



## Primary Sources: Mongol History

*Sources compiled by Eman M. Elshaikh*

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.

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## Source 1 - Ibn al-Athir's *The Complete History*

### Title

Excerpt from 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, illustrating the Mongols as cruel and efficient. It suggests that terror was a key tactic and explains that Mongol pastoral culture enabled them to expand rapidly without the need of maintaining robust supply lines.

### Key vocabulary

dependencies (noun): *something dependent or under the authority of another, esp. a colony or territory*

grievous (adjective): *causing emotional or physical suffering; painful*

commissariat (noun): *the military organization or system for supplying provisions and equipment to armed forces*

credit (verb): *to consider as factual or to acknowledge as having done a certain thing or as possessing a certain quality*

### Excerpt

For some years I continued averse from mentioning this event, deeming it so horrible that I shrank from recording it. . . To whom, indeed, can it be easy to write the announcement of the death-blow of Islam and the Muslims, or who is he on whom the remembrance thereof can weigh lightly? Oh, would that my mother had not born me or that I had died and become a forgotten thing [before] this befell! Yet . . . a number of my friends urged me to set it down in writing, and I hesitated long, but at last came to the conclusion that to omit this matter could serve no useful purpose. . . 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

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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, whence they marched on the towns of Adharbayjan and Arraniyya, destroying them and slaying most of their inhabitants, of whom none escaped save a small remnant; and all this in less than a year. . . [then] they passed on to Darband-i-Shirwan, and occupied its cities, none of which escaped save the fortress wherein was their King; wherefore they passed by it to the countries of the Lan and the Lakiz and the various nationalities which dwell in that region, and plundered, slew, and destroyed them to the full. And thence they made their way to the lands of Qipchaq, who are the most numerous of the Turks, and slew all such as withstood them, while the survivors fled to the fords and mountain-tops, and abandoned their country, which these Tatars overran. All this they did in the briefest space of time, remaining only for so long as their march required and no more.

Another division, distinct from that mentioned above, marched on Ghazna and its dependencies, and those parts of India, Sistan and Kirman which border thereon, and wrought therein deeds like unto the other, nay, yet more grievous. Now this is a thing the like of which ear has not heard; for Alexander, concerning whom historians agree that he conquered the world, did not do so with such swiftness, but only in the space of about ten years; neither did he slay, but was satisfied that men should be subject to him. But 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. And I have heard that one of them took a man captive, but had not with him any weapon wherewith to kill him; and he said to his prisoner, "Lay your head on the ground and do not move," and he did so, and the Tatar went and fetched his sword and slew him therewith. Another man related to me as follows: "I was going," said he, "with seventeen others along a road, and there met us a Tatar horseman, and bade us bind one another's arms. My companions began to do as he bade them, but I said to them, "He is but one man; wherefore, then, should we not kill him and flee?" They replied, 'We are afraid.' I said, 'This man intends to kill you immediately; let us therefore rather kill him, that perhaps God may deliver us.' But I swear by God that not one of them dared to do this, so I took a knife and slew him, and we fled and escaped.' And such occurrences were many.

## Citation

Translation from Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), Vol. II, pp. 427-431, made available and modernized by the Internet History Sourcebooks Project

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>.

## Source 2 - Juvaini's *History of the World Conqueror*

### Title

Excerpt of 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 *Tarikh-i Jahān-gushā* (History of the World Conqueror). Because of his political ties, he had access to information that others did not. In this excerpt, he describes how Chinggis Khan united the Mongol tribes and conquered many countries. It describes in detail the siege of Bokhara and Samarkand in Central Asia, which were to become key urban centers in the Mongol Empire. This account depicts the Mongols as willing to spare those who did not resist and explains how they extracted tribute from those they conquered. It also depicts Mongols as fierce and unforgiving in the face of resistance and describes how people in conquered regions became slaves or forcibly conscripted soldiers.

### Key vocabulary

precedence (noun): *priority in rank, order, or importance*

habitable (adjective): *capable of being lived in*

ascendant (adjective): *moving upward; rising; ascending*

indulgence (noun): *that which is granted as a favor or privilege; leniency and forbearance*

chieftains (noun): *a leader of a clan or tribe*

ague (noun): *a fever accompanied by recurring periods of chills and sweating*

citadel (noun): *a fortress built on a high place in or near a city*

### 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. . .

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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. It is otherwise with Khorasan and Iraq, which countries are afflicted with a hectic fever and a chronic ague: every town and every village has been several times subjected to pillage and massacre and has suffered this confusion for years, so that even though there be generation and increase until the Resurrection the population will not attain to a tenth part of what it was before. . .

And from [there] Chinggis Khan proceeded to Bokhara, and in the beginning of Muharram, 617 [March 1220], encamped before the gates of the citadel. And then they pitched the king's pavilion on the plain in front of the stronghold. And his troops were more numerous than ants or locusts, being in their multitude beyond estimation or computation. Detachment after detachment arrived, each like a billowing sea, and encamped round about the town. 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. . .

Then he asked them who were their men of authority; and each man indicated his own people. To each of them he assigned a Mongol or Turk in order that the soldiers might not molest them, and, although not subjecting them to disgrace or humiliation, they began to exact money from these men; and when they delivered it up they did not torment them by excessive punishment or demanding what was beyond their power to pay. And every day, at the rising of the greater luminary, the guards would bring a party of notables to the audience-hall of the World-Emperor.

Chinggis Khan had given orders for the Sultan's troops to be driven out of the interior of the town and the citadel. As it was impossible to accomplish this purpose by employing the townspeople and as these troops, being in fear of their lives, were fighting, and doing battle, and making night attacks as much as was possible, he now gave orders for all the quarters of the town to be set on fire; and since the houses were built entirely of wood, within several days the greater part of the town had been consumed, with the exception of the Friday mosque and some of the palaces, which were built with baked bricks. Then the people of Bokhara were driven against the citadel. And on either side the furnace of battle was heated. On the outside, [catapults] were erected, bows bent and stones and arrows discharged; and on the inside, ballistas and pots of naphtha were set in motion. It was like a red-hot furnace fed from with out by hard sticks thrust into the recesses, while from the belly of the furnace sparks shoot into the air. For days they fought in this manner. . .

Of the Qanqli no male was spared who stood higher than the butt of a whip and more than thirty thousand were

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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*. 1st ed. New York: Times Books, 1998.

## Source 3 - Marco Polo's *Travels*

### Title

Excerpt from 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 by organizing economic activity, enforcing laws, and even carrying out a census.

### Key Vocabulary

*oblige* (noun): *to make (someone) feel bound to do something or to act in a certain way*

*levied* (verb): *collecting money, property, or troops, usually by a government*

*cavalry* (noun): *soldiers who fight on horseback*

*garrison* (noun): *a military force that is located in a fort, village, or similar place*

*watch* (noun): *the group of people on duty during a watch, which is a period where people are stationed to look out for danger, rule-breaking, or trouble, typically during the night*

*magistrates* (noun): *a public official who exercises a judicial or executive function*

### 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



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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.

The city of Kinsay has some 3,000 baths, the water of which is supplied by springs. They are hot baths, and the people take great delight in them, frequenting them several times a month, for they are very cleanly in their persons. They are the finest and largest baths in the world; large enough for 100 persons to bathe together.

This city of Kinsay is the seat of one of the kings who rules over 100 great and wealthy cities. For in the whole of this part of the country, there are more than 1,200 great cities, without counting the towns and villages, which are also in great numbers. In each of those 1,200 cities the Great Khan has a garrison, and the smallest of such garrisons musters 1,000 men; while there are some of 10,000, 20,000, and 30,000; so that the total number of troops is something scarcely calculable. You must not suppose they are by any means all cavalry; a very large proportion are foot-soldiers, according to the special requirements of each city. And all of them belong to the army of the Great Khan.. . .

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](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/pop/menu/class_marco.htm#cambaluc).

## Source 4 - *The Secret History of the Mongols*

### 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. This excerpt depicts Chinggis Khan's political maneuvers to unite the Mongols as well as the communal political structure that sustained the empire—even though it was highly centralized around the Khan, the Mongol tribal leaders nonetheless had great political power. Alliances, contracts, and shared ownership were at the center of this political community.

### Key vocabulary

confiscate (verb): *to take by the power of authority*

plundering (verb): *to steal from by force*

conferred (verb): *to meet for discussion; hold a conference*

booty (noun): *riches or goods stolen or taken from people in war; loot*

yurt (noun): a movable round tent of skins or felt, used esp. by nomads in parts of Asia

linchpin (noun): *a locking pin inserted through the end of a shaft to hold a wheel or other moving part*

### 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-nemürge: 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. They fought at Dalan-nemürge and beat the Tatars back. After winning this victory and forcing [the Tatars] to join their people on the Ulqui-shilüeljit [River], he looted them [there]. The important peoples—the Chaqa'an Tatars, the Alchi Tatars,

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the Duta'ut Tatars and the Aluqai Tatars—were wiped out. [Although Chinggis Qahan] had made clear his orders, three [men]—Altan, Quchar, and Daritai—had not kept to them [but] had [instead] stopped for booty. Pointing out that they had failed to keep to his words, [Chinggis Qahan] sent both Jebe and Qubilai to confiscate the booty—the horseherds, the goods, everything—from those who had taken it.

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.' . . .

With great difficulty they overcame the Tatars, measured them against a linchpin, and killed them. . . Chinggis Qahan took [to wife] Yisügen-qatun, the daughter of the Tatar Yeke-cheren. . .

[Temüjin's] father, Yisügei Qan, had long ago sworn brotherhood with the Ong Qan, so it was said that [the Ong Qan] was like a father [to Chinggis Qahan]. [For these] reasons, they declared themselves to be father and son. They [also] spoke of other things: 'When we are riding out against many enemies, let us ride out together with a single [goal]. When we are hunting wild beasts, let us hunt together with a single [aim].' . . . Let us understand one another by teeth and by mouth, let us trust one another . . . They pledged these words, and [so] they lived together in companionship.

## Citation

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

## Source 5 - *Historia Tartarorum*

### 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 (noun): *height of a body in the upright position, esp. a human body*

strenuous (adjective): *requiring or characterized by great effort or exertion*

transgressors (noun): *someone who violates a law, religious commandment, or the like; someone who commits a crime or sin*

hordes (noun): *a large number, group, or crowd*

plebeians (noun): *one who is not a member of the upper class; common person*

chattels (noun): *any article of property not attached to lands or buildings; movable property, including enslaved people and animals*

javelins (noun): *a light spear thrown as a weapon*

### 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 tonsure<sup>1</sup> 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.

As to their clothing, one needs to know that men and women wear the same kind of garments and are therefore not easy to tell apart; and as these matters seem more curious than useful I have not troubled to write further about their clothing and adornment.

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<sup>1</sup> cutting or shaving some or all of the hair on the scalp, as a sign of religious devotion or humility



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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. Accordingly before the election of Kuyuk Khan, a nephew of Chinggis Khan was killed because he aspired to be emperor! He also ordained that the Tartars should conquer every country in the world and make peace with none unless they surrendered unconditionally and without treaty, and even then he ordered that all of nobler rank should be slain and only plebeians be spared. . .

He ordered, moreover, that the army should be commanded by leaders of ten, a hundred, a thousand, and ten thousand— that is, one man to command ten thousand, which the Russians call tumbas.. . .

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. . .

They are more obedient to their lords than other nations, more even than priests are to bishops, the more so as no mercy is shown to transgressors, and the emperor therefore holds them in his power in every way; for whether they are sent to their death or to live they must do their task with all speed. . .

All homesteads are subject to the Khan in their settlings and movements, for he fixes the stations of the chiefs, who in turn assign their posts to the leaders of a thousand, these to the leaders of a hundred, and these to the leaders of ten. . . .

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. . .

If they find their enemies unprepared, they surround them suddenly in a ring leaving only a single way of escape, and attack them fiercely with a hail of javelins, so that anyone who does not resist in the middle perishes in flight. I consider therefore that it is better to die bravely fighting than to take refuge in cowardly flight.

## Citation

McCullough, David Willis, ed. *Chronicles of the Barbarians : Firsthand Accounts of Pillage and Conquest from the Ancient World to the Fall of Constantinople*. 1st ed. New York: Times Books, 1998.

## Source 6 - Hayton's *Flower of the Histories of the East*

### 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. This excerpt focuses on Chinggis Khan and the rise of the Mongol Empire. It describes the rise of the Mongol Empire as rooted in a shared belief and a common “consent of all Tartars” and depicts the military organization.

### Key vocabulary

subjugation (noun): *to win mastery over, as by military conquest; subdue; vanquish; to force into submission or subservience; enslave*

recounted (verb): *to tell a history of events; relate; narrate*

reverence (noun): *a feeling of great respect or love*

consent (noun): *permission or approval of a plan or action*

Khan (noun): *the ruler of the Tatars and Mongols in medieval times*

Toman (noun): *for Mongols, a military division of 10,000 men*

### 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

## Primary Sources: Mongol History

Compiled by Eman M. Elshaikh

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. . . [and] that they should count up and [divide into units of ten] all those who were able to bear arms; and that upon every unit of 10 should be a commander; and upon 10 units of 10 a commander; and upon 1,000 there was a commander, and upon 10 units of 1,000 a commander, and they called the company of 10,000 a Toman.

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 - *The Khorezmshah's Downfall*

### Title

Sirat al-sultan Jalal al-Din Mangubirti, the History of [Sultan] Jalal al-Din Mangubirti

### Source type

Primary source—biography/historical work

### Date and location

1241-1242, Central Asia

### Author

Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Nasawi (d. c.1250)

### Description

Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Nasawi was secretary and biographer of Jalal al-Din Mangubirti, son of Sultan Muhammad Khorezmshah and the last ruler of the Central Asian Persian dynasty. Nasawi observed first-hand the Mongol invasion of and supposedly bribed the Mongols to spare his home town. This excerpt of al-Nasawi's work describes how the Mongols attempted to send envoys (representatives) to Khurasan and how the Sultan failed to protect these envoys, provoking the Mongols to invade. It challenges the depiction of Mongols as reckless and irrationally cruel, because it demonstrates that they attempted to establish diplomatic relations and agreements prior to invading—leading to the downfall of the Khroezmshah. Although Nasawi probably based much of this on his own experience, he also draws on other previous accounts, like Ibn Al-Athir's.

### Key vocabulary

proposition (noun): *a suggested plan of action*

summoned (verb): *to call [someone] to appear for a particular purpose*

quarters (noun): *a section of a town where a particular group of people live or an area of a building where a particular person lives*

ambassadors (noun): *a person who is sent by the government of one country to be its official representative in another country*

embassy (noun): *an ambassador and his or her staff or home*

provinces (noun): *one of the divisions of some countries, each with its own government*

### Excerpt

When the sultan returned from Iraq to Mawarannahr he received a visit from ambassadors from Chinggis Khan . . . The aim of that embassy was to strike up relations of friendship, peace, and good neighbors. [The ambassadors] said, "The great khan sends you felicitations and entrusted us with the following words: 'I do not overlook neither the elevation of your rank nor the extent of your power. I am familiar with the magnificence of your empire, and I know that your authority is recognized in the majority of the countries of the world. Therefore, I consider it my duty to strike up friendly relations with you, whom I consider to be dearest and most beloved of my sons. On your part, you know equally well



## Primary Sources: Mongol History

*Compiled by Eman M. Elshaikh*

that I have seized the kingdom of China as well as the neighboring Turkic countries, and that all the tribes of these lands submit to me; and you know better than anyone that my provinces are nurseries for soldiers, of mines of silver, and that may produce an abundance of things. If you would agree that we open up, each from our own side, an easy access for negotiations between our countries, this will be an advantage for us all and we would both benefit.”

Having heard the speech, the sultan summoned [the ambassador] Mahmud al-Khorezmi to his quarters during the night . . . After promising to reward him if he answered his questions sincerely, the sultan detached a magnificent pearl from his bracelet, to be given to the ambassador as a token of his promises, and asked him to serve him [as a spy] at [the court of] Chinggis Khan.

Because of his respect and his fear, Mahmud accepted the proposition that was made to him. The sultan then said, “Answer me frankly. Chinggis Khan claims that he is the master of China, and that he has seized the city of Tomgach. Is it true or is it a deception?”

Mahmud said, “It is the very truth. Such an important event cannot remain secret, and the sultan will soon have evidence of that.” The sultan said, “You know the grandeur of my countries and you also know how numerous are my armies. How then does this accursed dare call me his son in his speech? What can be the strength of the armies at his disposal?”

At that Mahmud began to feel irritated and saw that the conversation that had started amicably turned sour, so he decided to espouse wise advice and to flatter the sultan in order to escape death. He said, “Compared to your people and your innumerable troops, the army of Chinggis Khan has the consequence of a simple cavalier in the midst of a regiment, or that of a trickle of smoke through the night’s shadows. . . .”

[The two countries continued to live in peace until the day when four negotiators came from Chinggis Khan]. . .

Inal Khan, son of the sultan’s (maternal) uncle, was in the city at the head of 20,000 horsemen, and was governing it in the sultan’s name. Motivated by the vilest sentiments, Inal Khan decided to seize the riches of the merchants. He wrote the sultan a letter of threats and treachery, in which he said, “These men came to Otrar under the guise of negotiators whereas in fact they are spies who meddle in affairs that are none of their business. When they are alone with simple people, they threaten them saying, ‘you shouldn’t doubt that war is upon you. It will arrive soon, and you will face things you won’t be able to fight.’ Based upon such a testimony, and others of its kind, it would be best if the sultan authorized the seizure of these negotiators, until he made a decision in this case.” As soon as he was authorized to imprison them, Inal Khan became very aggressive and, using violence, he seized the negotiators and so they disappeared forever. Because of this trickery and treachery, he kept for himself all the riches that these men had brought with them and all the different objects in their possessions, but the consequences of this villainous act were disastrous.

Sometime after that . . . two Tatar envoys, [were] sent as ambassadors from Chinggis Khan. They said to the sultan, “You have given a letter of safe conduct, written and signed by your own hand to the negotiators so that no one would harass them, but then you have treacherously betrayed your commitment. However, if treachery was itself an act of a villain, it became even more odious when it was conducted by a master of Islam. If you maintain that all that was done by Inal Khan was not a result of your own orders, deliver him to our hands. We will censure him for the act he had committed, and we will avoid spilling more blood so that the people can continue to live in peace. Otherwise, prepare yourself for war in which the most valorous souls will lose their worth, and the most well-directed lances will be diverted from their aim.”

Despite the terror that enveloped his heart, and the fear that paralyzed his soul, the sultan refused to hand over Inal Khan. He could not, in reality, consent to such a demand, especially since many of his commanders belonged to the same tribe as Inal Khan. It was they who formed the embroidery whose sewing caused the end of his dynasty. . . .

## Primary Sources: Mongol History

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He also thought that if he would show too much cordiality in his response, he would only increase Chinggis Khan's desire, and therefore he appeared hard and uncompromising. He refused any reparations, and—his spirit troubled by fear—he ordered that the ambassadors be killed, an order that was executed at once. Alas, how much Muslim blood was spilled because of that murder! From all sides poured torrents of pure blood, and this movement of anger brought about the ruin and depopulation of the earth. . . .

As soon as he arrived at the boundaries of the sultan's empire, Chinggis Khan went straight to Otrar. He attacked the place with intensity, fighting day and night, and seized the town. He made Inal Khan appear before him and ordered that the molten gold (he had stolen) be poured into his ears and eyes. This cruel death was the just punishment for Inal Khan, whose ignoble behavior, barbarous acts, and former cruelties were worth the condemnation of all.

## Citation

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

## Source 8 - *A Spanish ambassador's account of Timur's Capital*

### 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. It shows that the Mongol Empire and its leaders established new networks and supported economic activity, making Timurid Central Asia a major center of trade during the fifteenth century.

### Key vocabulary

forthwith (adverb): *without delay or hesitation; immediately*

intervals (noun): *a space between objects or measured points*

embellish (verb): *to improve by, or as though by, decorations; decorate*

masons (noun): *a person whose work is building with stone, brick, or cement*

league (noun): *a unit of length equal to about 3 miles or 4.8 kilometers*

conduits (noun): *a channel, ditch, or pipe used to convey water or other liquid*

### 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: and at intervals down the street were erected water fountains. The cost of all this work was charged to the town council, and workmen did not lack, as many coming forward as were wanted by the overseers. The masons who worked through the day at nightfall went home, their places being taken by as many as had gone, who worked throughout the night hours. . . Thus in the course of twenty days the whole new street was carried through: a wonder indeed to behold . . .

I must describe that city for you, telling of all that is there to be seen in and round and about, and of all that Timur has accomplished there to embellish his capital. . . Samarqand stands in a plain, and is surrounded by a rampart or wall of earth, with a very deep ditch. The city itself is rather larger than Seville, but lying outside Samarqand are great numbers of houses which form extensive suburbs. These lie spread on all hands for indeed the township is surrounded by orchards and vineyards, extending in some cases to a league and a half or even two leagues beyond Samarqand, which stands in their center. In between these orchards pass streets with open squares; these all are densely populated, and here all kinds of goods are on sale with bread stuffs and meat. Thus it is that the population without the city is more numerous than the population within the walls. . .

Through the streets of Samarqand, as through its gardens outside and inside, pass many water-conduits, and in these gardens are the melon-beds and cotton-growing lands. . . 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 soil of the whole province of Samarqand is most fertile, producing great crops of wheat. There are abundant fruit-trees also with rich vineyards: the livestock is magnificent, beasts and poultry all of a fine breed. The sheep are famous for having those fat tails that weigh each some twenty pounds, ... of these sheep the flocks are so abundant that even when Timur is in camp here with his armies, [and there is a scarcity] a couple of sheep can be had in the market for the price of a ducat [which is about six shillings]. The prices indeed are so low that for a Meri, which is a coin worth [about three pence] or half a real, you may have a bushel and a half of barley. Baked bread is everywhere plentiful, and rice can be had cheap in any quantity.

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 both the kinds called Zaytumi and Kincobs, also crapes, taffetas, and the stuffs we call Tercenals in Spain, which are all produced here in great numbers. Further they make up special fur linings for silk garments, and manufacture stuffs in gold and blue with other colors of diverse tints dyed, and besides all these kinds of stuffs there are the spiceries. 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. Thus from Damascus he carried away with him all the weavers of that city, those who worked at the silk looms. Further the bow-makers who produce those cross-bows which are so famous: likewise armorers: also the craftsmen in glass and porcelain, who are known to be the best in all the world. From Turkey he had brought their gun-smiths who make the arquebus, and all men of other crafts wheresoever he found them, such as the silver-smiths and the masons. These all were in very great numbers, indeed so many had been brought together of craftsmen of all sorts that of every denomination and kind you might find many master-workmen established in the capital. Again he had gathered to settle here in Samarqand artillery men, both engineers and



bombardiers, besides those who make the ropes by which these engines work. Lastly hemp and flax had been sown and grown for the purpose in the Samarqand lands, where never before this crop had been cultivated.

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**

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## Image credits

**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