

Encounters Among Enemies: Preliminary Remarks on Captives in Mongol Eurasia

Captives – persons taken and held as prisoners of war – were an inseparable part of Mongol warfare, both raids and conquests, from the days of Temüjin onwards. For the steppe nomads, humans were a resource scarcer than territory. They formed a valuable part of the booty not only due to their potential skills – as labor force, arrow fodder or experts of various kinds – but also for their value as merchandise that could profitably be sold in the Empire's slave markets or – in the case of high-class captives – be ransomed for a considerable price. While the collective experience of Mongol prisoners is one of agony and desperation, not all captives suffered such a grim fate. Skilled captives could advance even in captivity, while others used their captivity to acquire connections or skills that helped them in their future careers. Captivity was therefore a major channel of mobility, both physical and social, in Mongol Eurasia.

Taking Captives: When, Why, Who

A typical description of a Mongol campaign can be summarized as "they killed, pillaged, and took captives." Indeed, captives were taken in nearly every Mongol battle and raid

While most prisoners of war were captured on the battlefield, captives were sometimes taken in other circumstances.

The Mongols took captives when they thought that they would be more useful alive than dead. They did not differentiate between warriors and civilians – from either urban or rural areas – and in both cases the survival rate was not high. The most popular captives were women and children, who could be kept for domestic or military use, sold as slaves, or distributed as booty.

Another useful group was formed by artisans, who were often separated from the rest of the population, and transferred to a different region to work for the Mongols.

Other individuals were kept alive for their specific skills: from scribal abilities to engineering, entertainment, or holiness.

The Experience of Captivity

Captivity ensured only temporary survival: people who were no longer useful, were systematically slaughtered. Muslim and European sources describe how each Mongol soldier was assigned a certain number of captives to execute and obediently fulfilled his duty.

Captives also served as arrow fodder: others were located in the middle of the army, carrying banners to create the impression of a huge force.

Captives were used as guinea pigs on other occasions, experiencing dangers such as crossing swamps or rivers before the Mongols.

Some captives also had the chance of meeting a more exotic death: Matthew Paris accused the Mongols of devouring their captives' flesh, (torture and cannibalism seem to have been more frequent in medieval armies or in the Crusaders case than among the Mongols)

Captives who survived became the property of their captors. the prisoners filled various roles, such as domestic servants, herders, or more professional jobs like scribes.

Song Zizhen reports that in 1234 the number of slaves owned by Mongols comprised no less than half of north China's population.

The journey was harsh: prisoners were made to walk barefooted, flogged those who could not meet the pace. In other cases, prisoners were marched around naked

This refers not only to their travel conditions but also to their fate at their destination, where they had to work hard, and were "flogged like donkeys" if they did not obey their master's command.

Receiving minimal food and clothing even in the harsh winter, women sometimes working "naked and hungry," some were reduced to thieving while others perished in the harsh conditions.

Some were able to acquire a basic education, while others, like Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, the Baghdadi historian captured in 1258, enjoyed a certain freedom of movement

Thus, for example, the woman from Metz who hosted William of Rubruck near Qaraqorum in the mid-1250s had been captured in Hungary ca. 1241 and suffered "unheard-of destitution." But when Rubruck met her, she was employed in the household of the Khan's Christian wife, was married to a young Russian artisan with whom she had three boys, and was "well enough off."

The famous French goldsmith William Buchier, who also had a family in Qaraqorum, received generous payment and high esteem for the metal toys he built

The Mongols' crave for talents meant that captives who acquired skills appreciated by the Mongols during their captivity had a chance to improve their condition:

How Did Captivity End

It is hard to say how long people were kept in captivity. When we have more accurate data, the period varies from several months to twenty-eight years, and in cases of, for example, transferred artisans, the line dividing captivity from freedom is not always clear-cut

Apart from death, captivity could end in escape, redemption, or release.

Redemption: Another way of ending captivity was redemption, usually involving ransom. Redemption was a private matter: Captives could redeem themselves if they had enough money – and the Mongols even suggested it on certain occasions

The price of captives varied considerably: it was most expensive during the actual battle –several other prices are mentioned, but there is no trace of the institutionalized formal system of ransoming, with fixed prices and negotiation patterns,

Release seems to have been the most common way of ending captivity. Initiated by the captor, it might result from a gesture of good will – either at the imperial level or at a very local and personal level: Release could also result from a successful plea of the conquered population to the invading Khan.

Many of the released captives are recorded as returning to their homes and pursuing impressive careers, thus captivity was not necessarily a "social death" nor an irremovable stain.

Conclusion

Captives were among the largest human groups to be herded up by the Mongols. Not surprisingly, then, their fate is reflective of Mongol warfare and society: cruel, large-scale, pragmatic, and meritocratic. Just as the Mongols swiftly rose from obscure steppe nomads to stand at the helm of the largest continental empire in the annals of the Earth, so too their captives could lose their entire world in one fell swoop. Legions of people were expelled from their conquered homelands and would spend the rest of their lives- or at least part of it- in captivity. That said, a much smaller yet significant cohort of these hostages transformed themselves from lowly shepherds or servants to, say, close advisers of the Mongol leadership and important generals and scholars. The importance of lineage and wealth notwithstanding, desirable skills that were acquired either before or during subjugation, as well as personal connections with the masters, were the key to social advancement.

Redemption was by and large a personal matter. Subjects can gain their freedom by escaping on their own, or via ransoms that were arranged by kith or kin. Talent and status also increased the chances for emancipation, and the personal preferences of the commander on the field were also important. In China, imperial edicts were a more formal channel for releasing captives.

What is more, the often long and protracted relations between Mongols and their wide array of captives triggered a considerable amount of mutual acculturation. Quite a few captives became proficient in their captors' language and etiquette. In turn, these expatriates used these proficiencies to interest the Mongols in their own native cultures, not least Islam or Confucianism.