

The Mongols: How Barbaric Were the “Barbarians”?

Introduction

Eight hundred years ago, during the 13th Century, a small tribe from the grasslands or **steppes** of central Asia conquered much of the known world. Operating from the backs of horses, Mongol warriors swept across much of Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Their reach extended from Korea to Poland, and from Vietnam to Syria. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Nothing quite like it has been seen since.

The reputation of the Mongols is not pretty. Much of the world called them “barbarians.” For the ancient Greeks, “barbaros” simply meant foreigner. By the 1200s, “barbarian” was a much more negative term referring to people who lived beyond the reach of civilization, people who were savage, evil.

Below is a short sketch of Mongol history.

Four maps are provided to help keep the story straight. This background essay is followed by ten documents. Your task is to use the background materials and the documents to judge the Mongol’s impact on the 13th and 14th Century world. Were they barbarians spreading death and destruction, or is there more to the story?

Beginnings

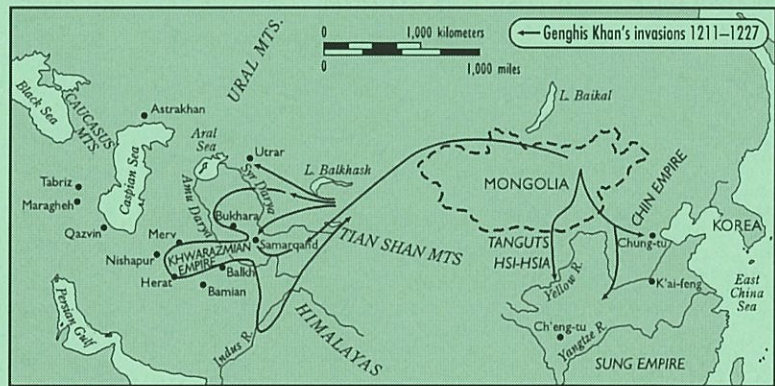
From the start, the Mongols lived in round, moveable houses they called **yurts**. They had few material possessions. They knew little about mining and cared nothing about farming. They were nomadic people who lived off the meat,

milk, and hide of horses, and the meat and wool of sheep.

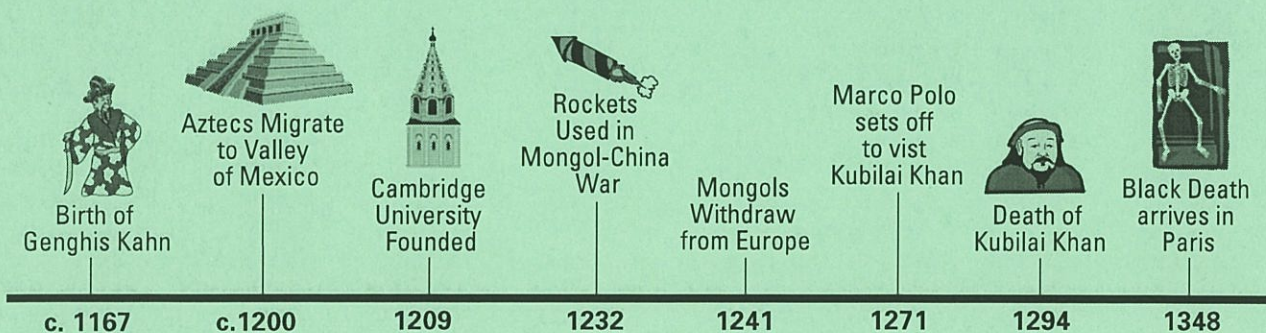
Then in 1167 a boy child was born on the Mongolian plains. His name was Temuchin. Temuchin did not have an easy childhood. His father was poisoned by a local enemy and the boy spent much of his teenage years fighting clan rivals. For an additional twenty years Temuchin fought to bring the Mongol clans of the region under one leadership. In 1206 Temuchin won that leadership and was given the title Genghis Khan. At this point, Genghis’ aspirations began to grow larger.

The First Wave: North China and Ancient Persia

Genghis Khan’s first serious target was the Chin armies of north China in 1211. An army of 200,000 rode east. Numerous Chinese cities felt Mongol brutality. Slaughter was so great that the



streets of the Chinese capital were greasy with human fat and flesh. With north China under his control, Genghis next attacked his neighbors to the west – the Uighurs, the Kara-Khi tai, the



Merkits, the Kipchaks. The Mongol empire was suddenly not so little.

Still further to the west was the ancient Persian empire of Khwarazm which included the modern nations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Initially Genghis Khan and the Shah of Khwarazm worked out a peaceful trade agreement, but then a Mongol caravan of 150 traders entering Khwarazm from Mongolia was murdered by one of the Shah's governors. This turned out to be a bad mistake. What followed was a Mongol onslaught that raked over the land of the Khwarazm Shah. Cities fell; Persian casualties were extraordinarily high.

The Second Wave: Russia and Eastern Europe

In 1227 Genghis Khan died and was succeeded by one of his four sons, Ogedei. Ogedei ordered the building of a Mongol capital called Karakorum, and afterward itched for further conquest. After long debate with his brothers

eastern Russian frontier. The great Mongol general Subedei sought to make an example of Riazan that would cause other Russian cities to submit. The city was destroyed. Men, women, and children were slain. A few survivors were allowed to escape to carry the warning: The Mongols are coming – submit or die.

Kolumna, Suzdal, Vladimir, Kozelsk, Kiev and other cities in Russia; Lublin, Cracow in Poland; Liegnitz in Silesia; Buda and Pest in Hungary – the Mongols swept their way west. By May, 1242, Mongol intelligence patrols were just 60 miles from Vienna.

And then the unexpected – the Mongols turned back! Word from Mongolia had apparently reached the front lines that the Great Khan Ogedei had died. Not understanding what had happened, western Europe held its breath and waited.

At about this time, in the 1240s, a small number of European visitors began to visit Mongolia and Mongol-controlled China, men like the John of Plano Carpini, Friar William of Rubruck, and, several years later, the famous Marco Polo. These men joined the Persians and Chinese who were already visitors at the Mongol court in Karakorum or in China. Thanks to the writings of these travellers we have some firsthand accounts of Mongol life.



and generals the decision was made to invade Russia and eastern Europe. Ogedei predicted the campaign would take a long eighteen years. An army of 50,000 horse soldiers, Persian and Chinese engineers, and 20,000 draftees were made ready to march. By the winter of 1237 this army stood poised on the frozen banks of the Volga; Russia and Europe lay before them.

The next five years were to shake the Western world. The first city to fall was Riazan on the

The Third Wave: The Middle East

Ogedei was succeeded by Genghis' grandson Mongke. Mongke set his sights on still further conquest. Two targets were chosen, the Middle East and southern China.

Again, a huge Mongol army was assembled on the steppes – thousands upon thousands of horses, numerous siege machines, and one thousand Chinese engineering teams for building roads and bridges. The massive army advanced into Persia on January 1, 1256.

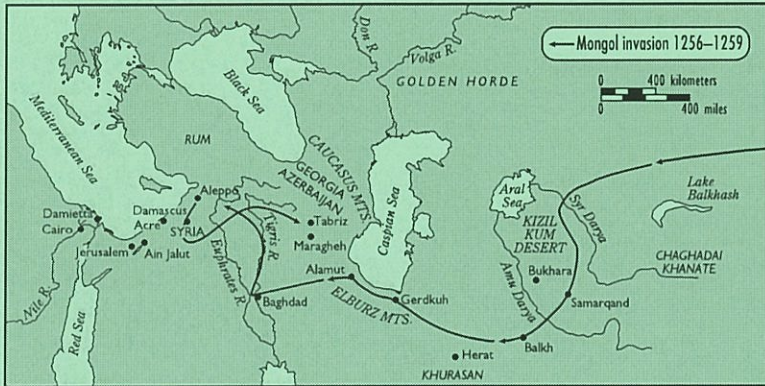
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First the Mongols annihilated a troublesome sect known as the Assassins. Next they advanced 500 miles west to the walls of Baghdad. There, in February, 1258, this spiritual and cultural center of Islam fell. Mongol armies proceeded into Syria and Palestine where they were joined by Christian troops from Armenia and Georgia. It was a time of shifting alliances and these

Kubilai, a grandson of Genghis, who ruled in China. Kubilai maintained enough ties with the other khanates to achieve a measure of security across much of Asia. Historians have called this time **pax Mongolica** or “the Mongolian peace.”

Kubilai was probably the most cultured of the Great Khans. He expanded his holdings in China by defeating the Sung Empire in southern China and established a new dynasty he called the **Yuan**. For the first time in three hundred years China was again a united country but now under Mongol control.

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eastern Christians saw the Mongol attack on the Middle East as a kind of crusade against Islam. Then, suddenly, history repeated itself. Just as the death of a Great Khan had stopped the Mongols as they approached Vienna in 1242, now the death of Mongke Khan in 1259 caused the Mongols to pull back from the walls of Jerusalem.

In his later years Kubilai weakened his empire with unsuccessful attempts to conquer Japan and Java. After Kubilai’s death the Mongols began to lose their grip across the entire empire.

In Persia Mongol authority ended in 1335. In China the last Mongol emperor was removed in 1368. In Russia the Golden Horde breathed its final official breath in 1502. The Mongol era was over.

Pax Mongolica and Kubilai Khan in China

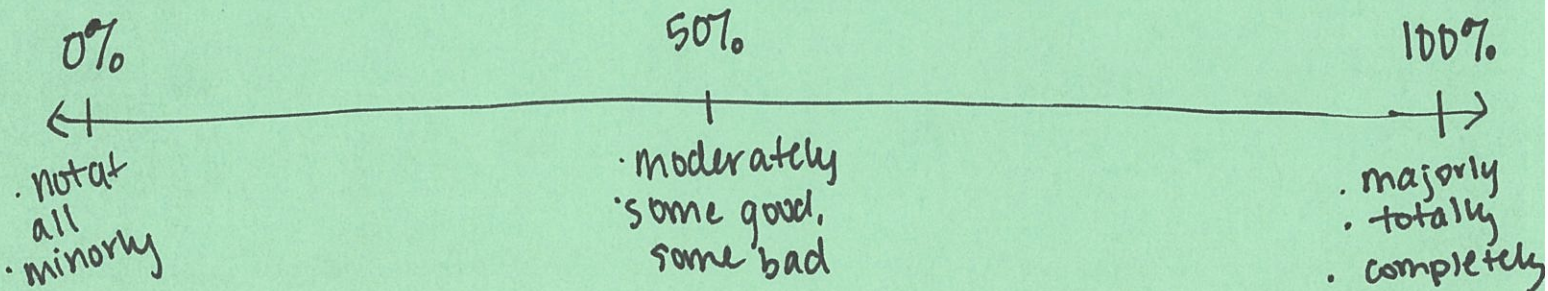
The Question

By this time the Mongol Empire consisted of four parts or **khanates** – the Russian khanate called the Golden Horde, the Persian khanate of the Ilkhans, the central Asian khanate, and a fourth khanate which included Mongolia and China. The next Great Khan was the famous

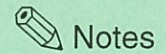
What should we make of the Mongols? There is no debate among historians that the Mongols had their brutal side. But when the day of historical judgment comes and the Mongol goods and bads are placed side by side on the balance scale, which way does the scale tip? Read the documents that follow and make your judgment:

~~The Mongols: How barbaric were the “Barbarians”?~~

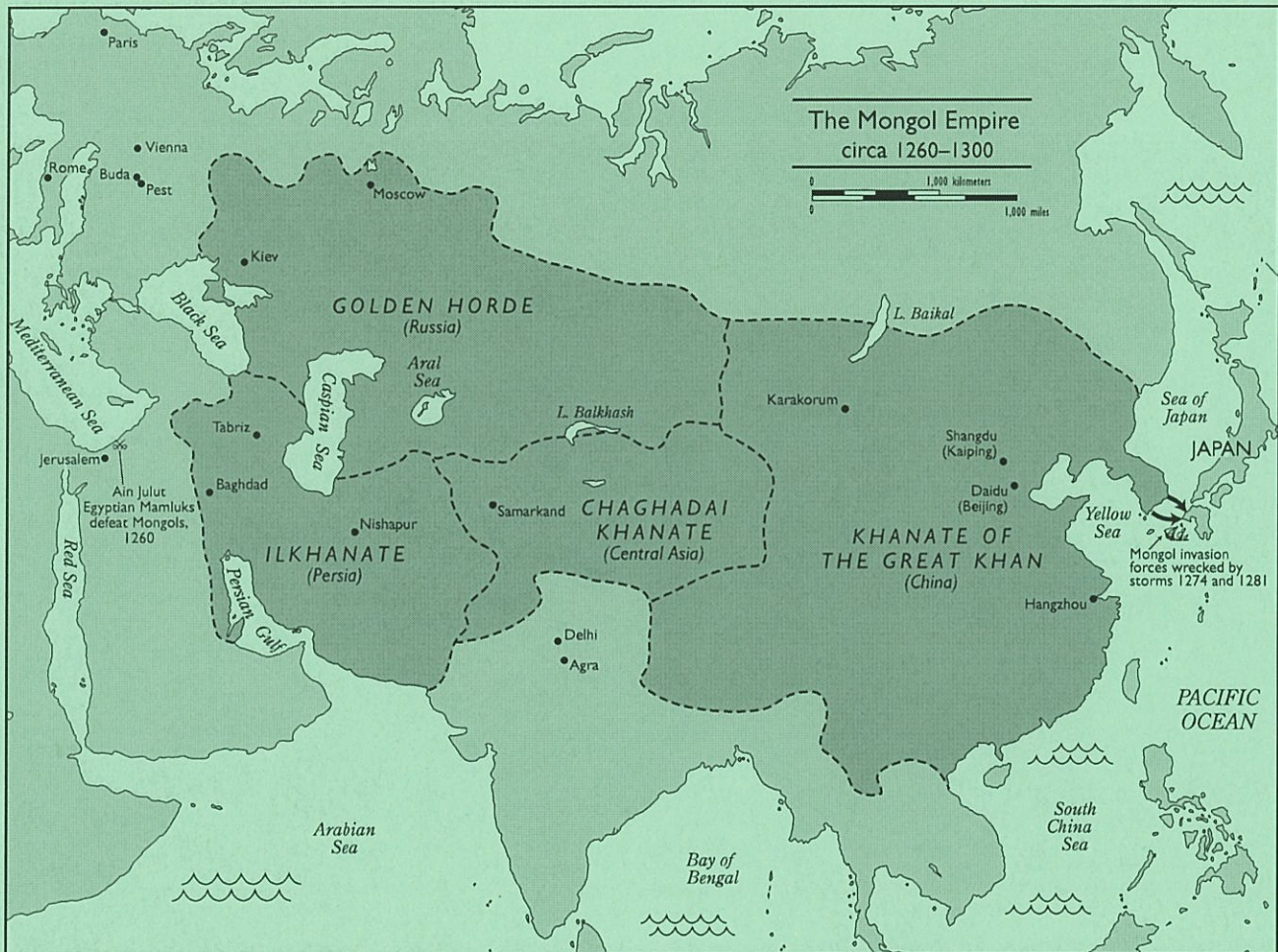
to what extent do the Mongols deserve the title “barbarians”?



Document 1



Source: Map created from various sources.



Size of World Conquests

Conquerors	Square Miles Conquered
1. Genghis Khan (1162-1227)	4,860,000
2. Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BCE)	2,180,000
3. Tamerlane (1336 -1405)	2,145,000
4. Cyrus the Great (600 - 529 BCE)	2,090,000
5. Attila (406 - 453)	1,450,000
6. Adolf Hitler (1889 -1945)	1,370,000
7. Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 -1821)	720,000

Note: The area of the continental United States (excluding Alaska and Hawaii) is 3,036,885 square miles.

Document 2

Source: John of Plano Carpini, *History of the Mongols*, in Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Note: John of Plano Carpini was a Franciscan emissary of Pope Innocent IV and traveled to Karakorum between 1245 and 1247. It is believed he was the first European to visit the Mongols in their homeland.

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Genghis Khan ordained that the army should be organized in such a way that over ten men should beset one man and he is what we call a captain of ten; over ten of these should be placed one, named a captain of a hundred; at the head of ten captains of a hundred is placed a soldier known as a captain of a thousand, and over ten captains of a thousand is one man, and the word they use for this number (is *tuman*). Two or three chiefs are in command of the whole army, yet in such a way that one holds the supreme command.

When they are in battle, if one or two or three or even more out of a group of ten run away, all are put to death; and if a whole group of ten flees, the rest of the group of a hundred are all put to death, if they do not flee too. In a word, unless they retreat in a body, all who take flight are put to death.

Likewise if one or two or more go forward boldly to the fight, then the rest of the ten are put to death if they do not follow and, if one or more of the ten are captured, their companions are put to death if they do not rescue them.

Document 3

Source: John of Plano Carpini, *History of the Mongols*, in Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Carpini on Battle Tactics

When ... they are going to join battle, they draw all the battle lines just as they are (about) to fight. The chiefs or princes of the army do not take part in the fighting but take up their stand some distance away facing the enemy, and they have beside them their children on horseback and their womenfolk and horses; and sometimes they make figures of men and set them on horses. They do this to give the impression that a great crowd of fighting men is assembled there.

They send a detachment of captives and men of other nationalities who are fighting with them to meet the enemy head-on, and some of the Tartars (Mongols) may perhaps accompany them. Other columns of stronger men they dispatch far off to the right and the left so that they are not seen by the enemy and in this way they surround them and close in and so the fighting begins from all sides. Sometimes when they are few in number they are thought by the enemy, who are surrounded, to be many, especially when the latter catch sight of the children, women, horses and dummy figures....

They reduce fortresses in the following manner. If the position of the fortress allows it, they surround

it, sometimes even fencing it round so that no one can enter or leave. They make a strong attack with engines (catapults for slinging large stones) and arrows and they do not leave off fighting by day or night, so that those inside the fortress get no sleep; the Tartars however get some rest, for they divide up their forces and they take it in turns to fight so that they do not get too tired. If they cannot capture it in this way they throw Greek fire (napalm); sometimes they even take the fat of the people they kill and, melting it, throw (catapult) it on to the houses, and wherever the fire falls on this fat it is almost inextinguishable.

While they are pitched before the fortification they speak enticing words to the inhabitants making them many promises to induce them to surrender into their hands. If they do surrender to them, they say: "Come out, so that we may count you according to our custom" and when they come out to them they seek out the artificers (artisans) among them and keep these, but the others, with the exception of those they wish to have as slaves, they kill with the axe....

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Document 4

Source: Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, edited by UNESCO and Manchester University Press, © UNESCO 1997. Reprinted by permission.

In the spring of 618/1221, the people of Nishapur (a city in Persia) saw that the matter was serious ... and although they had three thousand crossbows in action on the wall and had set up three hundred mangonels and ballistas and laid in a correspondent quantity of missiles and naphtha, their feet were loosened and they lost heart....

By the Saturday night all the walls were covered with Mongols;... The Mongols now descended from the walls and began to slay and plunder.... They then drove all the survivors, men and women, out onto the plain; and ... it was commanded that the town should be laid waste in such a manner that the site could be ploughed upon; and that ... not even cats and dogs should be left alive....

They severed the heads of the slain from their bodies and heaped them up in piles, keeping those of the men separate from those of the women and children.

Note: Juvaini was a Persian chronicler who was in the employ of the Mongol Il-khan of Persia who served under the Mongols as the governor of Baghdad. He wrote this account about forty years after the destruction of Nishapur.

Reported Inhabitant Deaths From Varied Sources

Year	Place	Reported Deaths	Source
1220	Bukhara (Khwarazm)	30,000	Juvaini
1220	Samarkand (Khwarazm)	30,000	Persian chronicler
1221	Merv (Khwarazm)	700,000	Persian chronicler
1221	Nishapur (Khwarazm)	1,747,000	Persian chronicler
1223	Herat (Khwarazm)	1,600,000	Chronicler
1237	Riazan (Russia)	Few survivors	Russian chroniclers
1237	Kozelsk (Russia)	No survivors	Russian chroniclers
1258	Baghdad (Persia)	800,000 - 2,000,000	Persian chroniclers

Note: These casualty figures are found in George Marshall's *Storm from the East*. Despite very probable exaggeration, there is agreement among chroniclers of the time and historians of today that the number of deaths at Nishapur was staggering.

Khwarazm is Persia became Ilkhanate (see doc 1)

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Document 5

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Source: Persian manuscript, "The Shah Namah" or "Book of Kings," c. 1300, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. In Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East, From Genghis Khan to Kubilai Khan*, University of California Press, 1993. Reproduced with the permission of BBC Worldwide Limited. Copyright © Robert Marshall 1993.



A scene from a Persian manuscript c.1300, showing the execution of a prisoner by a Mongol soldier. Others are being buried alive upside-down.

Document 6

Source: Charles J. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*, Indiana University Press, 1985.
Reprinted by permission of Indiana University Press.

Mongol Commerce in China and Persia

The Mongols conquered nearly all of Asia and achieved what all Inner Asian steppe empires had dreamed of, control of the continental caravan routes from China to Persia. The enormous destructive cost of the Pax Mongolica cannot be denied, but the Mongol Empire made significant contributions to the political institutions, economic development, and cultural diversity of many lands. No history of the Mongol Empire ... which dwells only on Mongol destruction, can be satisfactory.

- In both China and Persia the Mongols had taken up residence among their new subjects, garrisoning cities and gradually blending to a degree with the (local) societies. As a result, their economic interests coincided with those of the native peoples, and the Mongols, after the destruction of the initial conquest, promoted diversified economic development.
- The (Mongol) Yuan emperors built canals to improve transportation and communication. In China agriculture and (craft) production ... continued unabated.
- The same was true in Persia, partly because Persian craft traditions were well-established, but also because the Ilkanids (Mongol rulers) were patrons of the arts.
- Persian viniculture (winemaking) ... thrived under the Mongols, who were great drinkers, even after their conversion.
- The Persian silk industry also benefitted from the Mongol conquest because of the contacts that opened up with China.
- Cities along the caravan routes, in Persia, Armenia-Georgia, Central Asia, and China, prospered as part of the tax-free customs zones protected by the Pax Mongolica.

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Document 7

Source: Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, translated by Thomas Nivison Haining, 1991. Reprinted by permission of Blackwell Publishing. (Italics added.)

The evidence of the chroniclers and travelers enables us to identify the striking changes wrought on Mongol morality by Genghis' Khan legislation. *Juvaini* comments that Genghis Khan rooted out...adultery and theft. "War, strife, bodily harm or murder do not exist, robbers and thieves on a grand scale are not to be found among them," remarks *Plano Carpini*, "and for this reason their houses and the carts in which they store their wealth have neither locks nor bolts." *Juzjani* writes that no one except the owner would dare pick up even a whip lying on the ground. *Ibn Battuta*, describing how during travels in Iraq two horses went astray during the night, reports that although the travelers left the country soon afterwards the horses were brought to them on their journey twenty days later. He also comments that although there were many pack animals in the Kipchak area, these could be left unattended because of the severity of (Mongol) laws against theft.

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Document 8

Source: Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Penguin Books, 1958.

Document Note: Marco Polo journeyed to China from 1271 to 1295. For 17 of these years, Polo served Kubilai Khan in various capacities, including ambassador.

The Yams

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Let us now turn to the system of post-horses by which the Great Khan sends his dispatches.

You must know that the city of Khan-balik (modern-day Beijing) is a centre from which many roads radiate to many provinces.... When one of the Great Khan's messengers sets out along any of these roads, he has only to go twenty-five miles and there he finds a posting station, which in their language is called a yam.... And at each of these posts the messengers find three or four hundred horses in readiness awaiting their command, and palatial lodgings such as I have described. And this holds throughout all the provinces and kingdoms of the Great Khan's empire.

By this means the Great Khan's messengers travel throughout his dominions... (M)ore than 200,000 horses are stabled at these posts for the special use of the messengers. Moreover, the posts themselves number more than 10,000, all furnished on the same lavish scale. The whole organization is so stupendous and so costly that it baffles speech and writing....

If it happens at any point that there is some river or lake over which the couriers and mounted messengers must pass, the neighboring cities keep three or four ferry-boats continually in readiness for this purpose.

...When the need arises for the Great Khan to receive immediate tidings (news) ... I assure you that the messengers ride 200 miles in a day, sometimes even 250. Let me explain how it is done.... They tighten their belts and swathe their heads and off they go with all the speed they can muster, till they reach the next post-house twenty-five miles away. As they draw near they sound a sort of horn which is audible at a great distance, so that horses can be got ready for them. On arrival they find two fresh horses, ready harnessed, fully rested, and in good running form. They mount there ... and off they go again.... And so it goes on till evening.

Note: The Great Khan is Kubilai Khan.

Document 9

Source: William of Rubruck, *The Journey of William of Rubruck*, translated by a nun of Stanbrook Abbey, edited by Christopher Dawson, London: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Karakorum, Mongolia, May 30, 1254

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The next day he (Mongke Khan) sent his scribes to me, who said: "Our master sends us to you and he says: 'Here you are, Christians, Saracens (Muslims), and tuins (Rubruck would translate tuins as pagans; in fact, they were Buddhists), and each of you declares that his law is the best and his literature, that is his books, are the truest.' He therefore wishes you all to meet together and hold a conference and each one is to write down what he says so that he can know the truth."

(On the day following the exchange between the religious spokesmen Mongke Khan made this profession of faith to Rubruck:) "We Mongols believe that there is but one God, by Whom we live and by Whom we die and towards Him we have an upright heart. But just as God gave different fingers to the hand so has He given different ways to men."

- Notes:**
- Mongke Khan was the fourth Great Khan, the grandson of Genghis, and the brother of Kubilai who would succeed Mongke upon his death in 1259.
 - Over the course of the next two centuries Mongol leaders often converted to the region's dominant religions – Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism.

Document 10

Document Note: There were two codes of conduct that guided Mongol life. One of these was the **yasa**, usually referred to as the Mongol law. The second was the **bilik**, which was a set of rules to live by.

On Hospitality

Source: Rashid ad-Din, *Collected Chronicles*.

When a husband goes hunting or to war, his wife must maintain the household, so that the messenger or guest who dismounts there finds all in order and the wife is able to provide him with good food and anything else he may require.

Source: John of Plano Carpini, *History of the Mongols*.

They show considerable respect to each other and are friendly together, and they willingly share their food with each other, although there is little of it... When they are without food, eating nothing at all for one or two days, they do not easily show impatience, but they sing and make merry as if they had eaten well.

On Drinking

Source: Rashid ad-Din, *Collected Chronicles*.

If then there is no means to prevent drunkenness, a man may become drunk thrice a month; if he oversteps this limit he makes himself guilty of a punishable offense. If he is drunk only twice a month, that is better – if only once, that is more praiseworthy. What could be better than that he should not drink at all? But where shall we find a man who never drinks?

Source: John of Plano Carpini, *History of the Mongols*.

Drunkenness is considered an honorable thing by them and when anyone drinks too much, he is sick there and then, nor does this prevent him from drinking again....

On Adultery

Source: Yasa fragment, in Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*.

Whosoever commits adultery will be executed, whether or not they have previous convictions.

Source: Juvaini, trans. L.A. Khanlaryan in Paul Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan*.

If a woman who is captured by a Mongol has a husband no one will enter into a relationship with her. If an Unbeliever (i.e. a Mongol) desires a married woman he will kill the husband and then have relations with the woman.

On Marriage

Source: John of Plano Carpini, *History of the Mongols*.

Each man has as many wives as he can keep, one a hundred, another fifty, another ten – one more, another less. It is the general custom of them to marry any of their relations, with the exception of their mother, daughter and sister by the same mother. They can however take in marriage their sisters who have only the same father, and even their father's wives after his death.... All other women they take as wives without any distinction and they buy them at a very high price from their parents.

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