

The Othering of an Empire:
A historiographical and pedagogical assessment of
Orientalism, Genghis Khan,
and the Mongol Empire

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Section II: Primary Sources

An Artifact from the Yuan Dynasty

The following artifact, created in the late 13th century served as a "Safe Conduct Pass" (Paiza) under the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 CE) in China. Under the leadership of Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, the Yuan government attempted to create a new language which would unify the diverse people of the empire who spoke several languages such as Chinese and Mongolian. Their new language, called Phaka, was named after its creator who served as the "imperial preceptor" (a teacher) under Kublai Khan. Although the language virtually died out as soon as the Yuan Dynasty fell in 1368, it serves as a staple of Genghis Khan's legacy in China.⁵⁴

Note: The text translates to “By the strength of Eternal Heaven, an edict of the Emperor [Khan]. He who has not respect shall be guilty”



⁵⁴ "Safe Conduct Pass (Paiza) with Inscription in Phaka Script," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* [Safe Conduct Pass \(Paiza\) with Inscription in Phakpa Script | China | Yuan dynasty \(1271–1368\) | The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) (Accessed 6 January 2022).

An Excerpt from *The Secret History of the Mongols*

The following excerpt comes from the only written source historians currently possess from the Mongols themselves. Neither the exact author(s) nor the date of the document is known with most historians using the general timeline of 1228-1240 CE, but the significance of this document in shaping our understanding of the Mongol Empire can not be understated. Composed as an **epic chronicle**, this source encapsulates elements of fact and myth which, while making it hard for historians to discover fact from mythology, nonetheless provides important insight into factors such as a general timeline of events, moral values, and political reform. In this excerpt, Genghis Khan (then known as Temujin) ordered the Mongol wrestler, Būri Bökō, to fight his half-brother, Belgūtei, after an incident which resulted in the former insulting the latter by slashing him with a sword.⁵⁵

Formerly, when Būri Bökō was still with the **Jürkin**, seizing Belgūtei with one hand and tripping him with one foot, Būri Bökō toppled him and held him down so that he could not move. Būri Bökō was the strongest man among his people.

Činggis Qa'an now made Belgūtei and Būri Bökō wrestle. Būri Bökō, the invincible, let himself be toppled. Belgūtei, unable to hold him down, grabbed his shoulders and straddled him. Belgūtei glanced backwards and, when he caught sight of Činggis Qa'an's eye, the Qa'an bit his lower lip. Belgūtei understood. He sat on top of Būri Bökō and, crossing the two ends of his collar, he pulled them towards himself, tightening his grip. As he did that, he pressed his knee on his spine and broke it. Būri Bökō, his spine broken, said, 'I would not have been defeated by Belgūtei, but fearing the Qa'an, I took a fall on purpose. I hesitated, so I lost my life.' Thus he spoke and died.

After Belgūtei had pulled and broken his spine, he dragged Būri Bökō away, cast him off and left.

WORD BANK

Epic: A long poem detailing the deeds and adventures of a person/group of people.

Chronicle: A chronologically-organized history of events.

Jürkin: One of several other clans across the Asian steppes.

Činggis Qa'an: Another way to spell Genghis Khan.

⁵⁵ Author unknown, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, translated by Igor de Rachewiltz and edited by John C. Street. 4. ???, 58 ("[The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the T](#)" by Igor de Rachewiltz (accessed 12 January 2023).

An Excerpt from *The History of the World Conqueror*

Ata-Malik Juvayni (1226-1283 CE), a Persian historian, was born in the region of Khurasan (located towards the Eastern end of the Iranian Plateau) which, by 1221, was conquered by Genghis Khan and his Mongol forces. To Juvayni's fortune, however, he was born into a family of wealth and prestige which allowed him to gain a position of influence as he grew up. He traveled to the Mongol capital, Kakakorum, on two occasions, witnessed the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 at the hands of Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulugu, and even became the governor of Baghdad for some time. While living through these experiences, Juvayni began his masterpiece, *The History of the World Conqueror*, in 1252-3 and concluded this work in 1260, more than two decades before his death, for unknown reasons. It is from this work that historians are provided with one of the richest accounts of how the Mongols went about their rule. And, while writing positively about Mongol rule in many cases, there are some indications that Juvayni felt some sort of resentment towards those he wrote under. In this excerpt, Juvayni discussed the how and, more importantly, why Genghis Khan was able to defeat those who he crossed.⁵⁶

And indeed **Alexander**,...had he lived in the age of Chingiz-Khan, would have been his pupil in craft and cunning, and of all the **talismans** for the taking of strongholds he would have found none better than blindly to follow in his footsteps: whereof there can be no clearer proof nor more certain evidence than that having such numerous and powerful foes and such mighty and well-**accoutred** enemies,...he sallied forth, a single man, with few troops and no accoutrement, and reduced and subjugated the lords of the horizons from East unto the West; and whoever presumed to oppose and resist him, that man, in enforcement of the **yasas** and ordinances which he imposed, he utterly destroyed, together with all of his followers, children, **partisans**, armies, lands and territories. There has been transmitted to us a tradition of the traditions of God which says: '*Those are my horsemen; through them I shall avenge me on those that rebelled against me,*' and is there a shadow of doubt but that these words are a reference to the horsemen of Chingiz-Khan and to his people. And so it was that when the world by reason of the variety of its creatures was become a raging sea, and the kings and nobles of every country by reason of the arrogance of pride...then did God, in accordance with the above-mentioned promise, endow Chingiz-Khan with the strength of might and the victory of dominion.

WORD BANK

Alexander: Referring to Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE).

Talisman: An inspiring figure.

Accoutrement: Equipment.

Yasa: Mongol law which was transmitted orally.

Partisans: A supporter of a political cause.

⁵⁶ Ata-Malik Juvayni, *The History of the World Conqueror Volume I*, translated by John Andrew Boyle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 24-25, <https://archive.org/details/historyoftheworlthe011691mbp/page/n75/mode/2up> (accessed 16 January 2023).

An Image of a Mongol Tent (Known as both a Ger/Yurt)

The following image depicts a Mongol family from the 21st century in front of their Ger (also known as a Yurt). Although the Mongol Empire (1206-1368) is separated from us by more than half a millennium, many aspects of Mongol life from the 13th century are still present today in the country of Mongolia such as pastoral nomadism (the consistent migration of a population based on the living needs of the animals they herd). Thus, by observing some contemporary aspects of Mongol life, historians are provided with a glimpse into the past on how the Mongols were able to successfully travel rapidly with ease. The outside of the following ger, as with most others, is made of sheep wool, one of the main animals herded by the Mongols.⁵⁷



⁵⁷ Michael Chu, "Traditional Yurts," *World History Encyclopedia* 16 September 2019, <https://www.worldhistory.org/img/r/p/750x750/11224.jpg?v=1637801102> (accessed 15 May 2023).

An Excerpt from *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian*

Born into a family of merchants, Marco Polo (1254-1324) found himself headed eastward in 1271 from his native city of Venice (located in present-day Italy) as his father sought to find stability among his companions in the Mongol court. After four years traveling through places such as the Iranian Plateau, the Polo family reached the summer capital of the Yüan Dynasty in Shangdu (located just over 260 miles from Beijing) and met the emperor Kublai Khan (1215-1294). Impressed by the knowledge Marco possessed, Kublai Khan maintained the young man (then 21 years old) for the next 16-17 years filling the role of an administrator. In this brief excerpt, Polo details the lifestyle of the Mongols (referred to as "Tartars"), how they engage in combat, and why they displayed so much success in their conquests across the world.⁵⁸

Chapter LII: Concerning the Customs of the Tartars

The Tartar custom is to spend the winter in warm plains where they find good pasture for their cattle, whilst in summer they betake themselves to a cool climate among the mountains and valleys, where water is to be found as well as woods and pastures

Their houses are circular, and are made of wands covered with felts. These are carried along with them [wherever] they go; for the wands are so strongly bound together, as well as so well combined, that the frame can be made very light... The women do the buying and selling, and whatever is necessary to provide for the husband and household; for the men all lead the life of gentlemen, troubling about nothing but hunting and hawking, and looking after their **goshawks** and falcons, unless it be the practice of warlike exercises.

They live on the milk and meat which their herds supply, and on the produce of the chase; and they eat all kinds of flesh, including that of horses and dogs, **Pharoah's rats**, of which last there are great numbers in burrows on those plains. Their drink is **mare's milk**.

Chapter LIV: Concerning the Tartar Customs of War

All their harness of war is excellent and costly. Their arms are bow and arrows, sword and mace; but above all the bow, for they are capital archers, indeed the best that are known. On their backs they wear Armour of [curiously] prepared from buffalo and other hides, which is very strong. They are excellent soldiers and passing **valiant** in battle. They are more capable of hardship than other nations; for many a time, if need be, they will go for a month without any supply of food, living only on the milk of their mare's and on such game as their bows may win them. Their horses also will subsist entirely on the grass of the plains, so that there is no need to carry store of barley or straw or oats; and they are very docile to their riders. These, in case of need, will abide on horseback the livelong night, armed at all points, while the horse will be continuously grazing.

WORD BANK

⁵⁸ Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian: Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, translated and edited by Henry Yule (London: John Murray, 1904), 220-234, <https://archive.org/details/bookofsermarcopo01polo/page/228/mode/2up> (accessed 16 January 2023).

Goshawk: A medium-to-large predatory bird related to eagles.

Pharoah's rats: Most likely a jerboa, which is a small hopping rodent found throughout Asia.

Mare's milk: Milk from female horses.

Valiant: Courage, determination.

An Excerpt from *The Chronicle of Novgorod*

The following excerpt comes from the city of Novgorod (today located in Russia). Written from 1016-1471, the unknown collection of authors documented year-by-year the set of events to occur within the city and its surroundings. In 1224, during their journey from the Iranian Plateau to the steppes of northern Asia, the Mongol forces encountered Russian forces and defeated them in a short but memorable battle. Afterwards one or more of the writers took note of these foreigners (referred to as "Tartars") and, more than a decade later, was obligated to do so again as Mongol forces began their conquest across Eastern Europe in 1235.⁵⁹

A.D. 1224, A.M. 6731:

The same year, for our sins, unknown tribes came, whom no one exactly knows, who they are, nor whence they came out, nor what their language is, nor of what race they are, nor what their faith is; but they call them Tartars,...others say they are those of whom Bishop Mefodi of Patmos bore witness, that they came out from the Etrian desert which is between East and North. For thus Mefodi says, that, at the end of time, those are to appear whom Gideon scattered, and they shall subdue the whole land from the East to the **Efrant**, and from the Tigris to the Pontus sea except Ethiopia. God alone knows who they are and whence they came out.

A.D. 1238, A.M. 6746:

That same year foreigners called Tartars came in countless numbers, like locusts, into the land of **Ryazan**, and on first coming they halted at the river Nukhla, and took it, and halted at camp there. And thence they sent their emissaries to the **Knyazes** of Ryazan...demanding from them one-tenth of everything: of men and Knyazes and horses-of everything one tenth. [After the nobles of the city denied the Mongols their request, the Mongol forces engaged in a **siege** which resulted in the downfall of the city. The following is the account of what followed.]

They likewise killed the Knyaz and **Knyaginya**, and men, women, and children, monks, nuns, and priests, some by fire, some by the sword, and violated nuns, priests' wives, good women and girls in the presence of their mothers and sisters...And who, brethren, would not lament over this, among those of us left alive when they suffered this bitter and violent death? And we, indeed, having seen it, were terrified and wept with sighing day and night over our sins, while we sigh every day and night, taking thought of our possessions and for the hatred of brothers.

WORD BANK

Efrant: Euphrates river

Ryazan: A former city located in present-day Russia which was destroyed in 1238 CE.

Knyaz: A royal/noble title used for men in Slavic-speaking regions (e.g. Russia).

⁵⁹ *The Chronicle of Novgorod*, translated by Robert Mitchell and Nevill Forbes (London: Offices of the Society, 1914), 64,

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://faculty.washington.edu/dwaugh/rus/texts/MF1914.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjP84XN-MT8AhXakYkEHR3FBLIQFnoECCIQAQ&usg=AOvVaw0SC8stUoOGCU55gc-lj3_u (Accessed 13 January 2023).

Siege: A form of warfare which involves the surrounding of a city/town to cut off essential supplies and prevent escape efforts.

Knyaginya: A royal/noble title used for women in Slavic-speaking regions (e.g. Russia).

A Drawing from Rashīd al-Dīn's *Compendium of Chronicles*

Rashīd al-Dīn (1247-1318) is often credited as one of the first world historians, but his *Compendium of Chronicles* is more often praised for its in-depth analysis of the early days of Genghis Khan and his empires' rise. Working as an official in the Ilkhan Mongol court (located in present-day Iran), Rashīd enjoyed both Mongols officials and written documents restricted to others as his core for primary sources which provided his work with credibility that most consider to be unmatched.⁶⁰



⁶⁰ "The siege of Arbela in the era of Hulagu Khan, page from a Chingiz-nama (Book of Chingiz Khan) of the Jami al-tavarikh (Compendium of Chronicles) of Rashid al-Din (Persian, 1247–1318) By Basavana, *Internet Archives* <https://archive.org/details/clevelandart-1947.502.a-the-siege-of-arbela> (accessed 17 January 2023).

An Excerpt from William of Rubruck's *Account of the Mongols*

Sent by King Louis IX (1214-1270) in 1253 to convert the Mongols to Christianity, William of Rubruck (1220-1293) was one of the first Europeans who traveled into the heart of the Mongol Empire and, while there, visited the capital of Karakorum. Established as the capital by Genghis Khan in 1220, this city served as the center of operations for Genghis Khan's descendents as the Mongols continued their conquests into China. In this brief excerpt, William detailed his initial observations of the city and the palace of the then-leader Möngke Khan (1209-1259).⁶¹

Mangu [Möngke] had at Caracarum a great palace, situated next to the city walls, enclosed within a high wall... Here is a great palace, where he has his drinkings twice a year: once about Easter, when he passes there, and once in summer, when he goes back (westward). And the latter is the greater (feast), for then come to his court all the nobles, even though distant two months journey; and then he makes them largess of robes and presents, and shows his great glory. There are there many buildings as long as barns, in which are stored his provisions and his treasures. In the entry of this great palace, it being unseemly to bring in there skins of milk and other drinks, master **William the Parisian** had made for him a great silver tree, and at its roots are four lions of silver, each with a conduit through it, and all belching forth white milk of mares. And four **conduits** are led inside the tree to its tops, which are bent downward, and on each of these is also a gilded serpent, whose tail twines round the tree. And from one of these pipes flows wine, from another cara cosmos, or clarified mare's milk, from another **bal**, a drink made with honey, and from another rice mead, which is called terracina; and for each liquor there is a special silver bowl at the foot of the tree to receive it. Between these four conduits in the top, he made an angel holding a trumpet, and underneath the tree he made a vault in which a man can be hid. And pipes go up through the heart of the tree to the angel. In the first place he made bellows, but they did not give enough wind. Outside the palace is a cellar in which the liquors are stored, and there are servants all ready to pour them out when they hear the angel trumpeting. And there are branches of silver on the tree, and leaves and fruit. When then drink is wanted, the head butler cries to the angel to blow his trumpet. Then he who is concealed in the vault, hearing this blows with all his might in the pipe leading to the angel, and the angel places the trumpet to his mouth, and blows the trumpet right loudly. Then the servants who are in the cellar, hearing this, pour the different liquors into the proper conduits, and the conduits lead them down into the bowls prepared for that, and then the butlers draw it and carry it to the palace to the men and women.

⁶¹ William of Rubruck, *Account of the Mongols*, translated by W.W. Rockville (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2004), [William of Rubruck's Account of the Mongols](#) (accessed 17 January 2004).

An Depiction of Karakorum

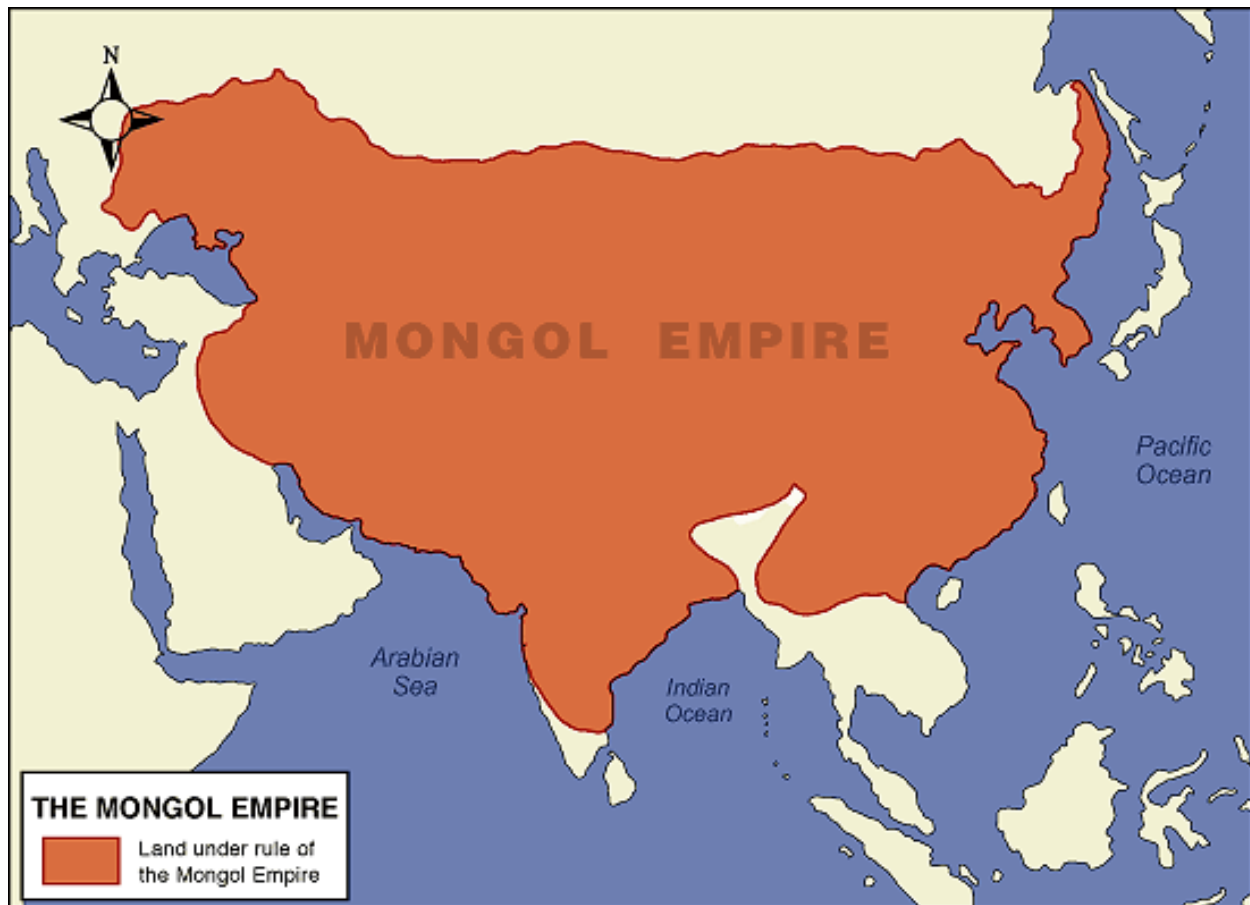
Once Kublai Khan (1215-1294) became the emperor of the Mongol Empire in 1260, he moved the capital from Karakorum to Shangdu which dealt a blow to the former that proved to be irreparable. Some attempts were made to elevate the city's importance throughout the 14th century, but the former capital's fate was sealed when, in 1380, soldiers of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) razed the city. As a result, the location of the city remained hidden to scholars until 1889, and still today only little can be excavated. Thus, much of what scholars know comes from those who documented their journeys to the capital in the 13th and 14th centuries. Depicted below is a drawing from an 18th century Dutch artist who attempted to depict the city based on the account by William of Rubruck.⁶²



⁶² "Karakorum Silver Tree," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 5 November 2021, [Archaeologists Map Ruins of Karakorum, Capital of the Mongol Empire, for the First Time | Smart News | Smithsonian Magazine](#) (accessed 9 February 2023).

A Map of the Mongol Empire

By the time Kublai Khan (1215-1294) came into power as emperor of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) in China, the Mongols attained the largest contiguous empire in history. Ranging from the eastern half of the Iranian Peninsula and the entirety of the Korean Peninsula to the vast majority of present-day India and the entirety of central Asia, the Mongols came closer than any other political entity to achieving domination of the entirety of Eurasia. The following map displays an approximation of how large the Mongol Empire was when it reached its peak.⁶³



⁶³ "History and Maps: The Mongol Empire," *Minneapolis Institute of Art* [Map of the Mongol Empire - The Art of Asia - History and Maps](#) (accessed 9 February 2023).