

The Chinggisids and their Intellectual Jousting Tournaments

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In recent years the image of the Mongols has been undergoing a steady change. This change reflects the growing interest in the development of the Chinggisid Empire and particularly their assimilation of the cultures of the peoples that the empire absorbed and their absorption by the sedentary cultures which, not always voluntarily, acted as their hosts. It was not only military technology, cuisine, medicine, art, and the practicalities and instruments for enhancing the quality of life and commerce which were exchanged but the intellectual ideas and ideals which underpinned the life styles of those who were encountered. Chinggis Khan famously aspired to provide his wives and children with the fineries of life and the best the world had to offer. But it was not just the material world that he aspired to but also the intellectual luxuries of scholarship and learning. Throughout the Chinggisid chronicles there occur references to the presence of wise men and learned advisers there for consultation on the great decisions that had to be made but in addition there are not infrequent references to debates often described in language more reminiscent of jousting tournaments or duels than intellectual exchange. These learned debates, usually between clerics of rival faiths, were staged by various princes in courts throughout the empire for sport and entertainment and their popularity must surely reflect some elements of the nature of the Chinggisid regimes.

This paper will consider the nature of these debates and the traditions from where they might have emerged and at the same time it will consider the role of “wise men” in Chinggisid society.