

VIEWPOINTS

The Mongols and Their Conquests

When Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227) was born, the Mongols were just another nomadic group roaming the Central Asian grasslands. A hundred years later, they ruled a vast empire that spanned the width of Asia, from China’s Pacific coast to the Middle East. This accomplishment owed much to the Mongols’ extraordinary military prowess. Under the leadership of Chinggis Khan and his successors, mounted Mongol armies struck at their enemies with astonishing speed and ferocity. Faced with such an opponent, many of their would-be foes chose to surrender without a fight. Skill in battle, however, was not the only explanation for the Mongols’ achievement. Once the Mongols had conquered a territory, they proved adept at maintaining control of their new lands, allowing existing institutions and elites to stay in place as long as Mongol rule was not resisted and tribute was paid. Finally, the Mongols embraced diversity. They were interested in the beliefs and ideas of other peoples and did not seek to impose religious and cultural homogeneity on their empire. As you read the documents included in this feature, think about the foundations and nature of Mongol rule. How did the Mongols conquer and control their large and diverse empire?

12-1 | **Observations on Mongol Rule in China**

Epitaph for the Honorable Menggu (ca. 1272)

The Mongol conquest of China occurred in stages and was not complete until the 1270s. The Mongols chose to continue using the established system of administration in China, but they distrusted local Chinese officials and the bureaucrats themselves. To watch the activities of the Chinese officials, the Mongols placed outsiders in key positions. Many were Mongols, such as the official described here, but many were imported from Central Asia and the Middle East. It is not known who wrote this epitaph, but it is thought to have been a Chinese official.

Epitaph for the Honorable Menggu, Great General of Huaiyuan, Governor of Huaimeng Route, and Military Administrator of Several Armies

Emperor Taizu [Chinggis Khan] received the mandate of Heaven and subjugated all regions. When Emperor Taizong [Ogodei Khan] succeeded, he revitalized the bureaucratic system and made it more efficient and organized. At court, one minister supervised all the officials and helped the emperor rule. In the provinces, commanderies and counties received instructions from above and saw that they got carried out. Prefects and magistrates were as a rule appointed only after submitting [to the Mongols]. Still one Mongol, called the governor, was selected to supervise them. The prefects and magistrates all had to obey his orders. The fortune of the common people and the quality of the government both were entirely dependent on the wisdom of the governor.

Zhangde, one of the ten routes,¹ is crucial to communication between north and south. In the fourth month of 1236, the court deemed Menggu capable of handling Zhangde, so promoted him from the post of legal officer of the troops of Quduqu to be its governor. At the time, the Jin² had fallen only three years earlier. The common people were not yet free of the army, the injured had not yet recovered, those who had fled had not yet returned, and the residents were not yet contented. Because regulations were lax, the soldiers took advantage of their victory to plunder. Even in cities and marketplaces, some people kept their doors closed in the daytime. As soon as Menggu arrived, he took charge. Knowing the people's grievances, he issued an order, "Those who oppress the people will be dealt with according to the law. Craftsmen, merchants, and shopkeepers, you must each go about your work with your doors open, peaceably attending to your business without fear. Farmers, you must be content with your lands and exert yourselves diligently according to the seasons. I will instruct or punish those who mistreat you." After this order was issued, the violent became obedient and no one any longer dared violate the laws. Farmers in the fields and travelers on the roads felt safe, and people began to enjoy life.

In the second month of 1238, Wang Rong, prefect of Huaizhou, rebelled. The grand preceptor and prince ordered Menggu to put down this rebellion, telling him to slaughter everyone. Menggu responded, "When the royal army suppresses rebels, those who were coerced into joining them ought to be pardoned, not to mention those who are entirely innocent." The prince approved his advice and followed it. When Wang Rong surrendered, he was executed but the region was spared. The residents, with jugs of wine and burning incense, saw Menggu off tearfully, unable to bear his leaving. Forty years later when he was put in charge of Henei, the common people were delighted with the news, saying, "We will all survive — our parents and relatives through marriage all served him before."

In 1239 locusts destroyed all the vegetation in Xiang and Wei, so the people were short of food. Menggu reported this to the great minister Quduqu who issued five thousand piculs³ of army rations to save the starving. As a consequence no one had to flee or starve.

During the four years from 1240 to 1243, the great southern campaigns took place. Wherever the armies passed, the local officials complained. Menggu, through loyal and diligent preparations, was able to supply the troops without hurting the people.

In 1247 some previously pacified cities in the Huai and Han areas rose in revolt. Refugees fled north and south. Border generals and local officials joined the fray, fighting and plundering. Menggu, by establishing trust, was able to gather together more than ten thousand households and settle them down as commoners. Even children were included.

At that time the harvest failed for several years in a row, yet taxes and labor services were still exacted. Consequently, three or four of every ten houses was vacant. Menggu ordered the officials to travel around announcing that those who returned to their property would be exempt from taxes and services for three years. That year seventeen thousand households returned in response to his summons.

In the first month of 1248 Zhu Ge, a bandit from Huizhou, organized a gang and rebelled. The military officers were planning to go overboard in their response to this, but Menggu declared,

“The state has honored me, enriched me, delegated control of the troops to me, and entrusted the fate of the region to me. Does it want me to pacify the bandits or become a bandit myself? There is no need to act recklessly. If the bandits are not caught or the rebellion not suppressed, I will accept the responsibility.” He then personally led the troops, capturing thirty-eight bandits at Heilu Mountain, and restoring peace to the local population. By fall there were no more rebels. When the bandit Xie Zhiquan rebelled in the third month of 1249, he pacified him the same way.

General Chagan recognized Menggu’s honesty and humanity. Whenever the other circuits condemned prisoners to death, he had Menggu conduct the review investigation. Innumerable times, Menggu relied on the law to redress grievances and reduce penalties. Ten years before, a peasant in Anyang had offended a noble and been ordered to turn over six young girls. Menggu ordered the noble official Alachur to marry them all out to commoners. There was a drought in the summer of 1250. After Menggu prayed for rain, moisture became adequate.

In the spring of 1262, Li Tan revolted and sent his henchmen to faraway places disguised as mounted couriers. They traveled through many routes, east and west, the officials unable to recognize them. Menggu discovered them and got them to admit their treacherous conspiracy, thus defeating them. When there was a drought in 1263, Menggu prayed for rain and it rained. That year he was given the title Brilliant and August General and made governor of Zhongshan prefecture. In 1270 he was transferred and became governor of Hezhong prefecture. In the spring of 1274 he was allowed to wear the golden tiger tablet in recognition of his long and excellent service, his incorruptibility, and the repute in which he was held where he had served. He was advanced out of order to great general of Huaiyuan, governor of Huaimeng route, and military administrator of several armies. On the 29th of the second month he died of illness in the main room of his private residence at the age of seventy-one.

Menggu was a Mongol, and when young was called Mongol Baer. His father was Xibaer, his mother Lengla. He had six wives . . . , seven sons, . . . six daughters. . . . Seven years after he was buried, Naohai and his other sons recorded Menggu’s virtuous government service for an epitaph and came to ask me to write the inscription.

Alas! When I think about all the government officials of the past and present, I come to the realization that the greedy ones are invariably oppressive and the honest ones are invariably incorrupt, the connection between their virtues and their administrative behavior as automatic as shape to shadow or sound to echo. Those who are greedy are not satisfied; not satisfied, they take by force, not caring how much they harm the world. Those who are honest do not take what is not theirs, no matter how slight it might be. How would they harm others to benefit themselves? The house where Menggu lived when he governed Zhangde nearly forty years ago, and the fields from which he obtained food then, were just adequate to keep out the wind and rain and supply enough to eat. When he died there were no estates or leftover wealth to leave his sons or grandsons. Therefore they had to model themselves on him and concentrate on governing in a way that would bring peace and safety, show love for the people, and benefit all. They have no need to be ashamed even if compared to the model officials of the Han and Tang dynasties.

Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed., *Chinese Civilization and Society: A Sourcebook*, 2d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1993), 192–194

12-2 | The Role of a Mongol Leader in Battle

RASHID-AL-DIN, *Chinggis Khan Fighting the Tartars* (ca. 1300)

Mongol military success was the result of many factors. The Mongols were expert horsemen who took full advantage of the speed and mobility of a mounted army. Moreover, the nomadic Mongol lifestyle was ideally suited to the training of tough, highly skilled warriors. In effect, Mongol boys grew up in a military camp, learning from an early age how to ride, hunt, fight, and survive. The skills they practiced daily made them formidable foes in battle. Finally, the Mongols were fortunate to have a remarkable leader in Chinggis Khan. As this illustration from a Persian history of the Mongols makes clear, Chinggis led his forces by example, placing himself at the head of his troops and plunging directly into battle. As you examine the illustration, ask yourself what it tells you about Mongol military prowess. How does it help explain the devastating effectiveness of Mongol armies?



Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France/Bridgeman Images.

12-3 | A European Merchant Travels the Silk Road

MARCO POLO, From *Travels: Description of the World* (ca. 1298)

Marco Polo (ca. 1253–1324) was an Italian merchant who traveled through Central Asia to China. He served as a government official for many years in the court of Khubilai Khan. Upon returning to Europe in 1295 — approximately twenty-five years after he began his journey — Polo wrote a popular book describing his adventures. Although historians have at times doubted the veracity of some of Polo’s claims, his *Travels* nonetheless provides an important record of Central Asia during the time of the Mongols. In this excerpt, Polo describes his journey along the Asian trade routes known as the Silk Road, including his crossing of the challenging Taklimakan Desert.

Let us turn next to the province of Yarkand [on the southwestern border of the Taklimakan Desert], five days’ journey in extent. The inhabitants follow the law of Mahomet,⁴ and there are also some Nestorian Christians. They are subject to the Great Khan’s nephew, of whom I have already spoken. It is amply stocked with the means of life, especially cotton. But, since there is nothing here worth mentioning in our book, we shall pass on to Khotan,⁵ which lies towards the east-north-east.

Khotan is a province eight days’ journey in extent, which is subject to the Great Khan. The inhabitants all worship Mahomet. It has cities and towns in plenty, of which the most splendid, and the capital of the kingdom, bears the same name as the province, Khotan. It is amply stocked with the means of life. Cotton grows here in plenty. It has vineyards, estates, and orchards in plenty. The people live by trade and industry; they are not at all warlike.

Passing on from here we come to the province of Pem, five days’ journey in extent, towards the east-north-east. Here too the inhabitants worship Mahomet and are subject to the Great Khan. It has villages and towns in plenty. The most splendid city and the capital of the province is called Pem. There are rivers here in which are found stones called jasper and chalcedony [both are quartz] in plenty. There is no lack of the means of life. Cotton is plentiful. The inhabitants live by trade and industry.

The following custom is prevalent among them. When a woman’s husband leaves her to go on a journey of more than twenty days, then, as soon as he has left, she takes another husband, and this she is fully entitled to do by local usage. And the men, wherever they go, take wives in the same way.

You should know that all the provinces I have described, from Kashgar to Pem and some way beyond, are provinces of Turkestan [i.e., the area of Central Asia inhabited by Turks].

I will tell you next of another province of Turkestan, lying east-north-east, which is called Charchan. It used to be a splendid and fruitful country, but it has been much devastated by the Tartars [Mongols]. The inhabitants worship Mahomet. There are villages and towns in plenty, and the chief city of the kingdom is Charchan.⁶ There are rivers producing jasper and

chalcedony, which are exported for sale in Cathay and bring in a good profit; for they are plentiful and of good quality.

All this province is a tract of sand; and so is the country from Khotan to Pem and from Pem to here. There are many springs of bad and bitter water, though in some places the water is good and sweet. When it happens that an army passes through the country, if it is a hostile one, the people take flight with their wives and children and their beasts two or three days' journey into the sandy wastes to places where they know that there is water and they can live with their beasts. And I assure you that no one can tell which way they have gone, because the wind covers their tracks with sand, so that there is nothing to show where they have been, but the country looks as if it had never been traversed by man or beast. That is how they escape from their enemies. But, if it happens that a friendly army passes that way, they merely drive off their beasts, because they do not want to have them seized and eaten; for the armies never pay for what they take. And you should know that, when they harvest their grain, they store it far from any habitation, in certain caves among these wastes, for fear of the armies; and from these stores they bring home what they need month by month.

After leaving Charchan, the road runs for fully five days through sandy wastes, where the water is bad and bitter, except in a few places where it is good and sweet; and there is nothing worth noting in our book. At the end of the five days' journey towards the east-north-east, is a city which stands on the verge of the Great Desert. It is here that men take in provisions for crossing the desert. Let us move on accordingly and proceed with our narrative.

The city I have mentioned, which stands at the point where the traveler enters the Great Desert, is a big city called Lop, and the desert is called the Desert of Lop. The city is subject to the Great Khan, and the inhabitants worship Mahomet. I can tell you that travelers who intend to cross the desert rest in this town for a week to refresh themselves and their beasts. At the end of the week they stock up with a month's provisions for themselves and their beasts. Then they leave the town and enter the desert.

This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end; and at the narrowest point it takes a month to cross it. It consists entirely of mountains and sand and valleys. There is nothing at all to eat. But I can tell you that after traveling a day and a night you find drinking water [at an oasis] — not enough water to supply a large company, but enough for fifty or a hundred men with their beasts. And all the way through the desert you must go for a day and a night before you find water. And I can tell you that in three or four places you find the water bitter and brackish; but at all the other watering-places, that is, twenty-eight in all, the water is good. Beasts and birds there are none, because they find nothing to eat. But I assure you that one thing is found here, and that a very strange one, which I will relate to you.

The truth is this. When a man is riding by night through this desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again. And in this way many travelers have been lost and have perished. And sometimes in the night they are conscious of a

noise like the clatter of a great cavalcade of riders away from the road; and, believing that these are some of their own company, they go where they hear the noise and, when day breaks, find they are victims of an illusion and in an awkward plight. And there are some who, in crossing this desert, have seen a host of men coming towards them and, suspecting that they were robbers, have taken flight; so, having left the beaten track and not knowing how to return to it, they have gone hopelessly astray. Yes, and even by daylight men hear these spirit voices, and often you fancy you are listening to the strains of many instruments, especially drums, and the clash of arms. For this reason bands of travelers make a point of keeping very close together. Before they go to sleep they set up a sign pointing in the direction in which they have to travel. And round the necks of all their beasts they fasten little bells, so that by listening to the sound they may prevent them from straying off the path.

That is how they cross the desert, with all the discomfort of which you have heard. . . .

Now I will tell you of some other cities, which lie towards the north-west near the edge of this desert.

The province of Kamul, which used to be a kingdom, contains towns and villages in plenty, the chief town being also called Kamul.⁷ The province lies between two deserts, the Great Desert and a small one three days' journey in extent. The inhabitants are all idolaters [Buddhists] and speak a language of their own. They live on the produce of the soil; for they have a superfluity of foodstuffs and beverages, which they sell to travelers who pass that way. They are a very gay folk, who give no thought to anything but making music, singing and dancing, and reading and writing according to their own usage, and taking great delight in the pleasures of the body. I give you my word that if a stranger comes to a house here to seek hospitality he receives a very warm welcome. The host bids his wife do everything that the guest wishes. Then he leaves the house and goes about his own business and stays away two or three days. Meanwhile the guest stays with his wife in the house and does what he will with her, lying with her in one bed just as if she were his own wife; and they lead a gay life together. All the men of this city and province are thus cuckolded by their wives; but they are not the least ashamed of it. And the women are beautiful and vivacious and always ready to oblige.

Now it happened during the reign of Mongu Khan,⁸ lord of the Tartars, that he was informed of this custom that prevailed among the men of Kamul of giving their wives in adultery to outsiders. Mongu thereupon commanded them under heavy penalties to desist from this form of hospitality. When they received this command, they were greatly distressed; but for three years they reluctantly obeyed. Then they held a council and talked the matter over, and this is what they did. They took a rich gift and sent it to Mongu and entreated him to let them use their wives according to the traditions of their ancestors; for their ancestors had declared that by the pleasure they gave to guests with their wives and goods they won the favor of their idols and multiplied the yield of their crops and their tillage. When Mongu Khan heard this he said: "Since you desire your own shame, you may have it." So he let them have their way. And I can assure you that since then they have always upheld this tradition and uphold it still.

Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), 82–85, 87–88.

VIEWPOINTS COMPARATIVE QUESTIONS

1. How is the governor Menggu described in this passage? What might this reveal about Chinese attitudes about Mongol rule?
2. In your opinion, should we treat this document (12-1) as a credible and objective description of Menggu's character and policies? Why or why not?
3. What weapons are the Mongols shown using? How might their choice of weapons have multiplied the military impact of their skill as horsemen?
4. What might the artist have wanted to convey about Chinggis's qualities as a leader? What choices did the artist make in composition and subject matter to highlight these qualities?
5. Consider the story Polo tells regarding the wives of Kamul. What does the response of the Great Khan say about the political strength of the Mongol leader in his empire? What does it tell you about Mongol attitudes toward cultural and religious diversity?
6. Taken together, how do these three documents help explain the Mongols' success?
7. Compare and contrast the depictions of Mongol rule offered by the Chinese official and by Marco Polo. What does each tell you about Mongol rule? How would you explain the differences you note?