The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410

Review Number: 510
Publish date: Saturday, 1 April, 2006
Author: Peter Jackson
Date of Publication: 2005
Publisher: Pearson Longman
Place of Publication: Harlow
Reviewer: Antti Ruotsala

Many scholars have thought to write a full presentation of the relations between the Catholic West and the Mongol Empire during the Middle Ages. It is a demanding task. The author should be specialised in many areas, know many languages, and he or she has to fit his or her presentation into a world historical context. Professor Peter Jackson – editor of The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 6: The Timurid and Safavid Periods (1986), translator and joint editor of The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck (1990), and author of The Delhi Sultanate: a Political and Military History (1999) – has accepted the challenge with his work The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410 (2005).

Of course, his book has important predecessors of high quality, mostly written in German-speaking countries. Perhaps the most recent is Felicitas Schmieder's Europa und die Fremden. Die Mongolen im Urteil des Abendlandes vom 13. bis in das 15. Jahrhundert (Sigmaringen, 1994). Schmieder's work is, however, meant exclusively for scholarly audience and is therefore more difficult for non-experts. (1)

The real story of Jackson's book begins in the year 1221 when Latin Christians first heard of the campaigns of Chinggis Khan in Central Asia, and ends in 1410 to the battle of Tannenberg which, according to Jackson, symbolised the decline of the Golden Horde, the Mongol khanate of the Western Eurasian steppes.

Jackson's work is both chronological and thematic. The two introductory chapters outline the situation of the Latin West and Mongol world before their collision. Then the shocking Mongol invasions of 1241–4 of the West and Near East are treated, along with the Latin responses to them (such as those of the papal embassies), the halting of the Mongol advance and images of the Mongols created among Western Christians. The next two chapters study the encounters in the Near East between the Crusaders and the Mongol Ilkhanate of Persia and Iraq as well as the complicated and mainly hostile contacts of the Golden Horde with Eastern Europe. The last great Turco-Mongol conqueror from Central Asia, Temür (Tamerlane, d. 1405), is discussed. The blow he dealt to the rising Ottoman Turks probably reprieved the Byzantine Empire for a further 50 years (pp. 248, 360). This is followed by two thematic chapters on the arduous missionary work of the newly-founded Franciscan and Dominican Orders as well as the development and decline of Western trading in the Mongol Empire, particularly in China and in the Black Sea region of the Golden Horde. The final chapter of the book treats the impact that contact with the Mongols had on Western notions of the world beyond Islam. There Jackson also examines later periods, for instance, how the information of the past Mongol world guided Columbus and others to their voyages of discovery (pp. 349–50).

The book's point of view is primarily Western. To gain an understanding of the Mongols' view of Latin
Christendom is difficult because of the dearth of the source material. The interest of the imperial Mongols lay more in Persia and especially in China. The word order of the book's title is justified: not only does it catch the reader's attention, but the Mongols and their empire, the largest continuous land empire in world history, play a central role in the volume. However, the sources are mostly Latin, though Jackson does also use Persian material. The leading Mongol source is, as usual, the so-called Secret History of the Mongols, the main part of which deals with the career of Chinggis Khan and which originates from c.1228.

The approach of Jackson's book is mainly empirical. He does not dwell on large-scale models or theories, and even declares that he is 'no disciple of postmodernism'. Although the book discusses various themes, probably because of that its main focus is in political history, especially military confrontations and diplomatic relations. Now, perhaps for the first time, it is possible to know how many times the Mongols (especially from the Golden Horde) attacked Europe and how many times the crusade was preached against them.

The book offers many new approaches and conclusions. For instance, Jackson argues that the most logical explanation for the Mongols' retreat from Europe in 1242 is that their purpose was simply to chastise the Hungarian Béla IV by devastating his kingdom and, if possible, by killing him (pp. 73–4, 358). This sounds like a very likely premodern calculation and there is some primary evidence which supports it. However, as Jackson also shows, one reason for the Mongols' withdrawal was their inner disintegration (p. 72). I would like to emphasise that the Mongols were very flexible in their tactics of war and were ready to change their targets as soon as it only opened new possibilities. Furthermore, the Mongol imperial system collapsed and the empire had dissolved into distinct khanates in the 1260s, which also signified the end of the 'Pax Mongolica'. Jackson demonstrates that this happened mainly because of two tensions: the boundary between the Great Khan's sphere of authority and that of his kinsmen was increasingly blurred and there were no fixed rules for the succession to the throne (pp. 113, 309).

Concerning Marco Polo, Jackson suggests that it was not because of his 'marvels' that he was disbelieved, but rather because he demolished prevalent conceptions found in traditional authorities. Jackson joins the large party that think that Marco Polo really did get to China. According to Jackson, 'we need to focus on Marco Polo's book as a whole, rather than simply on the sections that deal with China. This is necessary especially in the context of omissions' (pp. 342, 364). I concur. (2)

Moreover, it has been argued that the Crusaders lost their 'golden opportunity' to ally with the Mongols in the Near East during the latter half of the thirteenth century. The Mongol Ilkhans were compelled to look for collaboration against their enemies, the Mamlūks of Egypt and Syria as well as the Golden Horde nomads. As an expert on the crusading history, Jackson convincingly refutes this account. The popes and most of the Western rulers saw indeed the matter much clearer than their later scholarly critics. They were well aware of the Ilkhanid 'imperialism' and understood the Crusaders' own limitations. It was wiser to be benevolently neutral towards these hostilities between the Muslims (pp. 121, 183–6). I have published a short article on this theme, and must admit that with the help of the title under review the context in my article would have been in some ways richer. (3)

Jackson agrees with the prevailing conclusion that the main strength of the Mongol war machine was in the composition of its armies and the impact it made on the enemy. The nomadic tribes were systematically broken up and divided among new military units and the commanders, personally selected by the Great Khan, owed their appointments to ability and not to their status in the tribal hierarchy. By these means, the steppe nomads were welded into a single 'Mongol' people (pp. 42–3). This was exceptional in the thirteenth-century world, and possibly a sign of the military genius of Chinggis Khan.

Professor Peter Jackson's breadth of reading is admirable and his exact notes are full of precious information about sources and secondary literature. His command of languages is breathtaking, including as it does Persian, Polish and Hungarian. One minor, though frequent, omission from my own field of research is Michèle Guéret-Laferté's *Sur les routes de l'Empire Mongol. Ordre et rhétorique des relations de voyage aux XIIIe et XIVe siècles*
(Paris, 1994). I liked Jackson's wide-ranging use of Russian scholarship, because it is still too often ignored in Western scholarly work on Mongols. For instance, Lev Gumilev's synthesising studies are respected and discussed in Russia, but are mostly ignored outside it. It is, of course, the case that more Russian scholarship needs to be translated into Western languages so that it can be fully used and explored. An exception is the important article by Alexander Yourtchenko 'Ein asiatisches Bilderrätsel für die westliche Geschichtsschreibung: Ein unbekanntes Werk aus dem 13. Jahrhundert (Der 'Tschingis Khan-Roman')', *Zentralasiatische Studien*, 28 (1998), pp. 45–85. He argues, for example, that the fifth historical chapter in John of Plano Carpini's travel account *Historia Mongalorum* from 1247 includes Mongols' own oral or even written tradition. It is noteworthy that Jackson treats this theme in chapter 6 of his book, as well through consideration of the articles of John Andrew Boyle (pp. 149–150).

I was, of course, delighted to see that Jackson had used my published doctoral thesis *Europeans and Mongols in the Middle of the Thirteenth Century: Encountering the Other* (Helsinki, 2001), characterising it as 'thought-provoking' (p. 1). On the other hand, I do not share his scepticism towards my dating of the sermon of cardinal Eudes de Châteauroux 'Sermo in concilio pro negotio Tartarorum', edited in my book. I dated it 'in all probability' between 1241 and 1243 whereas Jackson supports the year 1261 as, in the sermon, it is said that the pope has information from his envoys in 'the Holy Land, Tripoli, Antioch' as well as from 'Prussia, and Livonia' (p. 153, n. 12). It may be possible even though these kinds of sermons often include later interpolations. Further, my dating is supported by Alexis Charansonnet, a specialist in medieval sermons as well as in Eudes de Châteauroux, who has dated the sermon in his doctoral thesis (2001) from the end of August to the end of October 1241. (4)

The Mongol expansion had significant consequences in Western civilisation. For instance, it inspired Latin missionary work and commerce in new territories in Asia hitherto hindered by the Muslims. The religiously pluralistic and syncretistic Mongols permitted the propagation of all faiths and their new and prosperous elite favoured trade and thus attracted merchants, especially from Italy. This process – despite declines and discontinuities – produced a mass of new information about the world outside Christendom and expanded remarkably the West's field of vision. Asia began to open up for Europeans and the world proved much larger than expected. Fourteenth-century Europe, then, witnessed an explosion in travel literature about Asia. For the Mongols, however, contacts with Latin Christians had not been so significant, and Western Christendom had played only a minor role in their whole expansions.

Altogether, I really enjoyed reading this book – including its notes. It is both a scholarly study and a profound and useful handbook for specialists, and, as such, this clearly written book will be read all over the world. It would also be suitable for a university course book. Now, would anyone be able to write this kind of scholarly explanation on later periods concerning the relations between the Mongols and the West? The story will be continued.

**Notes**


2. For instance, Marco Polo did not mention in his book, from a Western point of view, many impressive Chinese phenomena such as tea-drinking, chopsticks, foot-binding, or the Great Wall. However, if he had only written and, more particularly, oral information for his use, of course, he would have had picked up as well, and with pleasure, all these kinds of Chinese oddities. [Back to (2)]


The author is happy to accept this review, is delighted that Dr. Ruotsala enjoyed the book, and is grateful for the references to literature that had escaped his notice. He must, however, disclaim some of the linguistic competence with which he is credited.

Other reviews:
[2]

Source URL: https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/510#comment-0

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2896
[2] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/