

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.3

Judging the Mongols

The impact of the Mongol conquest on the conquered peoples included:

Death

Destruction

Extortion of wealth

Disease

Displacement

It also included:

the intensification of activity on the trade routes connecting East Asia with the Mediterranean lands and Europe.

the further spread of Islam in Asia

the advancement of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

Death: The Mongols inflicted it on a large scale. In battle, their powerful bows caused heavy enemy casualties. Moreover, mass slaughter of defeated enemy soldiers and civilians was used as a deliberate policy of terror in order to:

decrease the enemy's will to fight.

induce cities to surrender without fighting, thus avoiding long sieges, which the Mongol army could not afford because it needed to keep moving to find grazing land for its horses.

avoid the risk of leaving enemies behind that might be capable of renewing resistance.

reduce the size of the occupying detachments needing to be left behind.

The total death toll directly inflicted by the Mongols during the period of their conquests, spanning nearly two centuries, may have been several millions. This includes the deaths by hunger and disease that were by-products of Mongol military operations and rule.

But:

More urban populations were spared than were massacred. Often spared were artisans, clerics of all religions, scribes, scholars, merchants, young women, and often officers, nobles, and administrators.

Mass slaughter was not a Mongol monopoly either in their own time or later. In taking a little Song Chinese town in 1218, the Jin general had 15,000 of the inhabitants put to the

sword. In 1291, King Edward of England slew nearly 10,000 people of Berwick. In 1303, 30,000 Hindus died in a battle at Chitor.

By the time of Mongke's rule, the Great Khan insisted that destruction be limited to a minimum and civilians be left alone. To show he was serious, he had a senior Mongol commander of 10,000 publicly executed for killing a Persian civilian.

Khubilai's revision of the Chinese law code reduced the number of offenses that carried the death penalty to half what it had been under the previous dynasties.

Destruction: The Mongols often destroyed the towns they attacked, usually as a by-product of the battle, sometimes deliberately after their conquest. Mongols traditionally had no use for towns. Destroying them was a practical measure to prevent their use for resistance.

Irrigation channels, without which agriculture in regions with fragile ecosystems was impossible, were in many areas seriously damaged or neglected. Gradually they silted up and became unusable, with serious long-term ecological consequences that resulted in a set-back for agriculture over wide areas for centuries. This problem was especially acute in Persia and Iraq.

Destruction was a by-product of the Mongols' conquests, rather than policy. They were unaware of or uninterested in the damage; while the local population, reduced by flight, massacre, famine, disease, could not spare the labor to restore and maintain the irrigation channels.

But: There was a great deal of construction initiated and supported by the Mongols. Many of the towns the Mongols destroyed rose again a few years later with Mongol help.

Courier services were expanded and many additional way stations were built along trade routes, where both troops and civilian travelers could get food, drink, lodging, and a change of horses. In China under Khubilai Khan, the postal relay system came to include 1400 way stations 14-40 miles apart.

Roads and bridges built originally to service the Mongol military became trade and travel routes.

The extension of the Grand Canal to Beijing by the Mongols allowed cheap transport of rice from southern to northern China.

Extortion of wealth: After first plundering the conquered, the conquerors were for a while satisfied with tribute in the form of demand of silk, grain, precious metals, and sophisticated war machinery. Unpredictable and capricious demands were gradually replaced with regular though intermittently extortionate taxes, sometimes made worse by demands that greedy Mongol princes and officials made for extra payments.

But: Some of the wealth that flowed to the Mongols was redistributed. Only part made its way to Mongolia. Much went back to those conquered areas where Mongols settled as occupying troops, administrators, and governors.

From about 1250, the Mongols undertook reforms. The Great Khan Mongke commanded: "Make the agricultural population safe from unjustified harassment, and bring despoiled provinces back to a habitable condition." He introduced the very modern

graduated income tax; repaid debts of previous rulers said to be owing to merchants; and made it more difficult for princes and high officials to practice extortion.

The lot of some segments of the conquered population actually improved, owing to profits from the trade promoted and supported by the Mongols, to their enforcement of law and order within their territories, and to their opening of careers to merit, not only birth or wealth. The poorest classes received something like government welfare assistance: food, clothes, and money.

Disease: The association of disease and warfare is commonplace. Troops live under more unsanitary conditions than is normal. Unburied corpses often contaminated water supplies. Among the overcrowded and underfed in besieged cities and in close quartered armies, an infectious illness could spread quickly. The existing food supply must be stretched to feed the invading army, leaving little for the local population and thereby reducing its immune system.

The frequent long-distance travel of military personnel, merchants, and others promoted the wider spread of diseases. Of these the Black Death (bubonic plague) was the best known and most severe. This disease may have been carried by soldiers from Inner Eurasia to the Black Sea, and from there to West Asia, North Africa, and Europe. This infection killed about one third of the total population of Europe.

Displacement: During the Mongol campaigns of conquest and later, there was large-scale enslavement and forced movement of populations.

Many fled in terror when news reached them of an approaching Mongol army.

Within the army, peoples of different backgrounds were deliberately mixed in all groupings from 10 men to 10,000. They and their families, who often accompanied Mongol armies, moved long distances on campaigns and spent long periods in far-away places as occupying armies.

In conquered territories, the Mongols usually rounded up the craftspeople, and assigned them to Mongol princes and commanders. These captives, who could number tens of thousands in a single city, were carried off to Mongolia or other parts of the growing empire. This gave rise to considerable population exchanges between Russia, Central Asia, Persia/Afghanistan, Mongolia, and China.

But: Although captive artisans and young women (destined to be slaves, concubines, prostitutes, and entertainers) often remained in their masters' hands for the rest of their lives, some gained their freedom and married locally, some eventually returned to their homelands. Moreover, artisans often gained privileges. The movement of peoples resulted in exchanges of goods, ideas and styles and in frequent and widespread contact between peoples of widely different cultural, ethnic, religious, and language backgrounds.

Thousands of people traveled from western and central parts of Eurasia to serve the Mongol regime in China. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who traveled to China with his father and uncle in 1271 and remained there for seventeen years, was just one of these foreigners seeking opportunity in Mongol administration.

Genoese merchants, who traded extensively in the Muslim lands and Inner Eurasia in the Mongol era sold Chinese silk and "Tatar cloth" at the fairs of Northern France.

Chinese artisans designed ceramics especially to appeal to Muslim tastes.

The Chinese exported copper and iron goods, porcelain, silks, linens, books, sugar, and rice to Japan and Southeast Asia in return for spices and exotic items like rhino horns.

At the time of his death in Italy, Marco Polo had among his possessions a Mongol slave, Tartar bedding, brocades from China, and a Buddhist rosary.

Khubilai Khan had Persian copies of the works of Euclid and Ptolemy translated into Chinese.

Egyptian experts were called in to improve Chinese sugar-refining techniques.

Muslim medical and astronomical sciences became known in China. Chinese medical works were translated into Persian.

Buddhist monks built Chinese style pagodas in Persia.

Persian miniatures show Chinese-style mountains and dragons.

A Mongol version of the traditional stories about Alexander the Great was produced.

Diplomatic contact with Western Europe intensified.

Columbus owned a copy of Marco Polo's book, and on his first voyage he took with him a letter from the Spanish king to the Great Khan.

Islam's spread among the peoples of the Mongol empire was also helped by the movement of peoples.

Many of the Turkic groups that allied with the Mongols had earlier converted to Islam. A significant number of them were literate, and employed by the Mongols as clerks, administrators, and translators as well as soldiers. They carried the Qur'an and their beliefs to new potential converts.

Persia and Iraq were overwhelmingly Muslim when the Mongols swept in. Persian became one of the official languages of the Mongol empire, used even in China. And Persian culture, along with Islam, spread into Central and Eastern Asia.

The Mongol Great Khans' preferred Muslims for senior positions in China. They thought that foreign Muslims could be more impartial than local Chinese. The foreign recruits could be blamed in case of Chinese dissatisfaction. Scholars from Persia were especially admired for their scientific and cultural achievements.

Starting in the thirteenth century, the Mongol khans of the Golden Horde and of Persia converted to Islam and threw their governments' power behind the Muslim faith.

Buddhism advanced in China owing partly to direct support from the Great Khans, starting with Khubilai. Tibetan lamas (monks), who had frequently held secular as well as religious power at home, began to move to China. Khubilai, whose wife Chabi was an ardent Buddhist, found the political experience of the lamas useful to him. He put a number of them in positions of power and influence. He also made large donations to Buddhist temples, gave tax-exemption to Buddhist monks, and supported them in their arguments with Chinese Daoists.

Christianity lost out in the long run in Asia, though not through any action of the Mongols. Some members of the Mongol princely houses and senior advisors were Nestorian Christians. Christians also served in the army. Some of the steppe tribes within the Mongol empire were Nestorian Christians. Several Popes, that is, the head of the Latin, or Roman Catholic Christian church, sent several envoys and missionaries from western Europe to Mongolia and China. European leaders had hopes of allying with Mongol leaders against the Muslim powers that challenged European political and commercial interests in the eastern Mediterranean. Neither the political overtures nor missionary labors resulted in much success for the Latin Church in Asia.

Christianity suffered partly because it did not speak with a single voice: believers in Latin Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Nestorian, and other Christian doctrines engaged in heated disputes with one another and competed for converts. Latin Christianity never caught on in any of the Mongol lands, and, with the advance of Islam, Nestorian communities in China and Inner Eurasia gradually shrank.