

THE CAMBRIDGE WORLD HISTORY

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VOLUME V

Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict,
500 CE–1500 CE

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Edited by

BENJAMIN Z. KEDAR

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

and

MERRY E. WIESNER-HANKS

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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The Mongol Empire and inter-civilizational exchange

MICHAL BIRAN

In the early thirteenth century, Chinggis Khan and his heirs built the largest contiguous empire the world has ever seen, an empire that at its height stretched from Korea to Hungary, from Burma and Iraq to Siberia. The Chinggisids not only conquered the whole Eurasian steppe, the home of the nomads, but they also subsumed under their rule three other civilizations: the Chinese, whose centre and hinterland came under their rule by 1279; the Islamic, whose erstwhile centre, Baghdad, was conquered in 1258, after a large share of the eastern Islamic lands had already fallen; and since 1241, the Orthodox Christian outer realms, though not its centre, Byzantium itself. Moreover, as the only superpower of the thirteenth century, the Mongols had a noticeable impact on regions and civilizations outside their purview, such as Japan, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Muslim Middle East, and much of Europe.

The Mongols, a group of demographically marginal nomads, were able to create such a huge empire only by fully mobilizing the resources – both human and material – that they extracted from the regions under their control. More specifically, the formation of the empire, its continued expansion, and the establishment of its administration entailed a vast mobilization of people, goods, techniques, institutions, texts and ideas throughout its territory and farther afield. This process constituted the first step towards a robust inter-civilizational exchange.

Unprecedented human mobility informed the unified and constantly growing empire (1206–60). It continued on a smaller yet highly significant scale when the polity was divided into four khanates, each a regional empire headed by Chinggis Khan's descendants. The Khanate of the Great Khan, later known as the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), ruled over China, Mongolia,

I would like to thank Tom Allsen for his valuable comments.

Tibet and Manchuria, and enjoyed a nominal, though not uncontested, primacy over its counterparts. The Ilkhanate (1260–1335), literally 'the empire of the submissive khans', ruled in modern Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, parts of Anatolia, and the Caucasus. The Chaghadaid Khanate held power in Central Asia, from eastern Xinjiang (China) to Uzbekistan, until Timur's rise to power in 1370, and over eastern Central Asia through the late 1600s. The Golden Horde (1260–1480) governed the northwestern Eurasian steppe, from the eastern border of Hungary to Siberia, as well as the Russian principalities. Despite the many, often bloody, disputes between the four polities, they retained a strong sense of Chinggisid unity. In the mid-fourteenth century all four khanates were embroiled in political crises that led to the collapse of the Ilkhanate (1335) and Yuan China (1368), while considerably weakening the steppe khanates. The fall of the Yuan is generally deemed to be the end of the Mongol period, although from a Muslim vantage point, the 'Mongolian moment' sometimes extends until the Timurids' demise in 1500 (see Map 20.1).

Although the Mongol era was relatively short in imperial terms, the Chinggisids' impact on world history has been much more enduring. The primary reasons for this were their active promotion of inter-civilizational contacts and the transformations – not always intended – of religious and ethnic identities that were triggered by their population movements. Moreover, it is hard to ignore the imperial legacy that the Mongols bequeathed to ambitious dynasties across Eurasia, and a host of functioning institutions. This contribution holds true both for empires that paid homage to the Chinggisids (Timurid and Uzbek Central Asia, Qing China and Mughal India) and for those that ardently denied any such debt (Ming China, Muscovy and the Ottomans).

Running the gamut from the "Tatar Yoke" to the Pax Mongolica, the question of the empire's influence on world history has been debated for centuries in a discourse that is often freighted with strong nationalist undertones. The merciless destruction that the Mongols left in their wake is still what most people associate with the empire, and there is no reason to pretend it did not happen. Nevertheless, their legacy is much more complex, as they also triggered a long-lasting cultural effervescence; a thriving artistic and scientific exchange; booming international trade; new and abiding forms of legitimacy, jurisprudence and imperial culture; and a host of religious, ethnic and political changes. What is more, the Mongols integrated Eurasia on an unprecedented scale, a globalization of the Old World that contributed to the discovery of the New World and helped shape the early modern period.

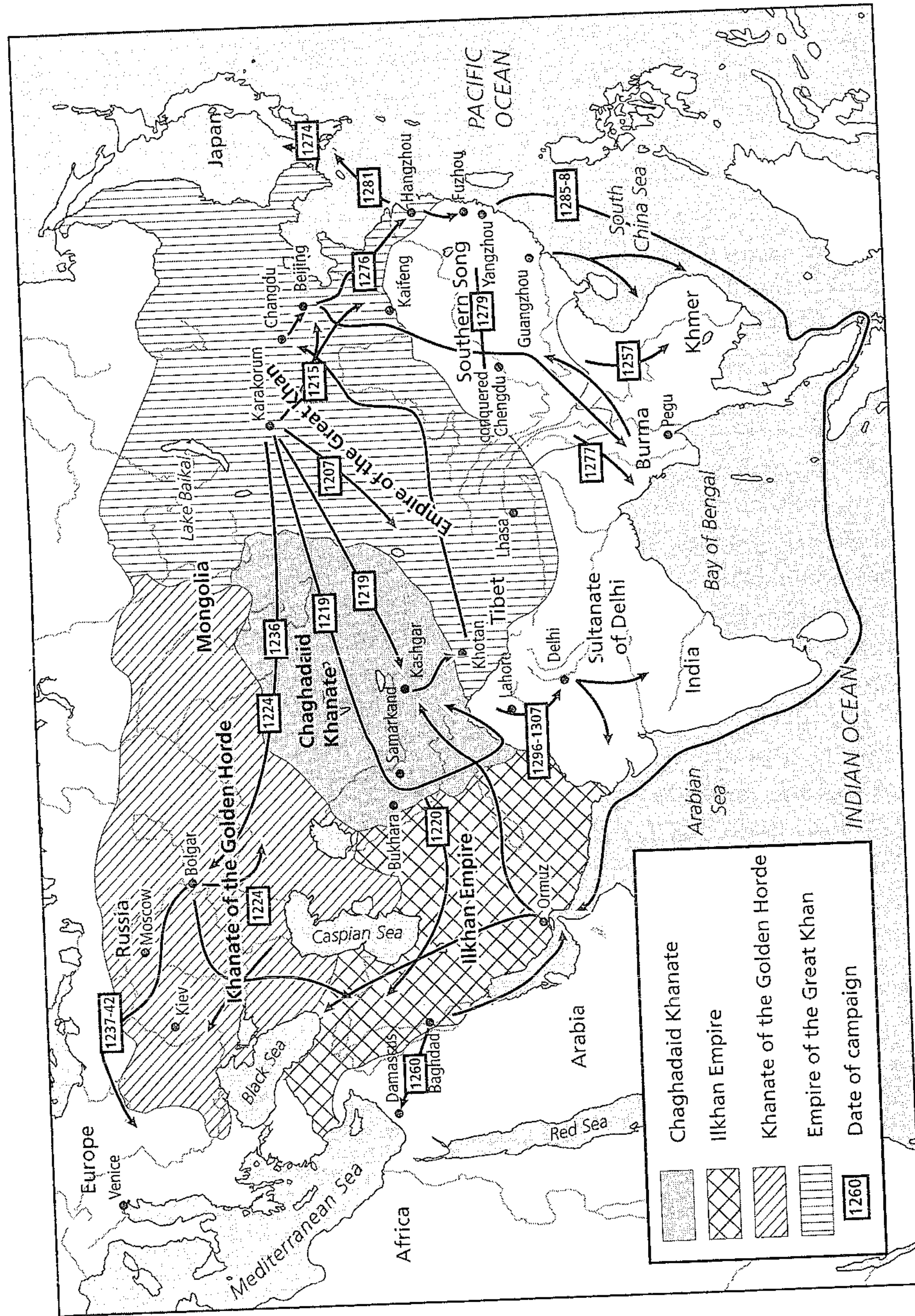
The focus of this chapter is on the Mongols' promotion of cultural, religious and economic exchange. In addition, it will discuss the legacy that they bequeathed to future empires. Before we proceed, though, let us set the stage with a sketch of the Mongols' imperial enterprise.

Empire building

In 1206, when Temüjin united the Mongolian tribes after more than two decades of in-fighting and was enthroned as Chinggis Khan, he had no intention of conquering the world. However, the ensuing spate of victories convinced both Chinggis Khan and everyone else around him that he was destined to rule the planet. The political fragmentation of Eurasia in the centuries that preceded the Mongols' rise and the emergence of post-nomadic states in eastern, central and western Asia were contributing factors, but Chinggis Khan's policies – above all the creative use of the Inner Asian cultural legacy and his pragmatic willingness to learn from others – merit the lion's share of credit behind the Mongols' success.

The basis for supra-tribal unity in Mongolia was the legacy of the prior steppe empires, most notably the Turks (c. 552–743), as these polities bequeathed a religio-political ideology and templates for military organization. Steppe ideology centred around the belief in Tengri (Heaven), the supreme sky god, who conferred heavenly charisma (*suu*) and the right to rule on earth to a single clan, each of whose members could be elevated to the khaqanate – the supreme office of the ruler. As Tengri did not bestow his mandate on every generation, its possession by the khaqan was confirmed by triumph on the battlefield and by the shamanic apparatus. The sovereign had certain shamanic functions, and his legitimacy was reinforced by controlling the sacred territory of the Orkhon River in Central Mongolia, where the Turks etched the Orkhon inscriptions and the Mongols built their capital, Qara Qorum, some four hundred years later. Following the demise of the Turks' successors, the Uighurs in Mongolia (744–840) and the Khazars in the western steppes (c. 618–965), no khaqan had tried to unite the steppe. However, the ideology was merely held 'in reserve', waiting to be put to fruition by future unifiers like Chinggis Khan.

More practical means behind the conquest's success was the organization of the army: Chinggis Khan retained the typical decimal unit that was characteristic of former Inner Asian empires, in which armies were arranged into units of ten and larger units based on powers of ten, but abolished its linkage to the tribal system: the new Mongol units often combined people



Map 20.1. The Mongol conquests and the Four Khanates

from different tribes and were led by Chinggis Khan's *nökers* (personal allies), rather than tribal chiefs. Chosen on the basis of merit and loyalty, this new elite provided the Mongols with a most professional military leadership. Moreover, the khan could confidently assign troops to fight on the extremities of Eurasia without fear of treason. Since every Mongol was a soldier (women offered logistical support), this reorganization begat social revolution: The soldiers' loyalty was transferred from tribe to commander and, higher up the chain, to the Chinggisid family. Moreover, allegiance was further buttressed by draconian disciplinary measures and booty. The rules governing the behaviour in these units, together with the growing body of legal precedents that Chinggis Khan ordered to register from 1206 onwards, were probably the basis for the famous *Jasaq* (Turkic: *Yasa*) – the ever-evolving law code ascribed to Chinggis Khan, which remained valid throughout the empire in conjunction with local laws.

The decimal organization was also a convenient means for incorporating new soldiers: During their campaigns, the Mongols eliminated existing nomadic elites and reorganized their troops into units headed by their loyal followers. This enabled them to impose a single, centralized authority across the whole steppe and mobilize its chief military resource – mounted archers. In turn, this system was broadened to include soldiers from the sedentary population. As a result, the more the Mongols conquered, the more manpower they had for their next conquests. As the troops advanced, the Mongols built roads and bridges and seized arms, thereby laying the groundwork for further expansion. In the process, they collected arms along with artisans who were transferred eastward in the service of the empire.

Chinggis Khan also retained the Inner Asian institution of the Royal Guard (*keshig*) that became the incubator of the military and administrative elite. The guard was responsible for the khan's personal security and general well-being: its ranks included officers who were responsible for his food and drink, garments, weapons, and herds; others were charged with writing his decrees and recording his deeds. The *keshig* also carried out police functions and served as the imperial crack troops. Its men were recruited from the decimal units, as commanders were instructed to assign both their sons and top warriors – regardless of their genealogy – to the elite guard. Consequently, the *keshig* served as both a reservoir of potential hostages (to which sons of subject rulers and high officials were later added) and a training centre for future Mongol commanders.

This organization, the quality of the commanders, the loyalty of the troops and their skill in mobile warfare, combined with meticulous operational

planning, were among the keys to the Mongol success. Another factor was the devastation and massacres on an unprecedented scale that accompanied the conquests. This violence should not be interpreted as wanton cruelty, for it was a strategic ploy that went beyond psychological warfare. The destruction was a brutal yet effective means of compensating for the Mongols' numerical inferiority and preventing future resistance: More specifically, the empire ravaged much more territory than it kept, thereby creating a wide belt of destruction around its borders. This buffer protected Mongol territory from future incursions, facilitated the Mongols' continuous expansion and increased their pasture lands. At later stages of the conquest (e.g. South China), the devastation was substantially reduced, as by then the conquerors had realized that their subjects were more useful alive. In some areas, the restoration was as potent as the wreckage.

Another major reason for the Mongol success was their willingness and capacity to learn from others. A case in point was the Chinese and Iranian siege engineers whose skills were used by the empire. For the campaign in South China, it even built a navy. However, the Mongols' eye for talent and innovation was most conspicuous in the field of administration, where they lacked not only numbers but experts and skills. As early as 1204, Chinggis Khan adopted the Uighur script for writing Mongolian, thereby creating a literate staff. Afterwards, he drew on experienced subjects to administer the conquered territories.

The administration evolved with the empire's growth and was systematized, first and foremost, by two of Chinggis' heirs, the khans Ögödei (r. 1229–41) and Möngke (r. 1251–9). While the bureaucracy's lower echelons were manned primarily by the subjected population, Mongols played a major role in its upper levels, which were inherently patrimonial. The Central Secretariat, a sort of Mongol government, evolved out of the *keshig* and its members were personally loyal to the khan. The Secretariat was based in Qara Qorum, the Mongol capital, which Ögödei erected in 1237. Its chief priority was to secure resources for the empire's functioning and continued expansion.

For the most part, Mongol rule was direct. This was partly because many of the elites were eliminated during the conquests. That said, former steppe empires usually settled for indirect administration, leaving former elites to govern their own lands. Mongol direct rule was administered by mobile secretariats (*xingsheng*) that branched off from the central government. The *xingsheng* indeed governed North China, Turkestan, and Northern Iran, eventually serving as the nucleus for Yuan China, Ilkhanid Iran and the

Chaghadaid administrations. Led by experienced non-Mongol administrators, such as the Khwarizmian merchants Mahmud Yalawach and his son Mas'ud Beg or the Khitan Yelü Chucai, their main duties were census taking and tax collection. The census, which was adopted from the Chinese, was the key element in Mongol efforts to harvest their domains, as it was used to impose taxes, recruit troops and labour and identify natural and human resources. The Mongols usually retained existing taxes, but also tacked on the *Qubchir* (contributions), a special levy to meet the rulers' immediate needs, and later the *Tamgha*, a commercial tax. The nomads also paid taxes and were rewarded, above all, from the centrally collected and then redistributed booty.

The Mongol administration had a dual character in several respects: From Ögödei's time onwards, the military and civil administrations were mostly separated. In addition, the Mongols often preferred double-staffing administrative posts, frequently pairing together home-grown and foreign officials. This method is well-documented in the Yuan dynasty, but was apparently also employed in the Ilkhanate. The idea was to have the two officials keep each other in check, a technique that the Mongols were indeed very fond of. Since the empire viewed the administration of all the sedentary lands – whether in China, Turkestan or Iran – as basically the same (despite local variants), they often exchanged administrative personnel.

In a number of cases, though, local dynasts were permitted to remain in place and govern with the empire's stamp of approval and under the supervision of Mongolian-appointed imperial residents known as *darughachi*, *basqaq* or *shihna* – a post inherited from the Qara Khitai. These officials also served in directly administered territories. This indirect administration existed mainly in regions north of the steppe: most prominently the Rus' principalities, but also the northern tribes of Manchuria and Siberia and various kingdoms on the khanates' margins, such as Armenia, Georgia, Anatolia, Tibet and Korea. These polities had to pay tribute to the Mongol treasury, participate in the census, provide military units when required, and send their leaders' relatives to the imperial guards.

Communication across the vast empire was maintained by the *Jam*, the mounted postal courier system. Though perhaps based on Khitan precedent, the *Jam* was systematized by Ögödei: Each station was located about every 33 to 45 kilometres from the next, and provided horses, fodder and couriers for authorized travelers who were able to cover about 350–400 kilometres a day. This network enabled the khan to transmit his orders efficiently, acquire information from the far reaches of the empire, and secure the roads for ambassadors and merchants.

The khan's attempts at centralization were balanced by the nomadic conception of the empire as the common property of all the Chinggisids, whereby the ruler was but *primus inter pares*. A prime example of this mindset was the appanage (*Qubi*). During the conquest period, vast territories were parcelled out to various Chinggisids, including women. While the central government administered the appanages, their revenues were forwarded directly to their owners. In a similar vein, the mobile secretariats were staffed with appointees of both the khan and the different princes, so that the interests of the entire Chinggisid clan were taken into account. Reforms to the administration were usually implemented in tandem with new waves of expansion. One reason for this timing was that the government had then secured funds for new campaigns, but it also stemmed from the need for further expansion in order to gain the traditional Mongol elites' consent for increased centralization. The empire's expansion and centralization reached their peak under Möngke, although even he failed to abolish the appanages. The dismantlement of the united empire after Möngke's death in 1259 – due to succession struggles, the sheer girth of the polity and the fact that it had reached the steppe's ecological borders – appreciably curtailed the resources that each khanate could muster for further expansion. Apart from South China, where the area's wealth and prestige justified the great effort needed for conquest, there was no significant Mongol expansion after the empire's dissolution. With respect to administration, local strategies became more important to the four successor states, but Mongol institutions (such as the *keshig*, *Jam*, and tax apparatus) were retained and the khanates continued to exchange administrators.

Cross-cultural exchange

The immense size of the Mongol Empire encouraged cross-cultural ties both within and beyond its borders, as no polity had hitherto commanded such a large portion of Eurasia's talent pool. However, as adeptly illustrated in the seminal works of Thomas T. Allsen,¹ the Mongols were not simply a passive medium that enabled such contacts to take place. Instead, they were the main agents who promoted and directed such contacts. What is more, they served as a filter that determined which particular cultural elements would be diffused across the continent. As a result, the Mongols' nomadic culture

¹ Especially Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Allsen's other works in the further reading.

had an enormous impact on what the sedentary civilizations exchanged. This connection was initiated by the Mongols' invasion of Turkestan in the 1220s, which drew on the human and material resources of northeast Asia. Following this campaign, the Mongols returned home with talent and material goods from the Muslim world. In fact, the process of empire building, which as aforementioned involved a massive flow of human and material resources, was often the first stage of cross-cultural ties. Since the Chinggisids regarded skilled individuals as a form of booty to be distributed across the empire and amongst the family, myriads of people were transferred across Eurasia to provide for the empire's needs – military, administrative and cultural.

The first and most potent catalyst for this mobilization was the army, as the Mongols appropriated the defeated and submitted populations – both nomad and sedentary – and organized them into decimal units, which were sent to wage war across the continent. In turn, the advance of this formidable army instigated a mass flight of people, as throngs of refugees from all classes and professions sought to escape the approaching storm. Furthermore, the empire transferred thousands of farmers and artisans to repopulate and revive the devastated areas. The Mongols also looked for experts in fields as varied as administration, military technology, trade, religion, craftsmanship, science and entertainment. The recruitment of professionals was systematized as early as the late 1230s by means of a census in which people were classified according to vocational skills. Later on, the different khanates competed for and exchanged specialists for the purpose of optimizing their sedentary lands' economic and cultural wealth and enhancing their kingly reputation. Additionally, the Mongols' reputation for rewarding loyal retainers, their encouragement of trade, and their religious pluralism attracted many gifted people to Chinggisid courts.

Dating back to the time of Chinggis Khan, the Mongol administration's recruitment of foreign specialists encouraged further mobilization and exchange. This policy was fine-tuned in Yuan China (where the demographic imbalance between rulers and ruled was far greater than in other regions), as a special category of *semuren* ('people of various kinds', i.e. non-Mongols and non-Chinese) was created for the many foreigners who played a significant role in the bureaucracy. With respect to privileges, the *semuren* outranked the local Chinese subjects and were second only to the Mongols themselves. The empire preferred immigrants from nomadic and post-nomadic empires such as those of the Khitans, Uighurs, or Khwarazmians because they were not only well-versed in the laws of the cities, but had connections to the steppe.

That said, the case of Marco Polo epitomizes the fact that other talented people were also welcome. For the purpose of winning over the loyalty of these newcomers, the Mongols sought to give them 'a taste of home', importing foreign (mostly Muslim) food, medicine and entertainment to, say, Yuan China. While the situation in China is far better-documented than in other khanates, there is evidence of a certain presence of Far Eastern food, medicine, knowledge and entertainment in Mongol Iran and apparently the steppe khanates.

Most of what was conveyed throughout the empire was not the Mongols' own culture, but rather elements from that of their sedentary subjects. However, it was the Chinggisids who initiated the bulk of these exchanges. The prime movers of this culture were imperial agents, including diplomats, merchants, administrators, artisans, soldiers and hostages. The particular cultural goods that diffused across Eurasia were those compatible with Mongol norms and beliefs, such as medicine (i.e. healing), astronomy and divination (reading of the heavens), geography and cartography (reading of the earth), and thus the Mongols also promoted scientific transfers. In short, the flow of people, ideas, and goods across Eurasia was determined to a large extent by the Mongols' affinities and needs.

The extensive mobilization along with growing trade (discussed below) elicited a constant and voluminous movement of people, objects and ideas throughout Eurasia. These developments not only encouraged integration, but also inspired the creation of tools such as maps, multilingual dictionaries and travel literature that facilitated further contacts both within and outside the empire. For example, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, multilingual dictionaries could be found not only in Iran and China, but also in Armenia, Korea, North India, Egypt, Yemen and Crimea. Likewise, the two most famous travelogues, those of Marco Polo and of Ibn Battuta, were compiled by natives of Venice and Tangier (in North Africa), respectively. The broadening of intellectual horizons under the Mongols finds expression in, among other works, the first true history of the world, which was compiled for the Ilkhans in Persia by their vizier Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 1318) – a polymath of Jewish origin whose diverse interests included medicine, theology, cooking, agriculture, history and geography. His *Compendium of Chronicles* (*Jāmi' al-tawārīkh*) offered not only a detailed history of the Mongols from the pre-Chinggisid period to the reign of Qubilai's successor, Temür Öljeitü (r. 1307–1311), but also sections dedicated to the annals of China, India, the Muslim world, the Jews, and the Franks, as well as comprehensive genealogical and geographical appendixes (see Figure 20.1).



Figure 20.1 The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, miniature from the 'Jāmi' al-tawārīkh of Rashīd al-Dīn, c. 1307 (vellum) (Edinburgh University Library, Scotland. With kind permission of the University of Edinburgh / Bridgeman Images)

Like the official histories in China, this tome was compiled by a team of research assistants under the direction of Rashīd al-Dīn. The result was that more information about the world (especially East Asia) became available in the Muslim Middle East. Produced in the 1330s with the help of Muslim cartographers, maps showing, inter alia, over a hundred places in western Europe and over thirty in Africa, also increased knowledge about the world in Yuan China. Correspondingly, the Europeans expanded the limits of their own knowledge to Central, East, South and Southeast Asia, and Mongols and Tatars were extolled in European literary works from *The Canterbury Tales* to *The Divine Comedy*.

The main axes of Mongol cross-cultural exchange ran between the Sinitic and Islamic civilizations, whereas the Christian Orthodox were a relatively marginal partner. This was mostly because China and the Muslim world, roughly equivalent in terms of culture, had much more to offer the Mongols than did the hinterlands of Orthodox Christianity that came under the empire's control. Although the Russians supplied soldiers and artisans to the far corners of Eurasia, they lacked both administrative personnel with experience in serving nomadic rulers, and scientists – astronomers, geographers, mathematicians – of the stature of their prestigious Chinese, Central Asian or Iranian counterparts. Furthermore, the Mongols shared the same territory with their sedentary subjects in Iran, Central Asia and China, a fact that encouraged all the parties to share economic resources and enhance

collaboration between their specialists. Conversely, the Mongols in the Golden Horde remained on the steppe, at a distance from their Russian subjects who were allowed to retain their own leaders. In addition, the political alliance between Yuan China and Ilkhanid Iran encouraged mutual exchange.

Another facet of cross-cultural exchange was the direct impact that Mongolian culture had on the Mongols' subjects and neighbours. The unparalleled success of the Chinggisids spawned imitation throughout Eurasia in all that concerned Mongolian names, clothes, hair style, diet and music. For instance, elements of 'Tatar dress' (the medieval equivalent of blue jeans), including fabric with small patterns, vests, and fur trim were adopted in fourteenth-century England, in Yuan and Ming China, Ilkhanid and post-Ilkhanid Iran, Chaghadaid and Timurid Central Asia, Mamluk Egypt and North India. Tent furnishings such as rugs and tapestries, which the Mongols used to make their palaces resemble tents, became high fashion among ruling elites from the Pacific to the Adriatic. Pasta, originating in the Middle East and favoured by the Mongols, spread into both China and Italy. Additionally, Eurasian elites became well-versed in Chinggisid lore. Mongol social norms also penetrated their subjects' lives. For instance, levirate marriages, condemned by both Islamic law and Confucian ethics, were not rare in Ilkhanid Iran and Yuan China. Lastly, following in the footsteps of their Mongol counterparts, Persian and Korean princesses attained an elevated status and became intimately involved in politics.

What were the ramifications of these cross-cultural ties in the post-thirteenth century world? It appears as though not all the imported knowledge was received with open arms or had a lasting impact. A case in point is intellectual property, such as medical theories. These sorts of goods did not travel well, for they were closely linked to particular worldviews. Technologies disseminated more easily: the Mongols introduced gunpowder from China to the West (at this stage, though, it was far from a military 'game changer'), while the art of distilling sugar arrived East from the Muslim world. Material culture, especially art, was often well-received and adapted to local conditions and tastes. The enduring influence of Chinese painting on Persian art is a well-documented legacy of the Mongol period, which even left its mark in Italy. Chinese-inspired Ilkhanid paintings and attendant new methods surfaced throughout the lands of Islam, where they became the standard for quality painting from the Ottoman Empire to Mughal India. In sum, Mongol policies fostered Eurasian integration on an unprecedented scale.

