

Yuan Dynasty Policies and Their Impact on Early Medieval Japan

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Most discussions of Mongol-Japanese interactions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries center on hostility. As textbooks and other modern historical materials explain, the Kamakura shogunate's negative response to overtures from Khubilai Khan led to Mongol-led invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281, and plans for a third invasion were in the works at the time of Khubilai's death. Much less well known is that during those same decades, while the shogunate was still at a state of war, Japanese merchant ships were sailing to Yuan Dynasty China to conduct trade. How did the rise of the Yuan Dynasty affect trade between the Japanese islands and the mainland? Who were these merchants, and how did government policies on both sides of the sea help or hinder their actions? This paper attempts to answer such questions while highlighting non-military aspects of relations between Yuan and Japan. It begins by reviewing the emphases in existing scholarship on politics, foreign relations, and conceptions of the world among the elites of the time. Next, the paper provides a brief but detailed examination of the early medieval Japanese economy, including the spread of monetization in the thirteenth century. Then it links economic growth to new shipbuilding techniques, the availability of Chinese copper cash, and the policies of the Yuan Dynasty. Whereas Japanese history often portrays the Kamakura period as if Japan was isolated, this paper attempts instead to better connect early medieval Japan to the Mongols and thereby more effectively place Japanese development in a wider regional context.