the Silk Roads did so as “commodities” themselves, ranging from captives and slaves to highly skilled personnel who were delivered as tribute. All were forced to relocate across Eurasia.

The chapters in this volume seek to illustrate life along the Mongol Silk Roads by focusing on the stories of male and female individuals of three elite groups from across Mongol Eurasia: military commanders, merchants, and intellectuals. These people came from diverse backgrounds and ethnic groups. They included Mongols, Chinese, Muslims, Qipchaqs, and Europeans. Their personal experiences elucidate aspects of Eurasian cross-cultural contact and physical and social mobility, beginning with the formative years of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–27) and ending with the empire’s collapse during the second half of the fourteenth century.

BACKGROUND: THE MONGOL EMPIRE

The “Mongol moment” in world history (1206–1368) is commonly divided into two: first, the era of the United Mongol Empire (1206–60)—when an ever-expanding polity ruled the newly conquered lands from its center in Mongolia; second, the period of “the Mongol Commonwealth,” during which the empire dissolved into four regional empires. Known as khanates or *uluses*,³ these four Mongol polities were centered in China, Iran, Central Asia, and the Volga region, and were headed by contending branches of Chinggis Khan’s descendants. With the dissolution of the United Empire, the Great Khan’s capital shifted from Mongolia to North China, eventually settling in Beijing. Despite the numerous, often bloody, disputes between the four Mongol polities, they retained a strong sense of Chinggisid unity. In the mid-fourteenth



MAP 0.1. Mongol Eurasia (1206–1368) (after Biran 2007, 12–13).

century, all four empires were embroiled in political crises that led to the collapse of the Mongol states in Iran (1336) and China (1368), and considerably weakened the two remaining Steppe khanates. The fall of the Great Khan's state in China is generally considered the end of the “Mongol moment” in world history, although Chinggis Khan's descendants continued to rule in the western Steppe, Muslim Central Asia, and India, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, the memory of the empire and its political structures continued to influence patterns of imperial formation and rule across Eurasia well into the early-modern period.

THE UNITED MONGOL EMPIRE (*YEKE MONGGHOL ULUS*, 1206–59)

Most of the empire's territorial expansion, as well as the formation of its institutions and ideology of world domination, took place during the

period of the United Empire. After two decades of bloody internecine wars, Temüjin united the Mongolian tribes and in 1206 was enthroned as Chinggis Khan (literally: universal ruler or harsh ruler). He spent the next few years (1204–9) organizing his nascent state. Relying on the precedents established by the earlier Inner Asian nomadic empires, notably the Turkic Empire of the sixth to eighth centuries, Chinggis Khan borrowed, for the consolidation of his future empire, ideological concepts, a writing system, and military and administrative institutions.

Following its incubation period, the newly organized Mongol army had to be put into action soon to prevent its soldiers from turning against each other, provide booty, and maintain Chinggis Khan's image as a successful military leader. Hence, principally from 1209 onward, Chinggis Khan led his armies outside Mongolia, gradually expanding from raids to conquests. When he died in 1227, he ruled over the largest territory any single individual had ever conquered—from north China to the Caspian Sea. One turning point in his career was his victories in Central Asia, against the Muslim Khwārazmshāh, who in the early thirteenth century ruled a vast, though recently assembled, empire, from Iran to the Jaxartes River (present-day Uzbekistan's eastern border). Through his military achievements in Central Asia during the 1220s, Chinggis Khan gained both considerable territory and human capital, including highly qualified nomadic warriors. These conquests also added a new set of Muslim precedents and talent to his administrative and imperial toolkit. The extraordinary success of his western campaign convinced Chinggis Khan himself and everyone around him that he was indeed destined to rule the earth.⁴

How were Chinggis Khan and his heirs able to conquer and rule such a large swath of land, and moreover, to accomplish this in such a short period? Several external factors contributed to the Chinggisids' success: the political fragmentation of Eurasia in the centuries leading to his rise; the emergence of post-nomadic states along the Eurasian Steppe, in eastern, central, and western Asia, which provided the Mongols with guiding models for ruling nonnomadic populations; and finally, nearly two decades (1211–25) of extremely high levels of rainfall in Inner Asia providing the vegetation and fodder needed for the quick and massive expansion of the Mongols' nomadic military apparatus, which heavily relied on horses and husbandry.⁵

The main reason for the Mongols' success, however, was none of the above. It was, above all, Chinggis Khan's own policies, notably the efficient mobilization of resources—human, material, and spiritual—and

his pragmatic willingness to learn from others both in military and civil matters.⁶ The reorganization of the army was one of the major steps Chinggis Khan took toward securing his rule in Mongolia and the empire's expansion. Military technological innovations or the usage of gunpowder-based artillery appear to have played a minor role, if any at all, in their success. In terms of armament and tactics, the Mongol armies largely kept to the traditional methods of Steppe warfare.⁷ Rather, it was their superior leadership, discipline, and strategic planning that made the Mongols exceptionally successful, and enabled them to mobilize the Steppe's chief military resource—the mounted archers (and at later stages, sedentary soldiers from the conquered lands as well).

Chinggis Khan retained the typical Inner Asian decimal units (10, 100, 1,000, 10,000), but abolished the tribal division of the military. The new units included individuals from different tribes; they were led, not by tribal chieftains, but by Chinggis Khan's own *nökörs* (personal retainers). Selected according to merit and loyalty, the empire's new *nökör* elite provided the Chinggisids with a highly professional and reliable military elite. However, the heads of several tribal lineages were allowed to retain a segment of their troops. Their loyalty to the Chinggisids was also secured through marriages with the Chinggisid family. Although some tribal identities proved to be more enduring—or were cleverly resurrected—the Chinggisids never faced a serious tribal threat after this reorganization. The Mongols incorporated large numbers of submitted soldiers into their armies, dividing them among the decimal units.

The army's allegiance was further buttressed with draconian disciplinary measures on the one hand, and generous distribution of the booty on the other. Both the distribution of plunder and the troops' discipline were sanctioned by the famous *Jasaq* (Turkish: *Yasa*)—the continually evolving law code ascribed to Chinggis Khan. The implementation of the *Jasaq* was supervised by his newly appointed judges (*jarghuchis*).

Chinggis Khan moreover adopted the Inner Asian institution of the supratribal royal guard (*keshig*). A combination of crack troops, police force, and a personal retinue, the *keshig* became the “nursery” of the empire's new military and administrative elite.⁸ The composite army was constantly at war, securing conquest and booty and wreaking havoc.

Another important factor in the Mongols' success was the unprecedented devastation their armies left behind, and the violent massacres they carried out during their conquests, which have shaped the Mongols' image ever since. However, the violence they unleashed was not

driven by wanton cruelty. Rather, as a strategic ploy, destruction and violence were enacted both as a means of psychological warfare and a brutal but effective way of compensating for the Mongols' numerical inferiority. The Mongols established a wide belt of destruction around their territories which functioned as a buffer zone preventing future incursions, and facilitated their further expansion, as well as increased available pasture. The Mongols substantially reduced the devastation in the later stages of the conquests (e.g., South China in the 1260s to 1270s). Further, some areas were restored shortly after the conquest, even becoming flourishing sedentary centers of the empire.⁹

Another major reason for the Mongol success was their willingness to learn from others—subjects, neighbors, and visitors—and their skill in doing so. This was particularly apparent in the military field (e.g., the use of siege engineers from both China and the Muslim world, or the establishment of the Mongol navy). Yet, the Mongols were on the lookout for talent and innovation in other fields as well: administration, medicine, astronomy, and entertainment, to name but a few. As early as 1204, Chinggis Khan adopted the Uighur script for writing Mongolian, thereby creating a literate staff. Thereafter, the Mongols drew extensively on their experienced subjects to administer the conquered territories and operate their courts. As with their military successes, the resourceful mobilization of talent and skills greatly contributed to the Mongols' effective administration. Their policy of religious pluralism and the respect and privileges they conferred upon religious and intellectual elites further enabled them to co-opt their subjects. Their active promotion of trade secured the support of the merchants, who were also often recruited to the imperial administration.

The Mongols' success in itself was the final factor that led to their further success. After heading out of Mongolia, Chinggis Khan did not suffer one single humiliating defeat, and his later victories were easier and quicker than his initial attacks on China. His record of conquest remained unblemished throughout his campaigns. Each victory further motivated his soldiers and discouraged his rivals. His military successes bolstered Chinggis Khan's public image as a charismatic ruler, preordained by Heaven (Tengri, the Mongols' supreme sky god) to conquer the world. Under his heirs, the mission of world conquest became the collective destiny of his entire clan. The Chinggisids' spate of victories continued throughout the United Empire. When the Mongols began to experience defeat (e.g., in 1258 in Vietnam, or in 1260 in Palestine), these downfalls were still dwarfed by the empire's previous achievements.¹⁰

Chinggis Khan also tried to avoid one of main weaknesses of nomadic empires, namely royal succession. Several overlapping and contradictory succession principles were employed in Steppe societies, creating the potential for bitter succession struggles after the demise of each khan. Both linear (father to son) and lateral (from brother to brother) succession were common, and principles of seniority and direct progeny (patrilineal and matrilineal) played a role as well. Moreover, the contenders' skills and success on the battlefield had significant, perhaps even primary, importance in deciding the successor. To avoid his succession turning into a bloody struggle, Chinggis Khan appointed his third son, Ögödei (r. 1229–41), as heir. Selected for his generosity and good temperament, which helped keep the empire together, Ögödei proved to be a fine choice. He not only continued his father's military expansion; under his reign, the empire's administration, policies, and ideology were further developed and systemized.

Assuming the title qa'an or great khan, Ögödei thus established his own position as superior to his brothers', who bore only the title khan. He founded the Mongol capital, Qaraqorum ("Black Sands") in the Orkhon valley in central Mongolia, the sacred territory of the Turks and Uighurs, and systematized the *jam* (Turk. *yam*), the mounted postal courier system. Post stations were established at stages, one day's journey apart (about every 33 to 45 kilometers), and provided animals, fodder, and couriers for authorized travelers. Travelers on the *jam* were therefore able to cover large distances, about 350 to 400 kilometers a day. The *jam* enabled the effective and quick transmission of imperial orders from the court, and the delivery of information from the far ends of the empire to the ruler. And it further secured the routes for ambassadors and for the merchants who had a special relationship with the Mongol elite.¹¹

Ögödei also shaped the central administration of the empire, separating military and administrative authorities, employing professional administrators from the conquered regions, and regulating revenue collection and military recruitment. The Mongol ideology of world conquest was further elaborated and openly proclaimed, fueling a new wave of expansion. In 1234, the Mongols annihilated Chinggis Khan's bitter enemy, the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), and in 1237–41 they wrought havoc in Europe, devastating south Russia and the Ukraine, and reaching as far as Germany before retreating to the plains of Hungary. After Jalāl al-Dīn Khwārazmshāh's death in 1231, the small Mongol contingent that had been pursuing the Muslim ruler went on to subdue Georgia and Armenia, and even advanced into Anatolia during the interregnum

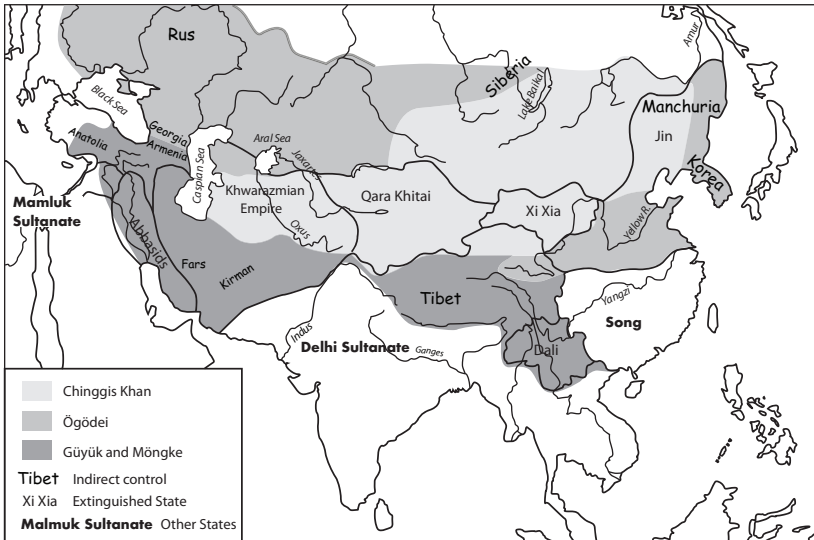
between Ögödei's death (1241) and the succession of Ögödei's eldest son, Güyük (r. 1246–48). During these five years, when the empire was ruled by Ögödei's widow, Töregene (d. 1246), most of the empire's expansion came to a halt. Güyük too died before achieving further major conquests. This situation, however, changed under his cousin and successor, Möngke (r. 1251–59), the son of Chinggis Khan's younger son, Tolui.

Möngke rose to power after a bloody coup, also known as the Toluid revolution,¹² in which Tolui's sons replaced the Ögödeids as the ruling family line. Möngke's accession was secured by massive purges among the Ögödeid and Chaghadaid branches and their supporters,¹³ as well as by administrative reforms that advanced the empire's centralization. Using censuses, Möngke was able to mobilize the resources of his vast realm to advance the empire's expansion. He appointed his brothers to lead new campaigns: Qubilai (r. 1260–94) was sent to China, and Hülegü (r. 1260–65) to the Middle East. Hülegü first subdued the Assassins, the Shī'ī Nizārī Ismā'īlī sect. Based in the fortress of Alamūt in the mountains of northern Iran, the Ismā'īlīs were infamous for the clandestine assassinations of their enemies.

In early 1258, Hülegü's forces stormed Baghdad, the seat of the 'Abbasid Caliphate, putting an end to the more than half a millennium-old Muslim caliphate. While Hülegü was campaigning in the Middle East, his brother Möngke was fighting against the Chinese Song dynasty (r. 960–1279) in southwest China. In 1253–4, another sibling, Qubilai, conquered the kingdom of Dali, in today's Yunnan province in China. Qubilai then continued to fight the Song forces on the Yangtze River, where, in the summer of 1259, he learned of Möngke's death.

The process of empire building, briefly sketched above, involved the extensive mobilization of human and material resources throughout Mongol territories and farther afield. This was due, first, to demographic considerations. The Mongols, who by Chinggis Khan's time numbered less than a million people, were able to create their huge empire only by fully mobilizing all resources, human and material, from the regions under their control. Moreover, mobility was central to the nomadic Mongols' culture and way of life, and thus it was natural for them to use it for imperial needs. Since the Chinggisids regarded skilled individuals as a form of booty to be distributed across the empire and among the family, myriad people were transferred across Eurasia to provide for the empire's military, administrative, and cultural needs.

The military was the main catalyst for the mobilization of individuals. The Mongols appropriated the defeated nomadic and sedentary



MAP 0.2. Conquests of the United Empire (1206–59).

populations, and organized them into decimal units, sent to wage war across the continent. Their formidable army further instigated the mass flight of people, as throngs of refugees from all classes and professions fled the approaching storm. The Mongol campaigns further resulted in myriads of captives flooding the empire's slave markets, and in defections of both individuals and collectives, though mostly after 1260. The empire transferred thousands of farmers and artisans to repopulate and revive devastated areas. The Mongols looked for experts in fields such as administration, military technology, trade, religion, craftsmanship, science, and entertainment. The recruitment of these professionals was systematized as early as the late 1230s, with the establishment of the census, classifying people according to their vocational skills. After the dissolution of the United Empire, the four khanates competed for and exchanged specialists in order to optimize their wealth and enhance their royal reputation.

Cross-Eurasian mobility, however, was not just a matter of coercion under Mongol rule. The rulers' reputation for rewarding loyal retainers, their encouragement of trade, their pluralistic attitude toward the religions of their subjects, and their preference for ruling through foreigners, namely employing nonlocal administrators, all assisted in attracting many gifted individuals to Chinggisid service.

The wide-ranging mobility of experts across the empire further promoted cross-cultural exchanges on a previously unprecedented level. Although it was mainly the cultural elements of their sedentary subjects, and not aspects of the Mongols' own culture, that were exchanged and trafficked across Eurasia, it was the Mongol elite who initiated the bulk of these exchanges and influenced their direction and extent. Imperial agents, ranging from diplomats, merchants, and administrators, to artisans, soldiers, and hostages, were the prime conveyers of cultures, ideas, and materials across the Mongol Silk Roads. Moreover, these imperial agents prioritized the exchange and transmission of the cultural elements of the sedentary subjects that were particularly compatible with the Mongols' cultural preferences. These included medical expertise (i.e., healing), astronomy, and divination (the reading of heaven), and geography and cartography (through which military intelligence was acquired). Functioning as cultural "filters," the Mongols' affinities and needs determined, to a large extent, the flow of people, ideas, and artifacts across Eurasia.¹⁴

The Mongols also cultivated economic ties that extended far beyond the empire's confines. They inherited, invigorated, and extended the various trade routes along the Silk Roads, as well as sundry means for resource extraction and exchange, including plunder, asset redistribution, taxation or tribute, and gifting. Not only did the Mongols provide security and transportation infrastructure, but they were active participants in Eurasian trade, both as investors and consumers.

Trade had long been essential to nomads, since their resources could not cover all their needs. In addition, nomadic political culture required leaders to redistribute wealth (e.g., silk), which was often produced or assembled by their sedentary neighbors or subjects, among their followers. Chinggis Khan was certainly aware of the benefits of commerce, which was the premise behind his expansion into Central Asia. And Muslim and Uighur merchants were among his earliest supporters. As the empire grew, systemic plunder was the major source of luxury goods. Redistributed among the Mongol elite, the khans and princes often chose to invest these considerable fortunes in international trade. Consequently, they entrusted their capital to commercial agents, *ortaq*s (partners), most of whom were Muslims and Uighurs.

The *ortaq* was a trader (or trading company) acting on behalf of, or financed by, a Mongol or other notable, in return for a share in the profits. The revenues were often spent on lavish consumption that typified the nouveaux riches, but was also meant to showcase the ruler's

prestige and power. The establishment of Qaraqorum further induced trade, for the resources of Mongolia could hardly support such an imperial center. The Chinggisids were ready to generously pay to enjoy the best the sedentary world could offer, all the while remaining on the Steppe. Many traders eagerly exploited these opportunities, benefiting from the safe roads and access to imperial post stations. International trade, both in luxury and bulk goods, therefore resumed soon after the conquests, and trade along the overland Silk Roads picked up once again during the United Empire.¹⁵

“THE MONGOL COMMONWEALTH”:
POST-1260 POLITIES

The succession struggle that erupted immediately upon Möngke’s demise, from which Qubilai Qa’an (r. 1260–94) emerged victorious, led to the empire’s dissolution. The process was accelerated by the empire’s sheer size, which made its management increasingly challenging. Moreover, the empire’s growth beyond the ecological borders of the Steppe rendered more difficult the additional military expansion, which had served to keep the *uluses* together. Eventually the United Empire was replaced by four big *uluses* or khanates.

The Khanate of the Great Khan (in Mongolian *Qa’an ulus*), later known as the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), ruled over China, Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, and Manchuria, and enjoyed a nominal, though not uncontested, primacy over its counterparts. The Ilkhanate (1260–1335), literally “the empire of the submissive khans” (in Mongolian *Ulus Hülegü*, after its founder, Hülegü), ruled in modern Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, parts of Anatolia, and the Caucasus. The Golden Horde (1260–1480), in Mongolian *Ulus Jochi*, after Chinggis Khan’s firstborn son, governed the northwestern Eurasian Steppe, from the eastern border of Hungary to Siberia, as well as the Russian principalities. The Chaghadaid Khanate (in Mongolian *Ulus Chaghadaid*, after Chinggis Khan’s second son Chaghadaid) held power in Central Asia, from eastern Xinjiang (China) to Uzbekistan, until Tamerlane’s rise to power in 1370, and over eastern Central Asia through the late seventeenth century. Until the early fourteenth the Chaghadaids shared rule in Central Asia with their cousins, the Ögödeids. Ögödei’s grandson, Qaidu (r. 1271–1301), resurrected the Ögödeids’ power after it was curbed under Möngke. Qaidu refused to acknowledge the authority of the Great Khan in China, and throughout his reign, raided the Yuan and the Ilkhanate, often with