



Primary Sources: Mongol History

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For students and historians, the Mongols provide an interesting puzzle: what were they really like? Examine a collection of sources that paint different pictures of the Mongols.



Introduction to this collection

Across these sources, we hear about the mysterious Mongols—or the Tatars/Tartars, as they are often called. Both Muslim and Christian sources speak of the Mongols in terms of a calamity or punishment in the earliest sources, while later sources are often more sympathetic—either because they are written from the heart of the empire or because of other political reasons. Some are full of hyperbole (exaggeration), while others present a more measured approach to the early history of the Mongols. Additionally, later sources talk of the recovery of urban areas after the Mongols establish a more permanent presence, describing robust trade networks and tight-knit communities. Because this collection focuses on the establishment of the empire, most of the sources are from the thirteenth century, with a few from later periods. This allows readers to track continuities and shifts not only in the history of the Mongol Empire but in changing attitudes about the Mongols across Eurasia.

Guiding question to think about as you read the documents: *How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?*

WHP Primary Source Punctuation Key

When you read through these primary source collections, you might notice some unusual punctuation like this: ... and [] and (). Use the table below to help you understand what this punctuation means.

Punctuation	What it means
ELLIPSES words ... words	Something has been <u>removed</u> from the quoted sentences by an editor.
BRACKETS [word] or word[s]	Something has been <u>added or changed</u> by an editor. These edits are to clarify or help readers.
PARENTHESES (words)	The original author of the primary source wanted to clarify, add more detail, or make an additional comment in parentheses.

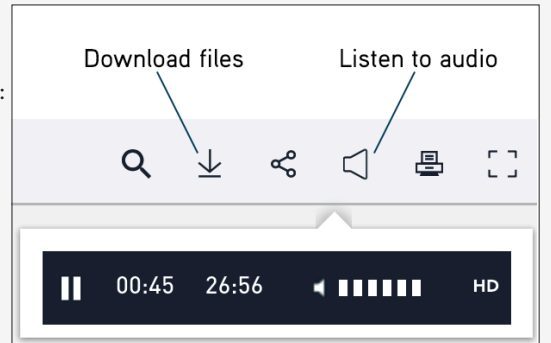
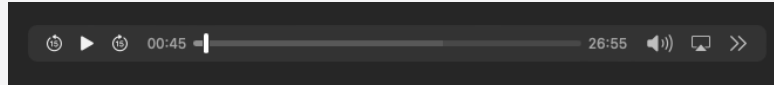
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Source 1 - Ibn al-Athir's The Complete History (1:45)

Title

Ibn al-Athir's the Complete History, "On the Tatars"

Source type

Primary source – historical work

Date and location

1220–1221, Mosul

Author

Ali ibn al-Athir (1160–1233)

Description

Ali Ibn al-Athir was an Arab-Kurdish historian from southeast Anatolia (near the modern-day border of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq). This excerpt, from his work *the Complete History*, describes the Mongol takeover of Muslim lands.

Key vocabulary

commissariat

credit (verb)

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

For some years I continued averse from mentioning this event, deeming it so horrible that I shrank from recording it. ... This thing involves the description of the greatest catastrophe ... which befell all men generally, and the Muslims in particular. ...

For even Antichrist will spare such as follow him, though he destroy those who oppose him, but these Tatars spared none, slaying women and men and children, ripping open pregnant women and killing unborn babes. Verily to God do we belong, and unto Him do we return, and there is no strength and no power save in God, the High, the Almighty, in face of this catastrophe. ... For these were a people who emerged from the confines of China, and attacked the cities of Turkestan, like Kashghar and Balasaghun, and thence advanced on the cities of Transoxiana, such as Samarqand, Bukhara and the like, taking possession of them ... and destroying, and slaying, and plundering, and thence passing on to Ray, Hamadan and the Highlands, and the cities contained therein, even to the limits of Iraq, ... All this they did in the briefest space of time, remaining only for so long as their march required and no more.

... these Tatars conquered most of the habitable globe, and the best, the most flourishing and most populous part thereof, and that whereof the inhabitants were the most advanced in character and conduct, in about a year; nor did any country escape their devastations which did not fearfully expect them and dread their arrival.

Moreover they need no commissariat, nor the conveyance of supplies, for they have with them sheep, cows, horses, and the like quadrupeds, the flesh of which they eat, naught else. As for their beasts which they ride, these dig into

the earth with their hoofs and eat the roots of plants, knowing naught of barley. And so, when they alight anywhere, they have need of nothing from without. As for their religion, they worship the sun when it rises, and regard nothing as unlawful, for they eat all beasts, even dogs, pigs, and the like; nor do they recognize the marriage-tie, for several men are in marital relations with one woman, and if a child is born, it knows not who is its father. ...

It is now time for us to describe how they first burst forth into the lands. Stories have been related to me, which the hearer can scarcely credit, as to the terror of the Tatars, which God Almighty cast into men's hearts; so that it is said that a single one of them would enter a village or a quarter wherein were many people, and would continue to slay them one after another, none daring to stretch forth his hand against this horseman. ...

Citation

Ibn al-Athir, Ali. "Medieval Sourcebook: Ibn al-Athir: On The Tatars, 1220-1221CE." Internet History Sourcebooks Project. Accessed July 24, 2019. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1220al-Athir-mongols.asp>.

Translation from Browne, Edward G. *A Literary History of Persia*. Vol. II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902. Made available and modernized by the Internet History Sourcebooks Project.

Source 2 - Juvaini's History of the World Conqueror (5:40)

Title

Juvaini's *History of the World Conqueror*

Source type

Primary source – historical work

Date and location

c. 1260, Persia or Central Asia

Author

Ala-ad-Din Ata- Malik Juvaini (1226–1283)

Description

Ala-ad-Din Ata- Malik Juvaini (1226–1283) was a Persian civil servant and historian who worked for the Mongol Empire. He wrote a history of the Mongol Empire called *Tarīkh-i Jahān-gushā* (*History of the World Conqueror*).

Key vocabulary

precedence

indulgence

habitable

chieftains

ascendant

citadel

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

CHINGGIS KHAN'S RISE TO POWER AND THE BEGINNING OF THE PASSING TO HIM OF THE EMPIRES AND KINGDOMS OF THE KINGS OF THE WORLD: A BRIEF ACCOUNT THEREOF

The tribes and clans of the Mongols are many; but that which today is most renowned for its nobility and greatness and has precedence over the others is the tribe of the Qiyat, of which the forefathers and ancestors of Chinggis Khan were the chieftains and from which they traced their descent. Chinggis Khan bore the name of Temujin until the time when ... he became master of all the kingdoms of the habitable world. ... And in those days the Mongol tribes were not united and did not obey one another. ...

When Chinggis Khan's cause prospered and the stars of his fortune were in the ascendant, he dispatched envoys to the other tribes also; and all that came to tender submission, such as the Oirat and the Qonqurat, admitted to the number of his commanders and followers and were regarded with the eye of indulgence and favor; while as for the refractory and rebellious, he struck the breath from their bodies with the whip of calamity and the sword of annihilation; until all the tribes were of one color and obedient to his command. Then he established new laws and laid the foundation of justice; and whichever of their customs were abominable, such as theft and adultery, he abolished. ...

When these regions had been purged of rebels and all the tribes had become as his army, he dispatched ambassadors to Khitai [China], and afterwards went there in person, and slew Altun-Khan, the Emperor of Khitai, and subjugated the country. And gradually he conquered other kingdoms also. ...

Chinggis Khan came to these countries in person. ... [When] he took Bokhara and Samarqand, he contented himself with slaughtering and looting once only, and did not go to the extreme of a general massacre. As for the adjoining territories that were subject to these towns or bordered on them, since for the most part they tendered submission, the hand of molestation was to some extent withheld from them. And afterwards, the Mongols pacified the survivors and proceeded with work of reconstruction, so that at the present time. ... the prosperity and well-being of these districts have in some cases attained their original level and in others have closely approached it. ...

And from [there] Chinggis Khan proceeded to Bokhara, and in the beginning of Muharram, 617 [March 1220], encamped before the gates of the citadel. ... At sunrise twenty thousand men from the Sultan's auxiliary army issued forth from the citadel together with most of the inhabitants. When these forces reached the banks of the Oxus, the patrols and advance parties of the Mongol army fell upon them and left no trace of them. When it is impossible to flee from destruction in any manner, then patience is the best and wisest course. ...

Of the Qanqli no male was spared who stood higher than the butt of a whip and more than thirty thousand were counted amongst the slain; whilst their small children, the children of their nobles and their womenfolk, slender as the cypress, were reduced to slavery.

When the town and the citadel had been purged of rebels and the walls and outworks levelled with the dust, all the inhabitants of the town, men and women, ugly and beautiful, were driven out ... Chinggis Khan spared their lives; but the youths and full-grown men that were fit for such service were pressed into a levy for the attack on Samarqand and Dabusiya.

Citation

McCullough, David Willis, ed. *Chronicles of the Barbarians: Firsthand Accounts of Pillage and Conquest from the Ancient World to the Fall of Constantinople*. New York: Times Books, 1998.

Source 3 - Marco Polo's Travels (9:40)

Title

Marco Polo's *Travels*

Source type

Primary source – travel narrative

Date and location

1271–1291, Venice

Author

Marco Polo (1254–1324) and Rustichello da Pisa (late 13th century)

Description

A description of the great city of Kinsay (Hangchow) which is the capital of the whole country of Manzi (South China). In this excerpt, Marco Polo describes the ways the Mongols maintain loyalty, law, and trade.

Key vocabulary

oblige

watch (noun)

levied

magistrates

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

Since the Great Khan occupied the city he has ordained that each of the 12,000 bridges be provided with a guard of ten men, in case of any disturbances or of any being so bold as to plot treason or rebellion against him.

Part of the watch patrols the quarter, to see if any light or fire is burning after the lawful hours; if they find any they mark the door, and in the morning the owner is summoned before the magistrates, and unless he can plead a good excuse he is punished. Also if they find anyone going about the streets at unlawful hours they arrest him, and in the morning they bring him before the magistrates. Likewise if in the daytime they find any poor cripple unable to work for his livelihood, they take him to one of the hospitals, of which there are many, founded by the ancient kings, and endowed with great revenues. Or if he be capable of work they oblige him to take up some trade. If they see that any house has caught fire they immediately beat upon that wooden instrument to give the alarm, and this brings together the watchmen from the other bridges to help extinguish it, and to save the goods of the merchants or others, either by removing them to the towers or by putting them in boats and transporting them to the islands in the lake. For no citizen dares leave his house at night, or to come near the fire; only those who own the property, and those watchmen who flock to help of whom there shall come one or two thousand at least.

The Khan watches this city with special diligence because it forms the head of this part of China and because he has an immense revenue from the taxes levied on the trade here, the amount of which is so high no one would believe it.

All the streets of the city are paved with stone or brick, as indeed are all the highways throughout this area so that you ride and travel in every direction without inconvenience. Were it not for this pavement you cannot do so, for the country is very low and flat, and after rain deep in mud and water. ...

It is also the custom for every burgess of this city, and in fact for every person in it, to write over his door his own name, the name of his wife, and those of his children, his slaves, and all in his house, and also the number of animals that he keeps. And if anyone dies in the house then the name of that person is erased, and if any child is born its name is added, so in this way the ruler is able to know exactly the population of the city. And this is the practice also throughout the country.

Citation

Polo, Marco. "Marco Polo in China (1271–1295)." Asia for Educators. Accessed July 27, 2019. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/pop/menu/class_marco.htm#cambaluc.

Source 4 - The Secret History of the Mongols (12:35)

Title

The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan

Source type

Primary source – historical work

Date and location

c. 1250, Central Asia

Author

Anonymous

Description

This is one of the only histories of the Mongols written in Mongolian. It is also one of the most famous. It is a written epic of the Mongols, which was likely compiled during the thirteenth century. It describes the origins of the Mongols, with a particular focus on Chinggis Khan.

Key vocabulary

plundering

yurt

conferred

linchpin

booty

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

After spending that winter [at Quba-qaya], in the autumn of the Year of the Dog, Chinggis Qahan prepared for battle with the Tatars at Dalan-nemürges: the Chaqa'an Tatars, the Alchi Tatars, the Duta'ut [Tatars], and the Aluqai Tatars. Before joining battle, Chinggis Qahan discussed the battle orders [before his soldiers]: 'If we triumph over the enemy, let us not stop for booty. When we have completed our victory, will the booty not be ours? ...

[Then] we will divide it among ourselves. If the enemy forces us to retreat, let us return to the place from where we began our attack. Those who do not do so will be executed.' In this way, he gave his orders. ...

After wiping out the Tatars and plundering them of everything, Chinggis Qahan [arranged] a great council of his clan to decide what to do with the [Tatar] people. They entered a single yurt and conferred. 'From early days the Tatars have destroyed our ancestors and fathers. [We must] gain vengeance on behalf of our fathers, we must seek revenge for our ancestors. Let them be killed. We will measure them against a linchpin and kill off [those who are taller than the linchpin] until all have died. We will make slaves of the survivors. We will divide them among ourselves, some here, some there.' ...

Citation

Onon, Urgunge. *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan*. Translated, edited and with an introduction by Urgunge Onon. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001.

Source 5 - Historia Tartarorum (14:15)

Title

Historia Tartarorum, or the Tartar Relation

Source type

Primary source – travel narrative

Date and location

1247, unknown

Author

C. de Bridia (disputed)

Description

The authorship of this document is contested, as little is known about Friar C. de Bridia. Some think this is a variant of the Ystoria Mongalorum, by Giovanni da Pian del Carpine/John of Plano Carpini. Regardless, it is one of the oldest European accounts of the Mongols.

Key vocabulary

stature

hordes

strenuous

chattels

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

Tartars are generally of low stature and rather thin, owing to their diet of mare's milk, which makes a man slim, and their strenuous life. They are broad of face with prominent cheekbones, and have a tonsure¹ on their head like our clerics from which they shave a strip three fingers wide from ear to ear. On the fore head, however, they wear their hair in a crescent- shaped fringe reaching to the eyebrows, but gather up the remaining hair, and arrange and braid it like the Saracens. ...

Their houses are called stations and are of round shape, made of withies and stakes. At the top they have a round window to let out the smoke and let in the daylight. The roof and door are of felt. They differ in size and are movable insofar as the size permits them to be carried. The "stations" of the Khan and princes are called hordes. They have no towns but are organized in stations in various places. They have one city called Karakorum. ...

They keep certain traditional laws made by Chinggis Khan ... should any man attempt out of pride to become Khan by his own personal influence, he must instantly be slain. ...

¹ *tonsure*: cutting or shaving some or all the hair on the scalp, as a sign of religious devotion or humility

They do not force anyone to abandon his faith provided he obeys their orders in every way, otherwise they compel him by force or kill him. ...

They have as many wives as they can afford, and generally buy them, so that except for women of noble birth they are mere chattels. They marry anyone they please, except their mother, daughter, and sister from the same mother. When their father dies, they marry their stepmother, and a younger brother or cousin marries his brother's widow. The wives do all the work, and make shoes, leather garments, and so on, while the men make nothing but arrows, and practice shooting with bows. They compel even boys three or four years old to the same exercise, and even some of the women, especially the maidens, practice archery and ride as a rule like men. ...

Whenever the Tartars plan to attack any countries, the army directed to conquer them marches speedily but with great caution in wagons and on horseback, taking with it whole families, including wives, boy children, and servant-maids, with their tents and all their chattels, herds, and sheep, and a vast stock of arms, bows, quivers, and arrows. When the Tartars begin to draw near, they send ahead their swiftest skirmishers to spread terror unexpectedly and kill, and to prevent an army from being quickly mobilized against them. If they meet with no obstacle, however, they continue to advance, and the multitude follows with all their families without concealment. ...

Citation

McCullough, David Willis, ed. *Chronicles of the Barbarians: Firsthand Accounts of Pillage and Conquest from the Ancient World to the Fall of Constantinople*. New York: Times Books, 1998.

Source 6 - Hayton's Flower of the Histories of the East (17:20)

Title

Hayton's *Flower of the Histories of the East*

Source type

Primary source – historical work

Date and location

c. 1307, Armenia

Author

Hayton of Corycus/Hethum the Historian (c. 1240–c. 1320)

Description

Hayton was an Armenian monk and historian, and a relative of King Hethum I of Armenia. He pushed for an alliance with the Mongols in order to recapture the Holy Land. He traveled widely throughout the Mongol Empire, compiling a history and geography of Asia.

Key vocabulary

subjugation

consent (noun)

recounted

Khan

reverence

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

Diverse nations of the Tartars, who were called Mongols, assembled and proclaimed chieftains and governors among them. They became so numerous that they were divided into seven nations, and to this day these nations are considered nobler than the others. The first of these nations is called Tartar, the second Tangot, the third Eurach, the fourth Jalair, the fifth Sonit, the sixth Mengli, the seventh Tebet.

And so it happened that when these seven nations were still under the subjugation of their neighbors, as was described, there was a poor old man, an artisan [a blacksmith] named Chinggis, who saw in a dream a vision; he saw a knight in armor upon a white horse who called him by his name and said to him, "Chinggis, the will of the Immortal God is such that you should be governor and lord over the seven nations of the Tartars that have been called Mongols, and that through you they shall be delivered out of the servitude in which they had been for so long, and shall have lordship over their neighbors." Chinggis woke up very joyfully, having heard the word of God, and recounted to all the vision that he saw. ...

[Then] the seven said chieftains [of the seven nations] assembled the people of the Tartars and made them offer [loyalty] and reverence to Chinggis, and they themselves did the same as to their natural lord. ... and the chieftains of the seven nations raised him upon the felt, put him on the throne, and named him Khan. ...

After Chinggis Khan was made Emperor by the common will and consent of all Tartars, before he did anything else, he needed to know if all would obey him. Therefore, he [declared] ... that everyone should believe and worship the Immortal God, by whose wish he was made Emperor, and without delay all the Tartars began to believe and profess God's name in all their deeds ...

After that, the chieftains of the seven lineages of the Tartars were ordered to give up all their arms and positions and that they should pay whatever they are ordered to pay ...

Citation

Levi, Scott Cameron, and Ron Sela, eds. *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Source 7 - A Spanish ambassador's account of Timur's Capital (19:45)

Title

A Spanish ambassador's account of Timur's Capital

Source type

Primary source – travel chronicle

Date and location

1403, Spain

Author

Ruy González de Clavijo (d. 1412)

Description

Ruy González de Clavijo was a Spanish ambassador to Timur's court at Samarqand. On May 22, 1403, Clavijo and his staff embarked on a three-year trip to Samarqand and back. In this excerpt, de Clavijo describes the robust, wealthy, and cosmopolitan city of Samarqand, thriving under Mongol rule.

Key vocabulary

forthwith

Guiding question

How did the Mongols create the largest empire in history and how did their imperial expansion impact trade over time?

Excerpt

Every year to the city of Samarqand much merchandise of all kinds came from Cathay, India, Tartary, and from many other quarters besides, for in the countries round the Samarqand territory commerce is very flourishing; but there was as yet no place within the city where this merchandise might be suitably stored, displayed, and offered for sale. Timur therefore now gave orders that a street should be built to pass right through Samarqand, which should have shops opened on either side of it in which every kind of merchandise should be sold, and this new street was to go from one side of the city through to the other side, traversing the heart of the township. The accomplishment of his order he laid on two of the great lords of his court, letting them know at the same time that if they failed in diligence, for the work was to go on continuously by day as by night, their heads would pay the penalty. These nobles therefore began at speed, causing all the houses to be thrown down along the line that his Highness had indicated for the passage of the new street ...

As soon as these shops were made ready, forthwith they were occupied by merchants selling goods of all sorts: ... Thus in the course of twenty days the whole new street was carried through: a wonder indeed to behold ...

... Beyond the suburbs of Samarqand stretch the great plains where are situated many hamlets, these being all well populated, for here the immigrant folk are settled whom Timur has caused to be brought hither from all the foreign lands that he has conquered. ...

The richness and abundance of this great capital and its district is such as is indeed a wonder to behold: and it is for this reason that it bears the name of Samarqand: for this name would be more exactly written Semiz-kent, two words which signify "Rich-Town," for Semiz [in Turkish] is fat or rich and Kent means city or township: in time these two words having been corrupted into the name Samarqand. Further this land of Samarqand is not alone rich in food stuffs but also in manufactures, such as factories of silk ... Thus trade has always been fostered by Timur with the view of making his capital the noblest of cities: and during all his conquests wheresoever he came he carried off the best men of the population to people Samarqand, bringing thither together the master- craftsmen of all nations. ...

So great therefore was the population now of all nationalities gathered together in Samarqand that of men with their families the number they said must amount to 150,000 souls. Of the nations brought here together there were to be seen Turks, Arabs, and Moors of diverse sects, with Christians who were Greeks and Armenians, Catholics, Jacobites, and Nestorians, besides those [Indian] folk who baptize with fire in the forehead, who are indeed Christians but of a faith that is peculiar to their nation. The population of Samarqand was so vast that lodging for them all could not be found in the city limits, nor in the streets and open spaces of the suburbs and villages outside, and hence they were to be found quartered temporarily for lodgment even in the caves and in tents under the trees of the gardens, which was a matter very wonderful to see. The markets of Samarqand further are amply stored with merchandise imported from distant and foreign countries.

Citation

Levi, Scott Cameron, and Ron Sela, eds. *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

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Cover: Genghis Khan seated on his throne with his wife under a tent with four Mongols and camels, miniature from Mongolian History in Verse, Persia 15th Century. © DeAgostini/Getty Images.



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