The Women Who Ruled the Mongol Empire

By Jack Weatherford | Monday, June 20, 2005

The Western world still trembles at the sound of two words — Genghis Khan — and his powerful Mongol hordes. While the male successors of Genghis Khan have received extensive attention, it is unknown to many that women dominated the world’s largest empire for considerable periods of time. Jack Weatherford sheds light on the women who served as the backbone of the empire in many critical times.

Traditionally among the Mongols, women managed the affairs at home, while men went off to herd, hunt or fight.

Never before, or since, has such a large empire been ruled by women.

As the war campaigns extended farther away and grew ever longer during the 13th century, women expanded their control and assumed public office as rulers.

This is especially true for most of the years between the reign of Genghis Khan, which ended in 1227, and that of his grandson Khubilai, which commenced in 1260.

Genghis Khan’s son Ogodei became Great Khan in 1229. However, he increasingly spent his time in drunken binges. As a result, power gradually conveyed to Toregene, the most capable, although not the senior, wife.

The oldest surviving evidence of Toregene’s authority in the Mongol court appears in an order to print Taoist texts issued by her as Yeke Khatun, Great Empress, under her own name, but still under the seal of Ogodei on April 10, 1240. The document shows clearly that she already controlled part of the civilian administration of the empire.

While the men fought, she pursued an entirely different line of activities supporting religion, education and construction projects on an imperial scale.

Soon thereafter Ogodei died, probably in an alcoholic stupor — and in 1241, Toregene assumed complete power as regent.
In pursuit of her own policies, she dismissed her late husband's ministers and replaced them with her own, the most important of whom was another woman, Fatima, a Tajik or Persian captive from the Middle Eastern campaign.

The Persian chronicler Juvaini, who seemingly disapproved of women's involvement in politics, wrote that Fatima enjoyed constant access to Toregene's tent. According to him, she "became the sharer of intimate confidences and the depository of hidden secrets."

Fatima played a political role while the older ministers were debarred from executing business, and she was free to issue commands and prohibitions.

During Toregene's reign, foreign dignitaries arrived from the distant corners of the empire to her capital at Karakorum or to her nomadic imperial camp. Emirs, governors and grandees jostled along the same roads as princes and kings.

The Seljuk sultan came from Turkey — as did representatives of the Caliph of Baghdad. So did two claimants to the throne of Georgia: David, the legitimate son of the late king — and David, the illegitimate son of the same king.

The highest-ranking European delegate was Alexander Nevsky's father, Grand Prince Yaroslav II Vsevdodovich of Vladimir and Suzdal, who died suspiciously just after dining with Toregene Khatun.

In addition to the rule of Toregene and Fatima from Karakorum in Mongolia, two of the other three divisions of the empire also had female governors.

Sorkhokhtani, the widow of Genghis Khan's youngest son Tolui, ruled northern China and eastern Mongolia. Ebuskun, the widow of Genghis Khan's second son Chaghatai, ruled Central Asia or Turkestan.

Only the Golden Horde of Russia, under the control of Batu Khan, remained under male rule.

Not only were most of the rulers women, but surprisingly, none had been born Mongol. They had married into the family from a conquered steppe tribe, and aside from Fatima, most of the women were Christians. In the Mongol world, neither gender nor religion hindered these women's rise to power.

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Toregene passed power onto her inept son Guyuk in 1246, but within 18 months, he lay dead under still unexplained circumstances. In the continuing political struggles at the center of the empire, the fringes began to unravel.
With his great love of metaphors, the chronicler Juvaini wrote: "The affairs of the world had been diverted from the path of rectitude and the reins of commerce and fair dealing turned aside from the highway of righteousness." He described the land as being in darkness, "and the cup of the world was filled to the brim with the drink of iniquity."

The Mongol people and their subjects, "dragged now this way, now that, were at their wits' end, for they had neither the endurance to stay nor did they know of a place to which they might flee."

After Guyuk's brief reign, it was time again for a woman — his widow Oghul Ghamish — to step forward and take control of the empire — just as her mother-in-law Toregene had done a decade earlier.

However, the other powerful woman of the empire — Sorkhokhtani — quickly contested her rule. With the full support of her four capable sons and a lifetime of preparation and waiting, Sorkhokhtani organized the campaign of election of her son to the office of Great Khan.

On July 1, 1251, the assembled Mongol throng proclaimed the election of her son, the 43-year-old Mongke.

Whereas Genghis Khan himself had produced sons who were relatively weak, prone to drink and self-centered, Sorkhokhtani had produced and trained four sons destined to make a major mark on history.

Each of her sons was a khan. In the coming years, Mongke, Arik Boke and Khubilai would all carry the title of Great Khan, for various lengths of time, and her other son, Hulegu, became the conqueror of Baghdad and founded a new dynasty of the Persian Ilkhante.

So great was her achievement that a Persian chronicler wrote that if history produced only one more woman equal to Sorhokhtani, then surely women would have to be judged as the superior sex.

The Mongol women presented a strange sight to the civilizations that they helped conquer. They rode horses, shot arrows from their bows and commanded both men and women.

In China, the Mongol women rejected foot binding — and in the Muslim world, they refused to wear the veil.

Yet, quickly after settling down in their newly conquered lands, Mongol women lost public power. Only in Mongolia did they continue to rule and to fight.

While Khubilai Khan ruled from the Chinese capital he founded at Beijing, his cousin Khaidu continued to fight against him from Central Asia and, true to the Mongol traditions, Khaidu's daughter fought with him.

According to Marco Polo, who referred to her as Aiyaruk, she was both beautiful and powerful — and skilled as an archer and wrestler. She supposedly never married, because
she vowed only to marry the man who could defeat her at wrestling, and none did. Her story, in part, inspired the 20th century opera Turandot by Puccini.

The empire of Genghis Khan ultimately lasted for a century and a half. By 1368, the Mongols were overthrown — and most of them withdrew to their steppe homeland.

While the men returned to squabbling over sheep and stealing horses, the women kept the imperial spirit alive. In the late 15th century, a new conqueror arose determined to restore the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan.

She was Manduhi, known forever to the grateful Mongols as Manduhai the Wise Queen. She took to the battlefield and, one by one, re-conquered the steppe tribes and united them into a single nation.

But this time, they were no match for the Chinese who rapidly expanded the Great Wall to keep her out and who now used the new artillery of gunpowder to defeat her troops. The era of the great warrior queens of Mongolia had passed.

And yet, on cold winter nights to this day, parents whisper to their children the stories of the great queens of Mongolia who ruled the largest empire in world history, and who still ride the wind.

By 1368, the Mongols were overthrown — but the women kept the imperial spirit alive.
China has a love-hate relationship with what is foreign. Traditionally all people beyond the Great Wall were barbarians - only part human. But invaders have sometimes been welcomed, in time, into the Chinese family. One was Kublai Khan.

In the 13th Century, no-one knew how big the world was so it was not so wild for the Mongols to set off from the grassland with the idea that they were going to conquer all of it. When the mighty Genghis Khan died in 1227, he had already claimed an empire stretching from the Pacific to Europe. His grandson Kublai set out to finish the job, and started by moving south to attack China's Song dynasty. But China had been a united empire on and off for more than 1,000 years. So what did the Song dynasty rulers make of Kublai's ambition?
"For the Song, it would been absolutely inconceivable that the Mongols could take over the whole of China," says John Man, author of a biography of Kublai Khan. "It would have been like, I don't know, the Picts taking over the Roman Empire or the Sioux in North America taking over the whole of Canada and the United States - inconceivable. So when it actually happened, the shock was catastrophic." The child emperor committed suicide. So did many loyal officials and their families.

Over centuries, the Chinese had got used to regarding themselves as THE world civilisation, and now this civilisation was at the mercy of people they viewed as barbarians. "Barbarians are these people who are not Chinese - savages, hovering between human and some kind of beast," says Xun Zhou, a historian at Hong Kong University. She points out that unease about the barbarian or foreign devil is embedded in Chinese writing. Part of the character used to refer to them is the one used for animals. "These people looked different. And that difference proposed a problem," says Xun Zhou. "For China, they don't really know how they should react to these people."

Mongol pleasures included wrestling, fermented mare's milk and throat singing, where the singer sings chords instead of single notes. All very different
from the southern Chinese elites who wore exquisite silks, admired each other's poetry and went to art exhibitions. They paid armies to do the fighting. Kublai was hugely outnumbered. The Song dynasty was a "a monumental culture" of 70 million people, says Man, and 10 to 100 times stronger in military terms. The Mongols had to be clever. One major battle took place at Xiangyang, a city with impenetrable walls dominating the Han River, a tributary of the Yangtze. "This turned into a sort of a mini Troy," says Man. "The siege went on for five years. The Chinese could not break out, the Mongols could not break in. There were countless attempts to sneak in, to break in, to break out - all foiled. So there had to be some sort of a new initiative, and the initiative was suggested by the empire itself." The Mongol empire, that is.

Kublai's relatives ruled all the way to Eastern Europe and he had heard of great catapults the Christians had used during the Crusades. He summoned two Persian engineers, who built the equivalent of heavy artillery - a catapult that could sling 100kg (220lb) of rock over 200m-300m (650ft - 1,000ft). After a few shots to get the range, it brought down a mighty tower in a cloud of dust. The capture of the city allowed the Mongol fleets access to southern China which, for the first time, was taken by barbarians. Kublai, in fact, ruled over all of present-day China. Yunnan in the south-west bordering Vietnam and Burma, Xinjiang stretching into central Asia, and of course Tibet. It is paradoxical that the country owes its enormous size to invaders with expansionist ambitions.

Kublai's capital was Beijing. The city today goes on putting up scaffolding and high-rises. But it was Kublai who gave it its first big makeover. He gave his dynasty a Chinese name, Yuan, and he ruled through a Chinese civil service. Chinese history has returned the compliment by absorbing the Mongol dynasty into its own imperial story - and absorbing part of Mongolia itself into the Chinese state. Today the Mongolians form one of China's 56 ethnic groups, along with Tibetans, Uighurs and the dominant Han. Having a porous sense of what is Chinese is itself part of the Chinese tradition.

The same applies to innovations the barbarians brought with them and which China found useful. Chinese medicine absorbed Islamic medicine, points out Xun, "but they never talk about it". Galloping as they did from one end of Eurasia to the other, the Mongols had picked up plenty of useful novelties. "They introduced buttons," says Verity Wilson, an expert on Chinese clothes and textiles. "Prior to this time, men and women had always closed their robes with some sort of belt. But, the Yuan dynasty is credited with bringing to China the
toggle-and-loop button, which now today we just call Chinese. It's a real marker of Chinese dress that they're closed with these toggle-and-loop buttons. But they didn't really come in until the Yuan dynasty." This process of assimilation has continued ever since. Chillies are a later example, arriving from the New World in the Ming dynasty of the 15th and 16th centuries.
"But now they've been absolutely incorporated into the Chinese way of life, and we can't really think about Chinese cooking without chillies," says Wilson.
"And the other thing we think about is teapots. Teapots have very much become an item associated with China. But pre-Ming dynasty, there were no teapots in China. So I think all those things which we take to be quintessentially Chinese have actually been absorbed by the Chinese from other cultures." The arrival of the bicycle some 500 years later was initially greeted with scorn. To begin with, it was only so-called "foreign devils" who rode them. No self-respecting Chinese gentleman - and even less a woman - would be seen sweating under their own locomotion. But soon it would become the Chinese worker's vehicle of choice.

Just 50 years ago, if a Chinese had declared a preference for American food, it might have cost them their liberty, if not their life. China rid itself of Japanese occupation at the end of World War II and the communists had thrown out Westerners after 1949. Soon, even the Soviets were sent packing. It was part of the party's narrative of a united China standing up to foreign aggressors. But by the 1980s, foreigners were being welcomed back. Which is why, 20 years ago, I attended the opening of the first McDonald's restaurant in Beijing. Now it feels as if there is American fast food or coffee on every corner. In some ways, today's penetration of foreign products - American fast food, German cars and Japanese electronics - mirrors that of a century ago when the colonial powers had forced open Chinese ports to trade. The difference is that this time it is at China's invitation.

Kublai's own dream of world domination would never be realised. Twice he launched an armada against Japan, the largest the world had ever seen or would ever see again until the Allied invasion of Europe 700 years later. And twice his navy was scattered by what the Japanese called their kamikaze, or "divine wind". The Mongol dream of world conquest sank with Kublai's ships. "He became old, he became fat, he became ill. His only son and heir died, his wife died, and he himself died in 1294 and left this part of the empire to his heirs, and none of them matched him in competence," says Man. "So 80 years later, they were chased
out in a revolution and went back to the grassland from which they originally emerged."

The revolution put a home-grown emperor on the throne, but only until the next foreign dynasty which again brought China new territory and ideas. The very last emperor of all loved bicycles, by the way. He is said to have removed doorstops in the Forbidden City so that he could cycle around, but that is another story. The point I want to make is that there is complicated history around what is Chinese… and what is not.

*Translation of The Travels of Marco Polo by Colonel Sir Henry Yule.*

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EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO: THE VENETIAN CONCERNING KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST

Introduction

Marco Polo (1254-1324) was born in Venice, an Italian city-state, to a powerful merchant family with extensive trade contacts. Marco Polo had the standard education for a young gentleman of his time—knowledge of classical authors and the basic beliefs of the Catholic church, a good grasp of French and Italian, and skills in accounting.

In 1260, Marco Polo’s father and uncle traveled through the Mongol empire, all the way to its capital in China. There they requested trade and missionary contacts. Tradition has it that on a second trip, taken in 1271, on which they carried messages from the Pope, the elder Polos took along young Marco, who was then seventeen. Many years later, Marco Polo, with the assistance of a romance novel writer, composed a book entitled The Travels of Marco Polo, or, A Description of the World. If the book is to be believed, Marco Polo spent seventeen years in China, during which time he not only conducted business, but also was hired by the Mongol Yuan emperor to serve as the governor of Yangzhou, a large southern Chinese port city.

The veracity of Marco Polo’s account is hotly debated among scholars. Some uphold Polo’s claim to have been to China, while others argue that he simply picked up tales of China from Arab traders and compiled them into a book. None dispute, however, that the book does contain descriptions of Yuan-dynasty China, albeit with the embellishments and inaccuracies that one would expect from text that has been copied and recopied since the thirteenth century.

In the excerpts that follow, Marco Polo (or his Arab sources) describes the cities and urban life of Yuan-dynasty China.


BOOK SECOND. PART I. CHAPTER X.
CONCERNING THE PALACE OF THE GREAT KAAN

You must know that it is the greatest palace that ever was. … The roof is very lofty, and the walls of the Palace are all covered with gold and silver. They are also adorned with representations of dragons [sculptured and gilt], beasts and birds, knights and idols, and sundry other subjects. And on the ceiling too you see nothing but gold and silver and painting.
[On each of the four sides there is a great marble staircase leading to the top of the marble wall, and forming the approach to the palace.]

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO:
THE VENETIAN CONCERNING KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST

The Hall of the Palace is so large that it could easily dine 6000 people; and it is quite a marvel to see how many rooms there are besides. The building is altogether so vast, so rich, and so beautiful, that no man on earth could design anything superior to it. …

BOOK SECOND. PART I.
CHAPTER XXX. CONCERNING THE BLACK STONES THAT ARE DUG IN CATHAY, AND ARE BURNT FOR FUEL

It is a fact that all over the country of Cathay there is a kind of black stone existing in beds in the mountains, which they dig out and burn like firewood. If you supply the fire with them at night, and see that they are well kindled, you will find them still alight in the morning; and they make such fine fuel that no other is used throughout the country. It is true that they have plenty of wood also, but they do not burn it, because those stones burn better and cost less. [Moreover with the vast number of people and the number of baths they maintain—for every one has such a bath at least three times a week, and in winter if possible every day, whilst every nobleman and man of wealth has a private bath for his own use—the wood would not suffice for the purpose.]

BOOK SECOND. PART III.
CHAPTER LXXV. OF THE NOBLE CITY OF SUJU

Suju is a very great and noble city. The people are Idolaters, subjects of the Great Kaan, and have paper money. They possess silk in great quantities, from which they make gold brocade and other stuffs, and they live by their manufactures and trade. The city is passing great, and has a circuit of some 60 miles; it hath merchants of great wealth and an incalculable number of people. Indeed, if the men of this city and of the rest of Manzi had but the spirit of soldiers they would conquer the world; but they are no soldiers at all, only accomplished traders and most skillful craftsman. There are also in this city many great philosophers and leeches, diligent students of nature.
BOOK SECOND. PART III.
CHAPTER LXXVI. DESCRIPTION OF THE GREAT CITY OF KINSAY, WHICH IS THE CAPITAL OF THE WHOLE COUNTRY OF MANZI

When you have left the city of Changan and have travelled for three days through a splendid country, passing a number of towns and villages, you arrive at the most noble city of Kinsay, a name which is as much as to say in our tongue “The City of Heaven,” as I told you before.

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK OF SER MARCO POLO:
THE VENETIAN CONCERNING KINGDOMS AND MARVELS OF THE EAST

And since we have got thither I will enter into particulars about its magnificence; and these are well worth telling, for the city is beyond dispute the finest and the noblest in the world. In this we shall speak according to the written statement which the Queen of this Realm sent to Bayan the conqueror of the country for transmission to the Great Kaan, in order that he might be aware of the surpassing grandeur of the city and might be moved to save it from destruction or injury. …

First and foremost, then, the document stated the city Kinsay to be so great that it hath an hundred miles of compass. And there are in it twelve thousand bridges of stone, for the most part so lofty that a great fleet could pass beneath them. … The document aforesaid also went on to state that there were in this city twelve guilds of the different crafts, and that each guild had 12,000 houses in the occupation of its workmen… The document aforesaid also stated that the number and wealth of the merchants, and the amount of goods that passed through their hands, was so enormous that no man could form a just estimate thereof. …

Inside the city there is a Lake which has a compass of some 30 miles: and all around it are erected beautiful palaces and mansions, of the riches and most exquisite structures that you can imagine, belonging to the nobles of the city. There are also on its shores many abbeys and churches of the Idolaters. In the middle of the Lake are two Islands, on each of which stands a rich, beautiful and spacious edifice, furnished in such style as to seem fit for the palace of an Emperor. And when any one of the citizens desired to hold a marriage feast, or to give any other entertainment, it used to be done at one of these palaces. And everything would be found there ready to order, such as silver plate, trenchers, and dishes [napkins and table-cloths], and whatever else was needful. The King made this provision for the gratification of his people, and the place was open to every one who desired to give an entertainment. [Sometimes there would be at these palaces an hundred different parties; some holding a banquet, others celebrating a wedding; and yet all would find good accommodation in the different apartments and pavilions, and that in so well ordered a manner that one party was never in the way of another.]
There used to be the city of Riazan in the land of Riazan, but its wealth disappeared and its glory ceased, and there is nothing to be seen in the city excepting smoke, ashes, and barren earth.... And instead of joy, there are only uninterrupted lamentations.

--Tale of the Destruction of Riazan

The city of al-Sara [Sarai] is one of the finest of cities, of boundless size... choked with the throng of its inhabitants, and possessing good bazaars and broad streets. --Ibn Battuta

Few subjects provoke more heated debate than the impact of the Mongols. Were they primarily a destructive force, leaving a swath of ashes and barren earth, or did they create conditions for the flourishing of cities, trade and cultural exchange across Eurasia? Evil or good? The answer, in fact, is not quite so simple, since it very much depends on when and where we look. Riazan's tragedy at the hands of the Mongols in 1237 is no more "typical" than is prosperity of Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde, at the time of Ibn Battuta's visit nearly a century later. Yet both are real, and their descriptions not mere propaganda on the part of the Christian monk who wrote the "Tale" or the pious Moroccan Muslim.

We might begin with some comments on the bias of our sources. Most narratives about the Mongol invasion and rule were written by sedentary peoples whom the nomadic Mongols had conquered. The traumas of war and the burdens of occupation by a culturally alien people naturally loom large in such accounts. Even those who arguably benefitted by working for the Mongols were unable to overcome their dislike for their masters, a dislike often rooted in cultural prejudice. A good example is Ata-Malik Juvaini, who wrote an important chronicle of Mongol history in the 1250s. A native of Khorasan--an area of northeastern Iran that, in his words, was "the rising-place of felicities and charities, the location of desirable things and good works, the fount of learned men"--Juvaini could not let his readers forget that "today...the earth hath been divested of the adornment of the presence of those clad in the gown of science and those decked in the
jewels of learning and letters.” Yet even Juvaini’s picture is far from one-sided or consistent. By the time he wrote, Bukhara, “the cupola of Islam,” had recovered from its conquest, “and today no town in the countries of Islam will bear comparison with Bukhara in the thronging of its creatures, the multitude of movable and immovable wealth, the concourse of savants, the flourishing of science....” In other words, the Mongols’ cruelty and lack of culture did not necessarily mean the end of civilization as Juvaini knew it.

Our perceptions of the Mongol impact may reflect as much modern concerns as they do any realities faced by the contemporaries of Chingis Khan’s successors. A case in point is Russian attitudes, shaped indeed by invasion and alien rule, but inflamed by the intellectual concerns of modern times. Those who lament Russia’s authoritarian political system or economic “backwardness” in modern times continue to blame the Mongols half a millenium after their empire had disintegrated. The emblematic painting, “The Apotheosis of War,” by the late nineteenth-century pacifist Vereshchagin, nicely sums up for Russians the Mongol contribution to civilization. And who can forget Prokofiev’s ominous music accompanying the opening frames of Sergei Eisenstein’s famous propaganda film, “Alexander Nevsky”? Pages of burning manuscripts crackle, and winds scatter the ashes across a barren landscape. The heroic prince breathes defiance in the face of a menacing and cruel Mongol official—mere prelude to Nevsky’s defeat of German knights, the other foreigners who always had it in for the Russians. [Eisenstein’s message in the late 1930s was clearly, “Let the Germans beware!”] This affirmation of Russian national character conveniently forgets the reality that in the thirteenth century Nevsky undoubtedly was a faithful servant of the Khans in suppressing rebellion amongst his fellow Christians. In short, Mongol rule has been employed in curious ways in the service of nationalist myths.

Can we actually measure the negative effects of the Mongol invasions? We tend to fall back on narratives of destruction, in part because there are no reliable series of data. That the destruction was real certainly is confirmed by archaeological sources. Yet the pattern of devastation is uneven, and there is little evidence to suggest that the Mongols destroyed just for the fun of it. Those who resisted indeed were slaughtered and their cities often razed. Yet, as we shall see, the Mongols do seem early on to have appreciated the importance of sedentary centers and trade; it simply would not have been in their interest to leave behind only a wasteland. To cite the apparent sharp decline in population in China during the Mongol period as proof of the Mongols’ destructive impact is a huge oversimplification. While it is tempting to blame the Mongols for the conditions which fostered the spread of the Black Death, which devastated cities as thoroughly as anything the Mongols did directly, that is a hard case to prove. And it is worth remembering that Europe was most severely hit by the dread epidemic more than a century after Chingis Khan and in a period when the Empire of his successors had already disintegrated.

One interesting attempt to measure the economic impact of the Mongols is a study by David Miller regarding the building of masonry churches in Russia. He argues that such construction may be an indicator of economic prosperity. His graphs show rather dramatically that the Mongol invasion brought such construction to a halt in the 1230s, but by the end of the thirteenth century there is a revival, and in the fourteenth century a building boom, even though at the time the Russian princes were still subject to the Mongols of the Golden Horde. To a considerable degree, Miller’s statistics are skewed by the city of Novgorod, which in fact had not shared the fate of Riazan at the time of the invasion. Yet it was not just Novgorod that seems to have prospered.
The fourteenth century saw the emergence of Moscow—previously a town of no consequence—as a significant political and cultural center, in the first instance precisely because of its princes' close relationship with their overlords, the Mongol khans.

The pattern that seems to emerge here is one in which areas beyond any real focus of Mongol concerns might in fact be left alone. Areas central to the Mongols (the capital of the Golden Horde, Sarai, would be a good example), might be built up by them. Regions that had been devastated might recover rapidly, if the khans so chose, but other such regions might remain wasteland. One example of the latter, emphasized by David Morgan in his largely negative assessment of the Mongol impact, was some regions in Iran which had depended on the sophisticated underground network of irrigation channels that the Mongols destroyed. We know, however, that most nomads relied on a symbiotic relationship with sedentary peoples; such dependence then required that agriculture and towns continue to flourish, at least in the regions that would directly interact with the Mongols.

This is not to say that regularized Mongol exactions were easily borne by the populations which were counted in censuses and taxed. In many cases, it seems clear that such taxes or the tribute payments required of local rulers were indeed very heavy. However, there is simply no way to know whether such impositions "set back" economic development "for centuries," or were substantially worse than what another conqueror at another time might have imposed. In the case of Russia, for example, the tendency has been to exaggerate the level of tribute payments. Arguably the Russian princes, once free of any Mongol control, greatly exceeded their former masters in rapaciousness, aided to be sure by what they had learned from the Mongols about tax collection.

Any discussion of the economic impact of the Mongols must include trade and the production of commercial goods. Juvaini makes very clear that Chingis Khan's invasion of Central Asia in 1219 was connected with trade disputes. In fact Juvaini has the Khan boast of the fact that his treasury was full of rich products of international trade; the Mongols were no rubes when it came to dealings with deceitful Muslim merchants. Archaeology confirms that even before the rise of Chingis, towns in Mongolia were actively involved in trade, in which the patterns of relations with China can be traced back to the beginnings of the "Silk Road."

The development of the Silk Road commerce under the Mongols was a result both of its direct promotion and the creation of an infrastructure which ensured safe conditions for travel. The direct policies obviously could cut two ways. There is ample evidence that craftsmen were re-settled individually and en masse at the whim of the khans. The Franciscan monk, William of Rubruck, traveled to the Mongol capital Karakorum in 1253-55. Among those he met there was a Parisian goldsmith, Guillaume Bouchier, who had been captured at Belgrad on the Danube. Bouchier's French wife had also been carried off during the Mongol invasion of Hungary. Thomas Allsen has carefully documented how the Mongol taste for luxury Middle Eastern textiles led to the transplantation of whole colonies of weavers from the Middle East to Mongolia and north China. Marco Polo describes such settlements in the time of Qubilai Khan. Of course, what was positive for the heartland of the Empire likely had a negative impact on the areas from which the craftsmen were conscripted.
The fragmentation of the Empire, a process which began even before the last conquests had been completed, was a result both of political competition and competition for control of trade routes. An illustration of this can be seen in relations between the Golden Horde (which encompassed the northwest quadrant of the Empire), on the one hand, and the Ilkhanids (who ruled in the Middle East) and their successors the Timurids, on the other. Included in the territories of the Golden Horde were the Crimea, with its trading connections to Constantinople and further West, and the lower Don and Volga Rivers, which funneled trade from the north and controlled the routes into Central Asia. It is significant that within a generation of the conquest of this region, the khans signed a treaty giving the Genoese exclusive privileges in the Black Sea ports; coins were issued with the inscription of the khan on one side and the seal of the Bank of St. George of Genoa on the other. Ibn Battuta reported that Kaffa, the major Genoese port in the Crimea, was "one of the world's celebrated ports," and he found Sarai to be a truly international city, inhabited by Christians from Byzantium and Russia and by Muslims from all over the Middle East.

![Map of Central Asia](https://example.com/map.jpg)

The routes of the silk road leading west from Central Asia (detail of map at Tashkent University).

Obviously one reason that the Golden Horde cultivated the alliance with Genoa was to ensure communication via Byzantium with the Mongols' allies, the Mamluks in Egypt. This was a typical example of a basic principle of international relations—to forge an alliance with a state on the other side of your closest enemy, the enemy in this case being the Mongol rulers of Iran and Iraq, the Ilkhanids. Surely part of the hostility revolved around the issue of whether the trade routes coming out of Central Asia would proceed north of the Caspian Sea to Sarai or instead go south through Ilkhanid territory. Ultimately such considerations were to contribute to the downfall of the Golden Horde later in the fourteenth century, when its ruler picked a fight with his former patron, the Amir Timur (Tamerlane), and the result was the devastation of the cities of the Golden Horde. For Tamerlane and the Timurids, the routes from Samarkand through northern Iran were the ones to maintain.

Competition and conflict could indeed interrupt traditional trade routes, but even in the period when the Mongol Empire was falling apart, we can document the relative safety and speed of travel all the way across Eurasia. To a considerable degree, the explanation lies in the Mongol rulers' development of the postal relay system (yam), which so favorably impressed contemporaries. In the first instance, of course, the system (rather like the pony express in the American West) was designed to speed official communication. Those on the business of the khan could show their badge of authority (paidze) and expect to receive fresh
mounts at the regularly placed relay stations. Clearly the invocation of the ruler's authority could provide favored travelers with some degree of security. We cannot but be impressed by the ability of defenseless Franciscans to travel across most of Eurasia in the middle of the thirteenth century. Marco Polo was one of many Europeans who made it all the way to China on diplomatic, religious or commercial missions. In his commercial handbook compiled around 1340, the Florentine merchant Pegolotti summed up very well what to expect:

_The road you travel from Tana [Azov] to Cathay is perfectly safe, whether by day or by night, according to what the merchants say who have used it. Only if the merchant...should die upon the road, everything belonging to him will become the perquisite of the lord of the country in which he dies...And there is another danger: this is when the lord of the country dies, and before the new lord who is to have the lordship is proclaimed; during such intervals there have sometimes been irregularities practised on the Franks and other foreigners..._

This then was the Pax Mongolica (Mongol Peace), a situation created by the Mongols which at least for a time facilitated commerce and communication.

Not the least of the explanations was the relative openness of the Mongols to individuals of different religions. Marco Polo, for one, emphasized the apparent willingness of Qubilai Khan to entertain all the “religions of the book” at the same time that he practised the rituals of traditional Mongolian religion. Among Qubilai’s astrologers/astronomers in the observatory he built were Muslims from the Middle East. Mongol rule witnessed a revival in Nestorian Christianity throughout Eurasia, the spread of Tibetan Buddhism through China to Mongolia, and the expansion of Islam in areas of Eastern Europe. Ibn Battuta could converse in Arabic with Muslims almost anywhere he traveled in the Mongol world. Yet, as the example of the Golden Horde shows, even when the khans converted firmly to a religion such as Islam they seem to have avoided a fanaticism that would have imposed conversion on their subjects. They certainly did nothing to cut their Russian subjects off from the West, a misconception that has been fostered by Russians to explain why Russia never experienced the Renaissance and all the benefits that flowed from it in the emergence of modern European culture. The cultural traditions of Russian Orthodoxy [the real barrier between Russia and the West] were left alone to flourish, just as traditional culture in China exhibited great vitality under the rule of the Mongol Yüan dynasty.

Mongol rule did bring with it initial destruction, the imposition of heavy financial burdens, and the loss of political independence, at the same time that it seeded political renewal in some areas and contributed selectively to economic expansion. In short, Riazan and Sarai can coexist on the same historical canvas.
Recommended Reading.

I. Primary Sources. (Note: There are various editions of many of these works.)

- Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia* (Toronto, etc., 1980). Includes the accounts of John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck and others.

II. Secondary Sources.

- David B. Miller, "Monumental Building as an Indicator of Economic Trends in Northern Rus’ in the Late Kievan and Mongol Periods, 1138-1462," *American Historical Review*, 94/2 (1989), 360-390. (Electronic text for those whose institutions support access to the JSTOR database.)