

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

The Mongols

in a Hurry

The empire built on horseback

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The Whole Thing in One Page

The Mongol Empire usually arrives as a moving wall of horsemen. Riders appear from the grasslands, shoot from the saddle, burn cities and leave a single colour stretched across Eurasia. The picture catches the speed and misses the harder achievement. A raid can move quickly. An empire must make orders, labour, food, revenue and obedience travel after the army has passed.

Genghis Khan created the founding political and military order. When he died in 1227, much of the familiar empire did not exist. His heirs finished the Jin conquest in northern China, broke the principalities of Rus, invaded Poland and Hungary, destroyed the Abbasid caliphate centred in Baghdad, conquered the Southern Song and ruled China as the Yuan dynasty. They also failed in Japan, mainland Southeast Asia and on the approaches to Egypt. Expansion revealed both the reach of Mongol organisation and the environments it could not master on the same terms.

Horseback mattered because it belonged to an ecology of movement. Riders managed strings of remounts. Columns separated across pasture, gathered intelligence and concentrated before slower opponents could combine. Yet horses could not reduce every wall, sail a fleet or keep a tax register. The imperial army compounded its power by absorbing engineers, infantry, sailors, translators, merchants, clerics, scribes and local rulers. Some served for advantage. Many were conscripted, deported or incorporated after defeat. The empire was built by Mongol command and by other people's skills.

Government began with allocation. Members of Genghis Khan's dynasty held claims to peoples, troops, tribute and future conquests. Censuses and assessments made some of those claims repeatable, though no uniform form covered Eurasia. Local officials collected, translated and bargained. Relay stations supplied authorised travellers with fresh animals and provisions. Decrees and tablets made entitlement recognisable, turning distance into a sequence of compulsory services. A fast messenger was

therefore the visible end of a long chain paid for by households along the route.

Violence belonged inside this machinery. Massacre, enslavement, deportation and exemplary destruction advertised the price of resistance. Medieval casualty totals often fail as statistics, but false precision is unnecessary to recognise mass killing. Administration could preserve a town because it was taxable, select artisans because their labour was useful and record those left outside protection. Classification made protection more selective and coercion more effective.

Supreme sovereignty remained dynastic. Assemblies confirmed great khans, but no office stood above the descendants of Genghis Khan. Senior women governed courts, controlled resources and acted as regents. Princes received armies, households and revenue bases. The arrangement carried rule across generations and gave several branches enough legitimacy to claim the whole.

By the later thirteenth century, Khubilai's Yuan, Hülegü's descendants in Iran, Jochid rulers in the western steppe and competing Central Asian courts still shared dynastic language, diplomatic habits and routes. They also fought one another and depended increasingly on different taxes, advisers, religions and local alliances. The empire did not split once into four ready-made countries. Continental command failed as regional Mongol governments became capable of standing without it.

Horseback supplied reach. Conquered labour and local institutions converted reach into rule. Dynastic allocation spread that capacity, then helped rival courts keep it. The empire broke because it had learned how to last in several places at once. That is the book.

Why You Should Care

In 1254, the Franciscan traveller William of Rubruck entered Möngke's palace at Karakorum and described a silver fountain shaped like a tree. Its maker, Guillaume Boucher, was a Parisian goldsmith captured during the Mongol invasion of Hungary and carried to the steppe. Pipes delivered several drinks for the court. A craftsman taken in central Europe had become the creator of a ceremonial machine at the political centre of an Asian empire.

That object gives a better introduction than another cavalry charge. It contains conquest, forced migration, specialist labour, long-distance transport and court display. It also contains the book's central correction. The Hungarian campaign brought Boucher under Mongol power. The fountain existed because a government could identify his skill, move him thousands of kilometres, supply a workshop and turn coerced expertise into imperial prestige. Möngke's court still moved seasonally, yet it used a city, palace, markets and workshops. Mobility and fixed institutions were partners rather than opposites.

The scale remains astonishing. In 1241, armies directed from a political world far east of Hungary defeated forces at Legnica and Mohi within two days of each other. Mongol rulers ended dynasties, redirected trade, moved populations and founded regional states whose consequences lasted for centuries. China was reunited under Khubilai's Yuan. The Abbasid caliphate centred in Baghdad was destroyed. Rus princes operated for generations within a Jochid order. Iran acquired a Mongol dynasty that ruled through Persian administrative traditions and later adopted Islam. Central Asia remained a field in which Chinggisid descent authorised power long after one great khan could command the whole.

The more useful reason to care is that the empire exposes how durable power works. It asks which supporting institutions make an apparently mobile power durable, and who supplies them. Spectacle fixes attention on impact: a falling wall, a routed army, a ruler killed or captured. Continued

rule sits behind the scene. Horses require pasture and skilled care. Siege requires engineers and labour. Revenue requires categories, translators and collectors. A decree needs a script, a seal and people prepared to recognise it. A messenger's speed depends on stations whose animals and food have been supplied in advance. The Mongol Empire turns the difference between reaching a territory and making that territory produce usable capacity into a continental experiment.

It also blocks two moral evasions. One reduces the Mongols to mindless destruction and therefore cannot explain diplomacy, administration or regional durability. The other praises cosmopolitan exchange until burned towns, enslaved captives and requisitioned households disappear behind silk and safe conduct. The same authority could protect an envoy, finance a merchant and seize a villager's horse. A register could regularise taxation and expose a household to tribute, labour or military service. Connection and coercion were not separate stories.

The human field is much wider than famous khans. Töregene Khatun governed after Ögedei. Sorghaghtani Beki built the coalition that carried her sons to power. Persian officials tried to turn overlapping military claims into sustainable revenue. Chinese engineers and sailors extended a mounted empire into siege and naval war. Rus princes, Armenian rulers, Muslim merchants, Uighur scribes, Korean shipbuilders, station keepers and captive artisans bargained, collaborated, resisted or endured inside the order.

This book begins in 1227, where the neighbouring life of Genghis Khan ends. It follows expansion, government, succession war and regional transformation rather than treating one four-colour map as the answer. By the end, horseback should look like the first component in a conversion process. Movement created reach. People, records, privileges, taxes and dynastic claims made that reach governable. Regional adaptation then explains why Mongol unity was brief while Mongol states and political legitimacy lasted.

The Core Ideas

Horsepower Was an Ecology, Not a Charge

A mounted archer can move faster than an infantryman. That fact does not explain an empire crossing climates, languages and fortified states. The Mongol advantage came from organising households, animals, command and information around movement.

Pastoral families raised horses alongside sheep, goats, cattle and camels. Warriors could travel with several remounts and change animals before exhaustion reduced the pace. Much of the army's transport and part of its food supply moved on the hoof. Columns separated to find grazing, conceal their direction and approach from several routes. Scouts travelled ahead. Messengers linked commands. Hunting formations trained riders to maintain position across wide ground and close around moving targets. These practices belonged to a long Inner Asian history. The Mongols did not invent steppe warfare. They coordinated it through a political order able to assign units, reward service and sustain plans beyond one leader's sight.

Speed worked because command could survive separation. Flags, horns, messengers and prior assignments helped dispersed columns alter formation, withdraw, circle or concentrate without dissolving into private pursuit. A retreat could be genuine or designed to pull an opponent away from support. Commanders sought local superiority even when the state they invaded possessed many more people and greater total revenue. Their advantage was rarely endless numbers. It was the ability to gather enough organised force at the point where an opponent's divided command could not answer it.

This mobility changed logistics without abolishing them. A sedentary army often depended heavily on carts and depots leading towards a base. Mongol forces distributed part of their supply through herds, remounts and separate columns. That made the line harder to identify and cut. It also created a moving appetite. Horses needed water and pasture whether battle occurred or not. Campaigns still required grain, iron, weapons, guides and

replacement animals. Invaded districts lost fodder, livestock and labour to imperial need. A logistical advantage for the army could be a harvest failure for the people underneath it. Pastoral households carried much of the preparation before mobilisation: breeding, training, milking, repairing tack and keeping animals alive through winter. The campaign's speed rested on slow work already completed.

Ecology set limits. Large herds performed differently in forest, wet farmland, mountain, desert and tropical heat. Mud, disease, exhausted grazing and river systems could slow or redirect operations. Southern China required infantry, shipping and long sieges. Japan required fleets built and crewed largely by subject populations. Campaigns in Vietnam and Java exposed problems of climate, supply, sea command and occupation. The empire could compel unfamiliar resources into service without becoming equally competent in every environment.

Horseback also shaped government. A ruler's court could move with households, guards, herds and records. Princes could hold claims dispersed across regions rather than one compact territory. Orders travelled through riders before capitals and bureaucracies became rooted. The same portability that created reach made control dependent on information, replacement and allegiance. Once regional courts acquired their own revenue, specialists and armies, they needed the distant centre less.

The subtitle names the foundation, not the completed structure. Horses made power portable. The mature empire appeared when rulers attached conquered expertise, allocation, taxation, writing and authenticated communications to that mobile ecology. Remove those additions and the cavalry remains formidable. It does not explain the empire.

Conquest Compounded by Absorbing Other People's Skills

The word *horde* suggests a mass of similar riders. Mongol forces became more capable because each conquest could make them less uniform.

The cavalry core retained steppe methods of scouting, remounting,

dispersed advance and coordinated manoeuvre. Against walled cities, those methods were insufficient. Engineers from northern China, Central Asia and the Islamic world designed and operated siege machines, mined walls and supervised assaults. Infantry guarded works, filled ditches and fought through breaches. Artisans produced bows, arrows, armour and equipment. Translators questioned captives and carried orders. Guides disclosed roads, water and political divisions. Conquered soldiers were reorganised for campaigns against the next state. Transfer could be deliberate and long-distance. A specialist removed from one city might appear years later at another court or siege, detached from the community that had trained him. Imperial capability accumulated through individual displacement as well as institutional borrowing.

This absorption was often coercive. A captured craft worker might be selected while neighbours were killed, enslaved or displaced. Communities supplied levies because Mongol rulers or local clients demanded them. East Asian troops and specialists appeared in western campaigns, while Central and West Asian personnel served farther east. Skills crossed Eurasia inside an imperial labour system that did not require willing migration. Calling the result cultural exchange without stating the coercion erases the people who paid for it.

Collaboration still had motives beyond fear. Rival princes sought Mongol support against local enemies. Merchants valued protection and access. Administrators could preserve office, property or influence by serving a new court. Religious figures competed for patronage. Some commanders defected because their existing ruler distrusted or mistreated them. The Mongols repeatedly entered fractured political fields and converted local disputes into imperial resources. Conquest worked through enemies of the enemy as well as through superior movement.

The conquest of the Southern Song shows how far the composite system developed. The Mongols faced wealthy cities, major rivers, fortified lines and a state with naval capacity. The war lasted decades. Chinese commanders, engineers, infantry and defectors mattered alongside Mongol and other

Inner Asian cavalry. The siege of Xiangyang and Fancheng required sustained blockade and specialised artillery. River and sea operations demanded fleets, sailors and shipbuilding. By 1279, when the final Song resistance was defeated, victory belonged to an imperial military organisation far removed from a pure band of nomadic horse archers.

Absorption also had political consequences. Specialists and officials expected rewards. Princes acquired networks of clients from different regions. Units and populations assigned to one branch of the dynasty could become the base of a future regional state. The army was therefore a machine for enlarging capability and redistributing people. A prince who received engineers, scribes and subject troops acquired relationships that could serve his own court after the common campaign ended. Uighur scribes and administrators were especially important in carrying writing and office into the early empire, while Chinese, Khitan, Persian and other personnel adapted those practices to different political settings. There was no moment when a finished Mongol bureaucracy replaced conquest. Administrative capacity accumulated through the same transfers that enlarged the army. Its diversity made expansion possible, while its internal allocations strengthened the separate courts that later fought over the empire.

Adaptation deserves no automatic praise. Learning can improve irrigation or translation. It can also improve siege, selection and forced transfer. Conquered institutions were first valuable because they worked; over time, some became traditions of regional Mongol rule. Each success widened the range of people who could help produce the next one. That compounding process, more than an imagined ethnic genius for war, explains how a mounted coalition acquired the techniques needed to conquer cities, cross rivers and govern societies its founders had never seen.

Terror and Administration Worked Together

Mongol violence and Mongol government are often placed in different chapters, as though organised rule began when destruction stopped. The conquest joined them. Submission could lead to tribute and protection. Resistance could become a category for collective punishment. Administration recorded the difference and made its consequences repeatable.

The rulers claimed an authority granted by Eternal Heaven and centred on Genghis Khan's dynasty. Envoys demanded recognition before many opponents had any reason to accept it. A city that resisted, killed emissaries, rebelled after surrender or obstructed a campaign might face massacre, enslavement, plunder and demolition. Destruction carried information beyond the place destroyed. Survivors, refugees and hostile chroniclers transmitted the warning. The next town decided under the shadow of the previous one. Reputation lowered the cost of some later sieges because fear arrived before the main army.

Baghdad in 1258 shows both the reality and the measurement problem. Hülegü's forces captured the Abbasid capital after the caliph rejected his demands and failed to organise an effective defence. The city was looted, many inhabitants were killed and the caliphate centred there ended. Later accounts provide immense and conflicting death totals. Those figures cannot be combined into reliable statistics, and the familiar image of every library book darkening the Tigris grew through retelling. Rejecting theatrical arithmetic does not turn the event into ordinary regime change. It keeps the judgement attached to evidence that can bear it.

No surrender rule operated mechanically across every campaign. Commanders weighed previous resistance, rebellion, strategic value, food, revenue, local bargaining and the claims of different princes. Some towns opened their gates and avoided general destruction. Others suffered despite negotiation or discovered that protection covered elites, selected households or useful specialists rather than everyone. Artisans could be separated for deportation. Young people might be enslaved or drafted. An

elite could transfer loyalty while poorer inhabitants carried the material cost. Safety was graded by categories made by the conqueror.

Counting and appointment did not replace coercion after victory. They organised it. A register could reduce repeated armed seizure by fixing an assessment. It could also expose households to tribute, labour and military levies. A protected merchant benefited from authority that requisitioned horses for the relay. A town preserved for revenue could be punished later for revolt. Peace might allow markets to reopen while the threat that founded obedience remained present.

The scale of killing cannot be recovered in one continental total. Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Armenian, Latin and Rus writers used numbers differently and often rhetorically. Population baselines are incomplete. Archaeology can show destruction or rupture at particular places without supplying a universal conversion from ruins to deaths. Massacre, enslavement, forced migration and severe agricultural damage are secure at many sites and episodes. Precision is not. Nor did violence fall evenly. A trading centre, irrigated district, frontier fortress and pastoral camp presented different resources and risks to commanders. Continental language can conceal local variation in both destruction and recovery.

The two easy portraits therefore fail together. A mindless destroyer cannot explain negotiation, selective preservation or tax policy. An enlightened administrator cannot explain why information and exemplary punishment were joined. The empire made submission useful to some people and refusal terrifying to many. Its growing capacity to classify could identify whom to protect, employ, move, tax or place outside protection.

Rule Began With Allocation and Counting

Conquest did not become government at the instant a clerk entered a household in a register. The prior question was ownership. Genghis Khan's descendants, their households and their commanders held claims to peoples, troops, tribute and expected territories. Counting made those claims easier to allocate, defend and repeat.

An *ulus* was not initially a clean province on a map. It could mean a people, a dynastic share, a military following, rights to revenue and an expectation of future conquest. Members of the ruling family might possess interests scattered across several regions. A village could face obligations claimed by the great khan, a prince, an imperial household, a military commander or a favoured religious institution. The empire's political geography was therefore made of relationships before it hardened into borders.

Censuses under Ögedei, Möngke and regional rulers counted households, adult males, property, herds or taxable capacity in different ways. No single form covered Eurasia. Dates, categories and enforcement varied. The common purpose was to turn an armed claim into an assessment that could be collected again. Registers supported tribute, military service, labour, transport and the distribution of revenue among branches of the dynasty. They also made competing claims visible enough to contest.

Imperial overseers commonly called *darughachi*, and officials described as *basqaqs* in parts of the western empire, worked beside local rulers and administrators. Their powers differed by time and place. In Rus, princes remained essential intermediaries. They sought confirmation from Jochid rulers, collected tribute and used access to the khan in their rivalries. In northern China, Mongol rulers inherited Jin institutions and employed Chinese, Khitan, Jurchen, Uighur and Muslim personnel. In Iran, military households, governors, administrators and tax farmers imposed overlapping demands before successive governments tried to make extraction less destructive.

Regularity did not guarantee moderation. A register could multiply obligations. Exemptions for princes, religious estates or favoured merchants shifted burdens onto others. Collectors could take more than a court authorised. Several members of the dynasty might claim income from the same population. For the person surrendering grain, animals or labour, the difference between official assessment, requisition and private exaction could be difficult to see. Fiscal reform recurred because uncontrolled predation threatened both subjects and future revenue.

Regional governments developed different instruments. The Yuan used Chinese administrative divisions, monopolies, grain transport and paper currency while preserving conquest-era inequalities. Ilkhanid governments relied heavily on Persian bureaucratic and monetary practice and pursued major reforms under Ghazan. Jochid rulers combined pastoral resources, Volga towns, Black Sea commerce and tribute mediated through Rus princes. These arrangements cannot be compared as though they measured the same taxpayers, assets or obligations. They were regional solutions to a shared imperial problem.

The people producing the numbers remain easy to miss. Scribes translated categories. Village heads identified households. Local elites negotiated assessments. Women, dependants, enslaved people and mobile pastoralists could be grouped, hidden or exposed differently by a count designed around male taxpayers, property or service. Administrative vision was interested vision.

Allocation and counting made distant resources usable without a Mongol army returning each season. They also altered the balance inside the dynasty. A prince who controlled dependable taxes, towns and clients no longer relied chiefly on access to the great khan's moving court. The machinery that made conquest durable gave regional branches the means to become sovereign.

Distance Was Governed by Authenticated Priority

The empire's most important route was not a road in the Roman sense. It was a sequence of obligations attached to recognised authority.

Under Ögedei and later rulers, the imperial relay known as the *yam* or *jam* expanded through stations that supplied authorised travellers with replacement horses, food, shelter, carts, guides and escorts. Distances and arrangements varied by region. Existing roads and local transport systems were incorporated rather than replaced by one continental design. A messenger carrying an urgent command could change mounts and continue while an ordinary caravan stopped. The gain came from replacement and

priority, not from one tireless horse.

Speed without authentication would have invited every traveller to demand imperial service. Decrees, seals and tablets identified rank and entitlement. One surviving late-thirteenth-century Yuan paiza is an iron plaque inlaid with silver and inscribed in Phakpa script. It invokes the authority of Eternal Heaven and the emperor. The object is a Yuan example, not proof that every credential across the empire looked the same. Its importance is functional. Engraved status could make a station household surrender animals, provisions and escort to a stranger.

That power required control. Princes, envoys, officials, clergy and merchants sought credentials or exemptions. Abuse could exhaust the network through excessive entourages, unauthorised requisition or refusal to return animals. Rulers issued restrictions because priority infrastructure can be consumed by its privileged users. The relay was therefore an administrative argument about who could move fastest, with how many people and at whose expense.

Local households stood behind the famous riders. They bred or supplied animals, stored fodder, prepared food, repaired equipment and replaced losses. In some places, existing communities and institutions carried the burden; elsewhere rulers reorganised stations and obligations. The surviving evidence is particularly detailed for Yuan territories and parts of Iran, which means it cannot be converted into a uniform continental station count. What can be generalised is the principle: distance became governable when an order could trigger a recognised sequence of replacement services.

Merchants used related privileges. *Ortoq* partnerships linked elite capital, court demand, credit and long-distance trade. Political protection could lower risk for selected traders and help courts obtain scarce goods. It could also produce debt, tax-farming power and resentment when favoured partners used official backing against producers or borrowers. Commercial movement was not a neutral market spreading underneath the state. It was often organised through access to the state.

Diplomacy shows the same machinery at work. Papal envoys reached Mongol courts. William of Rubruck travelled to Möngke. Armenian, Georgian, Rus, Persian, Chinese, Korean and Central Asian travellers crossed connected political spaces. Interpreters, hosts and guides shaped what they could learn. Artisans and scholars moved between courts, some voluntarily and others through coercive transfer. Medical, astronomical, geographic and artistic knowledge travelled through particular patrons and routes rather than washing evenly across Eurasia.

The phrase *Pax Mongolica* therefore needs boundaries. Related rulers protected movement across unusually broad zones in some periods. In others, Mongol states fought one another, routes shifted and tolls multiplied. Sea lanes remained important. No common law, currency or free market joined China to Europe.

The relay made command faster because it allocated slowness and cost elsewhere. That is the deeper institution. Distance was governed by deciding whose journey deserved priority and which communities had to make that priority real.

Sovereignty Belonged to the Dynasty

The Mongol Empire had assemblies, offices, decrees and customary expectations. None supplied an impersonal sovereign above the descendants of Genghis Khan. The dynasty was the only empire-wide source of supreme legitimacy.

Genghis had allocated peoples, forces and future claims among branches of his house. The great khan was expected to coordinate the whole, while lesser Chinggisid rulers exercised power through their own courts, guards, clients and shares. Expansion made this arrangement productive. A successful campaign could reward several branches with new households, tribute and command. The family turned conquest into a distributable political asset. The claim was larger than inheritance. Mongol rulers presented their supremacy as sanctioned by Eternal Heaven and treated submission as recognition of a world order rather than a temporary treaty.

That ideology could be expressed through steppe traditions, Chinese imperial language or the political vocabularies of Iran and Rus. Local forms changed, while universal authority still had to be embodied by a Chinggisid ruler.

Güyük's response to Pope Innocent IV in 1246 makes the claim visible. The papal mission sought information, restraint and conversion. The Mongol court answered from a universal hierarchy and demanded submission. Neither side understood the exchange as a negotiation among equal states. Dynastic sovereignty shaped diplomacy before either could agree what recognition meant.

Succession revealed its weakness. No fixed rule of eldest-son inheritance selected the next great khan. A *quriltai* of senior dynasts and commanders conferred recognition, but attendance, timing, coalition and military pressure shaped the result. After Ögedei died in 1241, his widow Töregene Khatun governed until Güyük's enthronement in 1246. Güyük died in 1248. His widow Oghul Qaimish became regent while Batu, leader of Jochi's branch in the west, resisted an easy return to Ögedeid control.

Sorghaghtani Beki, widow of Tolui, converted household power into continental strategy. She protected the interests of her sons, cultivated alliances and helped make Möngke's election possible in 1251. The transfer to Tolui's line was followed by trials, executions and removals of rivals. Recognition became effective because a coalition possessed the force to enforce it.

Senior women's power was substantial and bounded. Töregene, Oghul Qaimish and Sorghaghtani acted through property, dependants, marriage ties, appointments and the mobile household known as an *ordo*. Their careers do not establish general equality for women. They show that dynastic government could not operate without elite women managing courts, resources and succession. Regency made an existing political capacity visible.

Möngke attempted to tighten central control. He reviewed revenue,

challenged some abuses and assigned enormous campaigns to his brothers. Khubilai operated in China. Hülegü moved into Iran and Iraq. Ariq Böke remained close to the Mongolian heartland. The arrangement multiplied the dynasty's reach while placing major armies and revenue bases in the hands of men with equally prestigious descent from Tolui.

When Möngke died in 1259, no accepted procedure converted the vacancy into obedience. Khubilai and Ariq Böke each claimed the great khanship through rival assemblies. Khubilai prevailed by 1264, but victory did not make his authority universal. Berke of the Jochid line fought Hülegü. Qaidu, descended from Ögedei, built a long challenge in Central Asia. Each rival could make an intelligible claim because sovereignty came from the same ancestry.

Dynastic legitimacy therefore joined distant courts and armed their disputes. It enabled rulers in China, Iran, Central Asia and the western steppe to recognise a common political world when no shared bureaucracy, law or religion covered it. It also prevented a neutral office from overruling the branches. Once regional courts possessed armies, taxes and advisers of their own, a family quarrel became interstate war without ceasing to be a family quarrel.

Regional Success Broke Continental Command

Maps often show a united empire followed by four coloured khanates. The sequence looks like a clean partition. In practice, unity weakened through civil wars, overlapping dynastic claims and regional governments becoming strong enough to pursue their own interests.

Khubilai proclaimed the Yuan dynasty in 1271 and completed the conquest of the Southern Song in 1279. His court used Chinese administrative districts, taxation, grain transport, paper currency and a capital at Dadu while preserving Mongol privilege and drawing officials from across Eurasia. The dynasty ruled China as a Mongol imperial state, not as a conquest elite that had vanished into an unchanging local pattern. Its failed invasions of Japan and difficult wars in Southeast Asia showed that wealth and

administrative depth did not remove ecological and operational limits.

In Iran, Hülegü's descendants formed the Ilkhanate. They relied heavily on Persian officials, negotiated with Armenian and Georgian allies, fought Mamluk rulers and competed with the Jochid branch to the north. Religious patronage changed across reigns. Ghazan's conversion to Islam in 1295 aligned the court more closely with most subjects without erasing Chinggisid legitimacy or every inherited steppe practice. Abu Sa'id's death in 1335 left no accepted adult successor, and rival claimants exposed how much the state still depended on the dynasty it had regionalised.

The Jochid dominions, later called the Golden Horde, developed around the western grasslands, urban centres on the Volga, Black Sea trade and tributary ties to Rus. Rulers often worked through confirmed Rus princes rather than installing the same administration in every town. Jochid courts adopted Islam over time and supported cities without ceasing to command a pastoral political order. Their later divisions produced successor hordes, not one moment of disappearance.

Central Asia never settled into one equivalent and stable Chagatai box. Chagatai and Ögedeid descendants, Qaidu's coalition and other powers competed across pasture and oasis cities. Courts differed over taxation, urban administration, Islam and relations with Khubilai. The familiar four-part map is useful for orientation, but it freezes claims and borders that contemporaries continued to fight over.

These regional states still shared more than ancestry. Envoys, merchants, clerics, artisans and marriage partners crossed their boundaries. Rulers remembered common precedents and disputed who could speak for the whole. Chinggisid descent remained a recognised source of sovereignty. Yet each court depended increasingly on a particular tax base, military frontier, language mix, religious settlement and group of local intermediaries. Yuan, Ilkhanid, Jochid and Central Asian institutions did not converge on one end state. Their differences were part of Mongol history, not evidence that Mongol history had stopped.

Political unity was failing by the 1260s, while Mongol-ruled states remained powerful for generations. The Ilkhanate fragmented after 1335. The Ming captured Dadu in 1368, but the Yuan court withdrew north and retained its dynastic claim. Jochid and Central Asian traditions lasted on other timetables. Later conquerors who lacked Chinggisid ancestry often sought marriage links or Chinggisid figureheads because the old family still defined plausible sovereignty.

The causal loop closes here. Horse-based mobility allowed one dynasty to act across distance before local institutions contained it. Permanent possession required regional armies, capitals, revenue systems, religious alliances and administrators. Those resources made rule durable in each region and reduced dependence on a single centre. Continental command broke as regional Mongol governments succeeded. What began as portable power ended as several rooted political worlds carrying a shared imperial inheritance.

How It Actually Works

What Genghis Khan left

When Genghis Khan died in 1227, his empire already joined the Mongolian steppe to conquered territory in northern China and Central Asia. He had destroyed the Khwarazmian centre, broken the Tangut kingdom of Xi Xia, weakened the Jin and created a command structure that survived him. He had not conquered all China, invaded central Europe, taken Baghdad or founded the later regional khanates. Those were decisions and achievements of his heirs.

Tolui, his youngest son, acted as regent while the dynasty prepared a *quriltai*. In 1229 the assembly confirmed Ögedei, Genghis's chosen successor, as great khan. The delay mattered. Princes possessed their own followers and claims, yet enough of them accepted a process that prevented immediate civil war. Expansion offered a practical settlement: coordinated campaigns could reward several branches at once.

Ögedei developed Karakorum as an imperial centre, extended the relay, received envoys and tried to regularise revenue. The city was modest beside the great centres of China or Iran, but its workshops, storehouses, markets and religious buildings brought goods and specialists from many regions together. The khan's court still migrated seasonally. Karakorum gave that moving monarchy an administrative address. Princes and imperial households nevertheless drew resources from populations spread across Eurasia. A court in Mongolia could claim silk from China, tribute from Central Asia and the service of craftsmen deported after western campaigns. It was less a compact national capital than a meeting point for distributed dynastic rights.

Jin, Rus and Europe

The war against the Jin dynasty resumed. Mongol armies worked with Chinese and other surrendered forces, while defectors and administrators supplied intelligence. The Jin capital had moved to Kaifeng, and the remaining state faced pressure from both the Mongols and the Southern Song. Kaifeng fell in 1233. The last Jin emperor died the following year after a final defeat at Caizhou. The Mongols and Song had cooperated against a common enemy, then inherited a frontier with each other.

Farther west, commanders first subdued steppe peoples and Volga Bulgaria. A great campaign under Batu, a grandson of Genghis from Jochi's line, brought together princes and forces from several branches. Subedei was among its senior military architects. From 1237, armies attacked the principalities of Rus. Ryazan, Vladimir and other centres were taken and burned. Novgorod was not conquered, but its later rulers still had to operate within the Jochid order. Kiev fell in 1240 after a siege.

The conquest did not turn every Rus principality into a directly administered province. Surviving princes competed for confirmation from the khan, collected tribute and used Mongol support against rivals. Resistance continued, and arrangements changed over time. The Jochid rulers gained revenue and political leverage without stationing one uniform occupation government across the forest zone. Geography encouraged that

arrangement. Indirect rule suited a setting in which recognised princes could deliver tribute and mediate obedience without a dense bureaucracy imported from the steppe. It was an imperial technique, not evidence that conquest had been unreal.

The campaign continued into Poland and Hungary. Separate forces defeated opponents at Legnica and Mohi in April 1241. Hungary suffered occupation, destruction and population loss while King Béla IV escaped. Mongol columns probed towards the Adriatic. European rulers faced an enemy whose main command was not concentrated in one visible mass and whose siege capability had grown through earlier conquests.

Ögedei died in December 1241. The western armies withdrew from Hungary during 1242. The succession crisis mattered, but the familiar claim that every prince rushed home for an election is too tidy. Batu did not travel to the next *quriltai*, and Mongol forces remained active during the withdrawal. Political priorities, difficult campaigning conditions, pasture, resistance and the need to secure the western steppe all formed part of the decision. The empire had demonstrated reach without turning central Europe into a stable possession. For the people in its path, the distinction offered little comfort. Settlements were burned, captives taken and harvests disrupted. Hungary's open plain supplied some pasture, but fortifications, river crossings and local resistance complicated occupation. Béla IV later strengthened castles and invited settlers partly in response, showing how an invasion that did not become permanent rule could still alter a kingdom's institutions.

The empire governed through regencies

Ögedei's death opened a five-year regency. Töregene Khatun displaced several of her husband's senior officials, promoted her own clients and worked to secure the throne for her son Güyük. Her court received John of Plano Carpini, sent by Pope Innocent IV to learn about the Mongols and seek an end to attacks on Christian lands. Carpini witnessed Güyük's enthronement in 1246. The new great khan's reply to the pope did not offer a treaty among equals. It demanded submission. The exchange reveals a collision of diplomatic languages. The pope treated the Mongols as a power to be warned, converted or negotiated with. Güyük's court placed the pope inside a universal hierarchy and read friendly overtures as possible acknowledgement. Envoys did more than deliver messages: their treatment tested rank, intention and the distance between political worlds.

Güyük's position remained fragile. Batu had immense power in the west and a hostile relationship with him. Güyük began moving west in 1248 and died before the confrontation developed. His widow Oghul Qaimish became regent, but she lacked Töregene's coalition. Batu supported a transfer of supreme authority away from Ögedei's descendants. Sorghaghtani Beki, widow of Tolui, supplied the family organisation and alliances needed to advance her eldest son.

Möngke was elected in 1251. Opponents challenged the assembly's validity, and the new regime answered with trials, executions and removals. The succession did not reveal an orderly constitutional state. It revealed a dynasty capable of making a disputed settlement effective through coalition and coercion. Töregene, Oghul Qaimish and Sorghaghtani were not pauses between male rulers. They controlled appointments, audiences, resources and succession during the years when the empire's direction was decided.

Möngke's imperial drive

Möngke sought firmer control over imperial finance. Officials reviewed populations and obligations across several regions, while the court tried to restrain unauthorised requisition and overlapping claims. Uniformity remained out of reach, but the effort showed what the empire had become. The great khan needed information about revenue from Rus, Iran and China, not reports of booty alone. Möngke's agents confronted privileges and claims accumulated under earlier rulers. Revising an assessment meant challenging princes, religious estates, merchants and officials whose exemptions had become political property. Fiscal centralisation was therefore a struggle inside the dynasty as well as an attempt to protect subject populations from uncontrolled collection.

William of Rubruck reached Möngke's court in 1253 and 1254. He found Christians of the Church of the East, Muslims, Buddhists and other specialists competing for patronage, with interpreters moving among languages. At Karakorum he met Guillaume Boucher, the Parisian goldsmith captured during the western invasion, and described the silver drinking fountain Boucher had made for the palace. The object joined coerced movement to court magnificence. Rubruck's account is sharp, curious and prejudiced. It remains unusually valuable because he noticed food, clothing, ritual, carts, workshops and the mechanics of an audience rather than battles alone.

Möngke assigned major conquests to his brothers. Khubilai campaigned in southwestern China and took the Dali kingdom, creating a route around the Southern Song's western flank. Hülegü led a vast expedition towards Iran and Iraq. He destroyed the Nizari Ismaili stronghold at Alamut in 1256. In 1258 his army besieged Baghdad. The Abbasid caliph al-Musta'sim surrendered, the city was sacked and the caliph was killed. Baghdad continued as a city, but its role as the seat of the Abbasid caliphate ended. Hülegü then established rule through a mixture of Mongol commanders, Persian administrators and regional allies. The conquest rearranged property, office and religious patronage rather than leaving an empty ruin.

Its government also had to support troops on pasture contested with the Jochid branch, helping turn a western campaign into a separate dynastic state.

Hülegü's forces advanced into Syria. Möngke, meanwhile, personally led a campaign against the Southern Song. He died in 1259 during operations at Diaoyu fortress in Sichuan. Sources differ on the cause. His death removed the one recognised centre while his brothers controlled separate armies at opposite ends of Eurasia.

Civil war inside the ruling house

Khubilai and Ariq Böke each had a plausible claim. Khubilai possessed the resources of northern China and declared himself great khan in 1260 at an assembly of supporters. Ariq Böke, based near Karakorum and supported by other branches, was proclaimed by a rival assembly. Their war turned supply and recognition into weapons. Khubilai could draw on the agricultural and fiscal base of China. Ariq Böke depended more heavily on steppe routes and Central Asian alliances. Each tried to deny the other grain, horses, communications and political support. The contest showed that a claim to universal legitimacy survived only when attached to a working regional resource base. Ariq Böke surrendered in 1264 after defections and worsening supply narrowed his position.

Victory gave Khubilai control of Mongolia and China, not automatic obedience from every Chinggisid ruler. In the western steppe, Berke of Jochi's line went to war with Hülegü. Their conflict mixed dynastic rivalry, disputed territories, trade interests and Berke's Muslim commitments after Hülegü destroyed Baghdad. It became one of the earliest wars between major Mongol regional branches. Farther east, Qaidu, a descendant of Ögedei, built a durable coalition against Khubilai and his Central Asian allies.

The Mamluk victory at Ayn Jalut in 1260 belonged to this moment of divided command. Hülegü had withdrawn much of his force from Syria after Möngke's death, leaving Kitbuqa with a smaller army. The Mamluks

defeated and killed him. The battle checked Mongol expansion into Egypt and became an important source of Mamluk legitimacy. It was not the first occasion on which Mongol troops had lost, nor did it end Ilkhanid attempts to conquer Syria.

One empire now contained rulers who recognised Genghis Khan's dynasty while fighting over its meaning. Khubilai claimed universal supremacy. Other branches treated him as a powerful relative whose authority had limits. The civil wars made the relay, revenue and armies of each region serve competing centres.

Khubilai's China

Khubilai's hardest task was defeating the Southern Song, whose tax base, cities, rivers and fleets supported prolonged resistance. The paired fortress cities of Xiangyang and Fancheng blocked a route into the Yangzi basin. Their siege lasted from 1267 to 1273 and drew on engineers, artillery, shipping and surrendered personnel from across the empire. Once the position fell, Mongol-led forces advanced downriver. The Song capital, Lin'an, surrendered in 1276. Loyalist resistance continued until a naval defeat at Yamen in 1279.

Khubilai had proclaimed the Yuan dynasty in 1271. His capital at Dadu, later Beijing, placed the court near the border between steppe and agricultural China. Yuan government used Chinese administrative districts, taxation and grain transport while keeping Mongols at the top of a ranked imperial order and employing Central and West Asians in important offices. The court supported Buddhist institutions, managed relations with Daoists and other religious groups, and claimed the Chinese mandate without abandoning Chinggisid legitimacy. Government also ranked populations through categories that favoured Mongols and many Central or West Asian servants over subjects of the former Song. Practice varied, and office was never allocated by one table alone, but conquest remained visible inside civil administration. Yuan rule joined institutional borrowing to maintained hierarchy.

Rule over China gave the Yuan exceptional resources. It also created expensive commitments. Grain had to reach the capital. Armies guarded frontiers and suppressed resistance. Paper currency allowed the state to spend without moving equivalent metal, but confidence depended on fiscal discipline and acceptance. Corruption, local exaction, natural disasters, epidemic disease and court conflict later weakened the dynasty. None can explain its fall alone.

Korea shows another form of rule. After repeated invasions and prolonged resistance, the Goryeo court accepted subordination while retaining its dynasty and much of its administration. Royal marriages tied it to the imperial house; kings attended the Yuan court; the kingdom supplied tribute, troops and ships. Mongol demands reached Korean households through a local state that survived. The arrangement was neither independence nor annexation. It was layered sovereignty, and it made Korea both a subject partner and a major labour base for the invasions of Japan.

Khubilai also ordered campaigns beyond China. Fleets attacked Japan in 1274 and 1281. Japanese resistance, operational strain and storms contributed to failure, with the second expedition suffering catastrophic losses. Campaigns in Vietnam encountered climate, disease, supply problems and determined opponents. An expedition to Java failed to establish rule. These wars show the difference between assembling resources and using them effectively in an unfamiliar environment. Korean shipbuilders, Chinese sailors and subject troops supplied much of the labour. Failure therefore consumed conquered capacity as well as Mongol prestige. An imperial order could compel a fleet into existence without possessing equal knowledge of weather, coast, command at sea and sustained occupation.

Several Mongol empires

The Ilkhanate in Iran developed into a Persianate state ruled by Genghis Khan's descendants. Administrators sought regular taxation from agricultural communities damaged by war and overlapping claims. Ilkhans patronised Christians, Buddhists and Muslims at different times. Ghazan converted to Islam in 1295 and made it central to court legitimacy, while retaining Mongol dynastic claims and political memory. His government pursued fiscal and monetary reforms because an empire cannot consume its revenue base indefinitely.

The Jochid polity in the western steppe, later known as the Golden Horde, centred on pastoral power, Volga towns, Black Sea commerce and tribute from Rus. Its rulers worked through Rus princes rather than replacing every local institution. The label "Mongol yoke" captures coercion and tribute but can make two centuries of bargaining, trade and political adaptation look like one static occupation. Jochid rulers adopted Islam and developed cities without ceasing to command a steppe empire.

Central Asia remained divided and mobile. Chagatai descendants, Qaidu's coalition and later rulers competed across pasture, oasis cities and trade routes. Some courts defended steppe political practice against the settled orientation associated with Khubilai. Others relied increasingly on Muslim urban administrators and converted to Islam. There was no clean line at which Mongol identity ended and local identity began. Conversion and intermarriage altered courts unevenly. Pastoral elites still required seasonal space and military followings, while urban revenue required accommodation with merchants, jurists and landholders. Regionalisation was a negotiation among institutions with different clocks, not one generation of conquerors becoming indistinguishable from their subjects.

Connections continued across the divisions. Envoys negotiated marriages and alliances. Merchants crossed borders. Scholars and artisans moved between courts. Rashid al-Din's historical project in the Ilkhanate gathered information about several peoples under Mongol patronage. Chinese motifs appeared in Iranian art, while West and Central Asian astronomical, medical

and administrative knowledge reached Yuan settings. These movements were selective products of courts and routes, not proof that every inhabitant experienced a connected world. A manuscript translated for a ruler might travel farther than the farmer whose taxes financed the court. Objects crossing Eurasia reveal routes and patrons more securely than they reveal mass cultural convergence. Exchange was concentrated where power, credit and expertise could support it.

The long ending

The fourteenth century did not close the Mongol story in one collapse. The Ilkhanate fragmented after Abu Sa'id died in 1335 without an accepted adult heir. The Yuan faced rebellions, fiscal stress and political division before the Ming captured Dadu in 1368. The Mongol court withdrew north and continued to claim Yuan legitimacy. In the western steppe, the Golden Horde suffered dynastic conflict and later devastating attacks by Timur, yet successor khanates remained influential. Chinggisid descent continued to authorise rulers across Central Eurasia.

Plague passed through this divided world. Ancient DNA from burials near Issyk-Kul supports a Central Eurasian source close to the major fourteenth-century diversification of *Yersinia pestis*. It does not identify one Mongol caravan, one siege or one complete route to Europe. Imperial and commercial connections formed part of the environment through which people, animals and goods moved. Turning that condition into a single-cause story gives the Mongols more control over disease than any state possessed.

The empire's political unity was brief beside its effects. It shaped the political order within which Moscow rose, reshaped Iran, reunited China under foreign rule, altered Islamic and Christian diplomacy and made Chinggisid ancestry a resource claimed for centuries. Later conquerors such as Timur lacked that ancestry and compensated through Chinggisid figureheads and marriage claims. The dynasty that could no longer command one empire still defined who could plausibly command many of its successor worlds. That afterlife complicates the word collapse. Central coordination failed, capitals

changed hands and dynasties ended. Political techniques, genealogies, trade centres and memories were reassembled by later rulers. The Mongol Empire stopped being one government long before Mongol imperial legitimacy stopped organising Eurasian politics.

How we know

The evidence was produced from different edges of power. Juvaini and Rashid al-Din served Mongol rulers while writing conquest and dynastic history through Persian literary and political conventions. Chinese court histories, decrees and administrative texts preserve institutions through their own categories. Rus chronicles, Armenian and Arabic histories, papal envoys and William of Rubruck record encounters shaped by fear, patronage, religious purpose and limited access.

No source sees the whole empire. Court histories legitimise winners. Conquered writers may magnify totals while preserving violence that official narratives minimise. Travellers report what interpreters and hosts allowed them to see. The survival of detailed Yuan and Ilkhanid administration creates a further trap: evidence from those regions cannot become a continental standard by convenience.

Coins, seals, documents, archaeology, art, buildings, environmental evidence and ancient DNA can test written claims at particular places and dates. They do not recover every motive, army strength, casualty total or route. The broad sequence of campaigns, successions, institutions, civil wars and regional states is secure. Universal surrender rules, exact continental counts and a single plague path are not. Confidence rises where independent forms of evidence converge and falls when one court, chronicler or region has to carry the whole claim.

What People Get Wrong

"Genghis Khan conquered the whole empire"

Genghis Khan's name became so dominant that later Mongol history is often folded backwards into his life. He died in 1227 after creating the founding dynasty, command structure and conquests across the steppe, northern China and Central Asia. He did not conquer the Southern Song, finish the Jin, invade central Europe, take Baghdad or found the Yuan and later regional states.

Those achievements belonged to his descendants and to the subject populations they mobilised. Ögedei's reign saw the Jin destroyed and the western campaign launched. Batu and other princes conquered Rus and entered Poland and Hungary. Möngke assigned simultaneous offensives to Khubilai and Hülegü. Khubilai completed the conquest of southern China. The myth persists because a founder's name offers a single agent for a multi-generational empire, and because Chinggisid legitimacy made his descendants advertise continuity with him.

The correction changes the explanation. If one exceptional man did everything, succession and administration become an epilogue. Once the chronology is restored, the central subject becomes institutional inheritance: how later rulers used, altered and fought over what Genghis left. It also restores Töregene, Sorghaghtani, Batu, Möngke, Khubilai, Hülegü and thousands of less famous operators to the history they made.

"They were an endless horde of born horse archers"

The image combines two errors: infinite numbers and effortless skill. Medieval writers often supplied army totals large enough to communicate terror rather than permit accounting. Modern retellings then compare the entire population of an invaded state with an imagined mass arriving from Mongolia. A state's population is not the force available at one battlefield, and Mongol-led campaign armies included troops from many conquered and allied peoples.

The armies were finite. Horses required grazing and water. Warriors died. Garrisons removed men from the mobile field force. A *tumen* was conventionally associated with ten thousand, but a named unit need not have marched at paper strength. Chroniclers counted units, auxiliaries, camp followers and successive contingents differently. The Mongols often defeated more populous states by separating columns, gathering intelligence and concentrating enough organised force before divided opponents could respond.

Mounted ability was learned, not biological. Pastoral households trained many children to ride, manage animals and judge ground from an early age. Elite military performance still required suitable bows, arrows, tack, remounts, discipline and repeated practice. Wealth and role affected access. Women could ride and manage herds without serving in the field army on the same terms as men. By the Southern Song war, Mongol-led forces also depended on infantry, siege engineers, sailors, smiths, translators and administrators.

The combined myth persists because it makes victory look natural. The real explanation is more demanding: social training produced a strong mounted base, command made that base usable at scale and conquest added capabilities it did not possess. The same account explains failure. Poor pasture, overstretched garrisons, bad intelligence, maritime inexperience or rival commands could remove the concentration on which success depended.

"A city that surrendered was always spared"

The promise of safety for submission appears in Mongol demands and helped make terror useful. It was never a universal contract applied identically by every commander. Outcomes depended on prior resistance, rebellion, strategic value, dynastic interests, local negotiation and the categories imposed after surrender.

A city might avoid general destruction while still surrendering weapons, money, hostages, labour and troops. Artisans could be deported. Elites might retain office while other inhabitants were enslaved. Rival princes could dispute who owned the captives or revenue. Some communities suffered after opening their gates, and some resisted before negotiating terms. The myth persists because a neat rule makes the violence look either rationally limited or mechanically monstrous. It also turns the word *spared* into a binary condition. A population left alive might lose property, relatives, freedom of movement or the right to refuse service. The evidence shows a coercive bargaining system with uncertain enforcement. For inhabitants, the difference between incorporation and catastrophe was real, but it was controlled by the conqueror. A useful source question follows: whose account records the terms, and which people disappear when an elite surrender is described as the surrender of a whole city?

"The Pax Mongolica created one peaceful free market"

The phrase *Pax Mongolica* is useful only with boundaries. Related Mongol courts protected envoys, funded merchants and maintained relay routes across an unusually broad political zone. Travellers and objects could move between China, Iran, Central Asia and the Black Sea through connections that conquest had rearranged.

There was no single peaceful market. Mongol states fought one another. Routes crossed toll points and unstable frontiers. Favoured merchants received privileges that others lacked. Tax farming, debt and requisition could make imperial commerce costly for producers and households.

Maritime exchange continued outside Mongol control. Safety varied by decade, route and political relationship. The flattering version survives because movement leaves attractive evidence: silk, ceramics, maps, diplomatic letters and scientific texts. Court-sponsored travellers are also more likely to leave records than villagers whose animals were requisitioned. Evidence about movement therefore contains a built-in social bias towards people able to travel. The correction adds the station keeper, taxpayer, captive artisan and merchant without protection. Connectivity was produced by power and distributed unequally. A route can be safer for an accredited envoy and more extractive for the communities ordered to maintain it at the same time.

"Religious tolerance meant freedom of religion"

Mongol rulers patronised Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Daoists and other ritual specialists. They often exempted clergy, invited debate and avoided demanding that all subjects adopt one creed. Compared with states built around confessional uniformity, that policy could create unusual room for institutions to coexist.

It was not a modern right held equally by individuals. Courts judged religious communities by service, loyalty, political usefulness and claims to sacred power. Competing groups sought tax exemptions and influence. Rulers intervened in disputes, restricted practices and changed patronage. Some later Mongol states adopted Islam, while the Yuan privileged particular Buddhist institutions. Ordinary believers did not automatically share the exemptions granted to clergy. Public debates at court took place before a ruler who selected participants, judged performance and could favour one institution afterwards. They were displays of patronage as well as exchanges of belief. Tolerance described a method of ruling diversity under Chinggisid supremacy. Treating it as liberal neutrality removes both the political calculation and the real pluralism the policy sometimes allowed. A ruler could protect several organised religions while maintaining an imperial hierarchy no subject was free to reject.

"The empire split neatly into four khanates"

A four-colour map offers relief after a complicated story: Yuan, Ilkhanate, Chagatai Khanate and Golden Horde. These names identify important regional states, but the borders and dates suggest more order than contemporaries possessed.

An *ulus* could mean people, revenue rights, military followings and expected lands rather than a fixed sovereign territory. Princes held claims across regions. Qaidu's power cut across the tidy division between Ögedeid and Chagatai domains. The Jochid world contained several wings and later successor hordes. The Ilkhanate's end produced competing dynasties, not an empty colour. Khubilai continued to claim authority beyond Yuan territory, while other rulers used shared descent without accepting his command. The correction matters because fragmentation was a process of civil war, fiscal rooting and local alliance. Even the familiar names are uneven: Yuan was a dynastic title adopted by Khubilai, Ilkhanate describes Hülegü's line, and Golden Horde is a later label applied to the Jochid world. They are not four equivalent boxes created at once. Fragmentation did not occur at one meeting where four countries were drawn.

"The Mongols caused the Black Death by opening the Silk Road"

The story compresses pathogen, ecology and transport into one imperial decision. Genetic evidence from fourteenth-century burials near Issyk-Kul places a strain close to the great diversification associated with the Black Death in Central Eurasia. It does not identify the complete route from that region to the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and Europe.

Trade, war and migration connected hosts and transport networks. Mongol-ruled territories formed part of that environment. So did rodents, fleas, climate, ports, ships and commercial routes beyond Mongol control. The famous account of plague bodies projected into Caffa during a Mongol siege is not an eyewitness transcript capable of proving a continental transmission chain. The pandemic moved through several mechanisms and

regions whose sequence remains under study. Calling it a Mongol creation mistakes a condition of spread for sole cause. It also ignores maritime transport and the dense commercial links of the Mediterranean, where no great khan controlled every port. A political map cannot substitute for the ecology of host species, vectors and local outbreaks. Empires can increase contact. They do not command microbial evolution or write one itinerary for disease.

Use It

Separate mobility from speed

When an army, company or state appears fast, look behind the visible movement. Mongol riders changed mounts because the system had raised, allocated and positioned extra horses. Columns could disperse because commanders trusted shared objectives, scouts and signals. A rapid message depended on stations, credentials and local supply.

This lens changes the question from “How fast did they go?” to “Which resources could be replaced before delay became binding?” Speed is an outcome. Mobility is the capacity to keep moving after animals tire, terrain changes, information becomes stale and units separate. It also has a geography. The same organisation that moved efficiently across pasture worked differently among southern rivers, forests, mountains and seas. Whenever a mobile power reaches an unfamiliar environment, inspect what it has had to borrow, build or compel before treating movement as an intrinsic trait. Then inspect the return. An organisation able to arrive may still lack the forage, repairs, medical support or political settlement needed to remain and leave in good order.

Look for the labour hidden inside elite power

Maps name Genghis Khan, Ögedei, Batu, Möngke, Khubilai and Hülegü. Their decisions mattered. None could build a siege engine, copy every decree, translate every audience, sail every ship, count every household or feed every relay horse. The imperial achievement belonged to a hierarchy of visible rulers and less visible workers.

Use this correction whenever a small elite receives credit for a large result. List the specialised tasks the result required. Then identify who performed them, under what incentives and with what freedom to refuse. Mongol conquest drew on pastoral households, captive artisans, Chinese and Persian administrators, Uighur scribes, Muslim merchants, local princes, sailors, soldiers and station keepers. “The Mongols did it” may be a convenient label, but it should never erase the composite labour system inside the verb. Agency includes collaboration, bargaining and resistance as well as command. It also changes over time. A family coerced into one campaign may later use imperial service to gain office or protection, while another loses the craft worker, animal or harvest that made the opportunity possible. One label rarely captures every stage.

Treat terror as an institution, not a temperament

Calling a ruler cruel can be morally accurate and analytically thin. Mongol terror worked because violence was selected, communicated and attached to categories such as resistance, rebellion or injury to envoys. The destruction of one place altered bargaining in another. Administration then recorded who had submitted, who owed tribute and who remained outside protection.

This lens asks four questions. What behaviour is the violence meant to change? Who receives the warning? Which officials convert fear into compliance? What limits the policy when destruction threatens revenue or legitimacy? The answers prevent a false choice between rational government and brutality. A violent system can possess calculation without gaining moral legitimacy. It can also fail: threats may harden resistance,

commanders may exceed policy, and terror can destroy the skills, food and trust on which occupation depends. Explanation is not excuse. It identifies how harm becomes repeatable. It also separates the ruler's stated rule from the incentives received by commanders and collectors. Where reputation rewards severity, violence can expand beyond the point a distant court considers useful.

Ask who pays for connectivity

The imperial relay is easy to admire from the rider's saddle. Look at it from the station. Fresh horses, fodder, carts, guides, shelter and labour had to appear before an authorised traveller arrived. A route that saved time for an envoy consumed resources from the districts supporting it.

Apply the same view to every celebrated network. Identify the privileged user, the supporting population and the rule that transfers cost between them. Mongol tablets and decrees distinguished travellers whose movement deserved priority. Merchant partnerships joined political protection to private gain. Attempts to curb abuse show that rulers understood a network could be consumed by its own favoured users. Connectivity does not distribute benefits automatically. It creates channels through which goods and knowledge can move, while deciding whose delays, taxes, land and labour make that movement possible. Compare the same route from several positions: ruler, accredited traveller, merchant without privilege, producer and station household. The network will look like a different institution from each.

Inspect the transfer of power

A state can survive an exceptional founder and still fail at the first disputed vacancy. The Mongol dynasty avoided primogeniture without creating an impersonal alternative. Several male descendants had plausible claims. A *quriltai* conferred recognition, while regents, senior women, commanders and regional princes assembled the coalition. The arrangement preserved several branches and made attendance, force and control of resources part of every contested transfer.

When judging any ruling system, examine the transfer mechanism before admiring the current ruler. Who may compete? Who certifies the result? Which resources remain under neutral control during the transition? What happens when a candidate refuses the forum? Mongol history shows that an ambiguous rule can support flexibility while expansion gives every branch new rewards. Once growth slows and regional courts command their own revenue, the same ambiguity converts a family disagreement into civil war. A good succession system therefore needs more than a list of eligible people. It needs an accepted losing position, because every transfer rule is tested most severely by the candidate who can reject the result.

Distinguish fragmentation from disappearance

The end of a unified colour on a map is not the end of its institutions. By the 1260s, major Mongol branches fought one another and Khubilai could not enforce universal command. Yet Yuan, Ilkhanid, Jochid and Central Asian rulers remained powerful. They continued to use Chinggisid legitimacy, court practices, diplomatic routes and inherited military networks while becoming more dependent on local taxes, languages, religions and allies.

Use this lens against rise-and-fall stories that require one date of death. Track which functions ended and which changed scale. Central appointment may collapse while regional taxation improves. A dynasty may lose a capital but preserve a political claim elsewhere. Successor states can reject one another while carrying shared institutions. Fragmentation may reduce coordination and still extend the life of a system by allowing different regions to adapt. The cost is that what survives no longer belongs to one centre. This lens also protects against the reverse mistake: calling every successor institution proof of uninterrupted continuity. Track ownership, authority and function separately. A relay route may remain while the command it once served has gone.

The limits

These lenses do not make the Mongol Empire a template for every mobile power. Steppe ecology, thirteenth-century military practice, Chinggisid legitimacy and the political fields of China, Iran, Rus and Central Asia were specific. Evidence also survives unevenly. Court histories tell us more about rulers and officials than about households. Written tax demands reveal state intention better than actual collection. Famous travel accounts overrepresent people with access to patrons and interpreters.

Comparison must preserve scale and coercion. A commercial platform is not a conquest empire because both use networks. A family company is not a khanate because succession matters in each. The value lies in sharper questions about movement, labour, information, cost and transfer, followed by attention to the institutions and people of the case in front of you. Analogy should open an investigation, not complete it. The same caution applies inside the empire. Evidence from Yuan China cannot be treated as the average Mongol experience, and an Ilkhanid fiscal reform cannot establish how tribute worked in every Jochid or Central Asian district.

The one thing to keep

The Mongol Empire was never explained by the horse alone. Horseback gave a ruling coalition reach: commanders could separate, gather intelligence, change mounts and concentrate force across immense distances. The empire appeared when that reach was attached to other people's skills, household registers, tribute, protected messengers, local officials and a dynasty able to distribute authority among relatives.

That process should permanently change the map in your head. A mounted column implies spare horses, pasture, handlers and information. A fast envoy implies stations whose households surrender time and resources to recognised priority. A conquered province implies people who translate, classify, collect and bargain over the new claims. Once regional courts controlled those functions for themselves, unity became less necessary to their survival and harder to enforce. The empire built on horseback lasted by

becoming several governments able to act when the rider from the centre no longer came. Imperial capacity is revealed less by how far one command travels than by what organised action remains possible after the command stops arriving.

Terms

Chinggisid

A descendant of Genghis Khan, using the scholarly spelling Chinggis. Across much of Eurasia, Chinggisid ancestry became a privileged qualification for supreme sovereignty. Later conquerors sought marriage links or Chinggisid figureheads when they lacked it.

Khan

A ruler or lord in Inner Asian political traditions. Mongol usage varied by period and branch, so the title does not always identify an independent sovereign. Context matters before translating every khan as a king.

Qa'an

The title usually translated as great khan or emperor. It marked a claim to authority over the whole Chinggisid imperial order, even when other branches resisted. The title could outlive the power to enforce it.

Khatun

A high-ranking woman of a ruling household. Khatuns could control property, courts and clients, act as regents and shape marriages, appointments and succession. Their households were political institutions in their own right.

Quriltai

An assembly of senior dynasts and commanders that deliberated and confirmed major decisions, including succession. Recognition depended on attendance, coalition and power, not a fixed electoral constitution. A disputed assembly could therefore deepen rather than settle a succession crisis.

Ulus

A people, patrimony or political share assigned within the ruling dynasty. An *ulus* could include subjects, revenue rights and expected territory before becoming a regional state. The word resists translation as a modern country.

Ordo

A ruler's or elite woman's mobile court, household and camp. The term helps recover the people, property and administration travelling behind the visible military command. Several senior women's *ordos* controlled substantial resources.

Keshig

The imperial guard and household service surrounding the great khan. It protected the ruler, trained trusted elites and connected personal service with later office. Household proximity could become a route into imperial government.

Tumen

A decimal military and administrative unit conventionally associated with ten thousand. Actual strength varied, so the name should not be converted automatically into an exact headcount. Attrition, allocation and campaign need altered field strength.

Nökör

A companion who entered personal service to a leader rather than relying only on inherited kinship. The relationship linked loyalty, reward and political advancement. It helped rulers build service ties across inherited kin groups.

Remount

An extra riding horse used to replace a tired animal. Access to remounts extended operational movement, but required herds, pasture, water and skilled animal management.

Composite bow

A compact bow made from materials such as horn, wood and sinew. Its power and size suited mounted use, while manufacture and maintenance required specialist knowledge.

Siege train

The engineers, machines, tools, labour and supplies needed to reduce fortified places. Mongol siege capacity expanded through captured, recruited and transferred specialists.

Darughachi

An imperial overseer appointed to supervise administration, revenue or political compliance. Duties differed across regions and often overlapped with local officials rather than replacing them. The office makes regional variation more important than one translation.

Basqaq

A term used especially in sources for Mongol officials in the western empire, often connected with tribute or supervision. Its office and reach changed over time.

Census

A state count of people, households or taxable resources. Mongol censuses made revenue and service claims more regular, while exposing populations to new burdens. What was counted depended on the obligation being imposed.

Qubchur

A levy associated with Mongol fiscal practice, commonly assessed on herds, households or produce in varying forms. Regional definitions and enforcement were never completely uniform.

Tamgha

A mark or seal identifying authority and ownership, and in some settings a customs or commercial levy. The term linked political claims, goods and taxable exchange across multilingual settings.

Yam

The imperial relay network, also written *jam*, whose stations supplied authorised travellers with replacement horses and provisions. Local communities carried much of its cost. The system privileged imperial movement rather than offering public post to everyone.

Paiza

A credential showing that its bearer held imperial authority or travel privileges. Different ranks conveyed different entitlements, and abuse prompted repeated attempts at control. A credential made infrastructure available by making status legible.

Jarliq

A formal command or grant issued by a Mongol ruler. Jarliqs could confirm office, privilege, tax exemption or political status across different legal traditions. Spellings vary because the term travelled through several languages.

Ortoq

A merchant or commercial partner linked to elite investment and protection. Ortoq arrangements connected long-distance trade, court demand, credit, taxation and sometimes unpopular debt collection. Commercial privilege could therefore become a source of political resentment.

Appanage

A share of people, land or revenue assigned to a member of the dynasty. Appanages distributed rewards while giving regional princes independent resources.

Karakorum

The imperial centre developed under Ögedei in Mongolia. Its court, workshops and religious buildings joined a mobile steppe monarchy to goods and personnel from conquered regions.

Dadu

Khubilai's principal capital, on the site of modern Beijing. It anchored Yuan rule near both the Chinese agrarian heartland and the Mongolian steppe.

Yuan

The dynasty proclaimed by Khubilai in 1271. It completed the conquest of the Southern Song and ruled China as a Mongol imperial state until 1368.

Ilkhanate

The Mongol state founded by Hülegü's line in Iran and neighbouring lands. It became Persianate, adopted Islam under Ghazan and fragmented after 1335.

Golden Horde

The later name for the Jochid dominions of the western steppe. Their rulers governed through pastoral power, Volga centres, trade and tributary relationships with Rus principalities.

Chagatai lands

The Central Asian inheritance associated with Chagatai's descendants. It contained pastoral and urban zones, competing branches and changing relations with Islam and neighbouring Mongol states.

Pax Mongolica

A modern label for periods of protected movement and exchange under Mongol rule. It is useful only when bounded by region, date, privilege, warfare and local cost.

Go Deeper

David Morgan, *The Mongols*

Morgan's second edition, published by Blackwell in 2007, is a strong compact bridge from this book to serious scholarship. It covers conquest, government, regional states and source problems without requiring specialist preparation. Morgan is particularly good at separating what the evidence supports from the durable stories built around it. Some bibliography and emphases predate the major collective synthesis published in 2023, so use it as a clear foundation rather than the last word. A newly interested reader should begin here. Keep a map beside it, because the argument moves rapidly among dynastic branches whose territories and alliances change faster than their names.

William of Rubruck, The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck

Read Peter Jackson's translation in the Hakluyt Society edition, edited with David Morgan and published in 1990. Rubruck travelled to Möngke's court in the 1250s and noticed food, clothing, ritual, interpreters, workshops and personalities with unusual sharpness. He also carried Christian assumptions, misunderstood some practices and depended on uneven translation. That combination makes the text valuable: it supplies an eyewitness view and teaches the reader to distinguish close observation from confident interpretation. The notes are detailed and worth using. Compare Rubruck's judgements about religion with his precise descriptions of court procedure: proximity improves observation without removing purpose or prejudice.

Michal Biran and Hodong Kim, editors, The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire

This two-volume 2023 work is a major recent broad synthesis used for this book. Its chapters treat imperial ideology, military expansion, administration, economy, religion, art, science, environment and successor states across Eurasia. It corrects an older habit of letting Persian, Chinese or European evidence define the whole empire from one edge. The price is density. It is a reference work rather than a continuous beginner's narrative. Choose the introduction, the chapter closest to your region of interest and the epilogue before attempting both volumes in sequence. Its greatest value is comparison: institutions that look uniform in an empire-wide summary become regional choices when placed beside one another.

Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World*

Favereau's 2021 study shifts attention westwards to the Jochid empire usually called the Golden Horde. It explains pastoral government, cities, trade, diplomacy, Islam and relationships with Rus without reducing the polity to a tax collector outside Russian history. The book is accessible, argumentative and useful against the idea that Mongol power ended when continental unity broke. Its regional focus is the reason to read it and the limit to remember. Pair it with a study of Yuan China or the Ilkhanate before generalising its model to every Mongol state. Favereau is also useful for seeing cities and pastoral rule as connected forms rather than opposites.

Notes and Sources

Scope, scale and names

The narrative begins with Genghis Khan's death in 1227. His life, steppe unification and founding campaigns belong to the neighbouring biography; this book owns what his heirs built from that inheritance. The maximum reach of related Chinggisid rulers is treated as a shifting imperial order rather than one date when every frontier was controlled equally. Michal Biran and Hodong Kim's *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire* supplies the main comparative frame; David Morgan's *The Mongols* remains the compact synthesis. Genghis is used in the familiar personal name, while Chinggisid identifies the dynasty. Khubilai, Ögedei, Güyük, Möngke and Hülegü follow common modern scholarly forms. Regional labels such as Yuan, Ilkhanate and Golden Horde are used with their different origins and dates visible.

Horseback, remounts and command

The account of pastoral logistics, remounting, dispersed columns, reconnaissance and concentration draws on Morgan, Timothy May and the military chapters in Biran and Kim. Steppe mobility predates the Mongol Empire, so no riding practice, decimal unit or feigned retreat is presented as a personal Mongol invention. No fixed number of remounts is assigned to every rider, and no campaign army total is treated as secure across sources that count units, auxiliaries and paper strengths differently. The discussion of pasture and environmental limits is a constraint model, not a claim that ecology determines victory. The failed maritime and tropical campaigns are used as counterexamples to universal cavalry explanations.

Composite armies and conquered labour

The treatment of engineers, infantry, sailors, translators, administrators and transferred artisans relies on the comparative chapters in Biran and Kim, Allsen's studies of imperial exchange and Rossabi's account of Khubilai. Specialists came from several conquered and allied populations. The manuscript does not assign the counterweight trebuchet, gunpowder weapons or any other contested technology to one ethnic inventor. The siege of Xiangyang and Fancheng and the final Song campaigns demonstrate long adaptation, but do not turn every auxiliary into a willing collaborator. Forced transfer, conscription, bargaining and defection are kept distinct where the evidence permits.

Violence, surrender and numbers

Juvaini and Rashid al-Din are indispensable for conquest and dynastic history, but both wrote under Mongol patronage and shaped events through Persian literary and political conventions. Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Rus and Latin accounts supply other positions without creating a neutral total. Jackson's *The Mongols and the Islamic World* guides the treatment of Baghdad and the western campaigns. The book retains massacre, enslavement, deportation, destruction and coercive surrender while rejecting precise city death totals and one aggregate Mongol death toll. No universal promise that surrender guaranteed safety is claimed. Baghdad's capture in 1258 ended the Abbasid caliphate centred there; it did not make the city permanently disappear, and later stories about every book in its libraries require more caution than popular accounts usually give them.

Counting, taxation and local rule

Allsen's *Mongol Imperialism*, Morgan and the administration chapters in Biran and Kim support the account of censuses, revenue allocation and Möngke's reviews. Census categories, dates and coverage varied among China, Iran, Rus and the steppe. Darughachi and basqaq are therefore defined functionally rather than treated as identical offices everywhere. Favereau supplies the corrective that Jochid rule over Rus often operated through confirmed princes, tribute and political arbitration rather than one dense occupation bureaucracy. Yuan paper currency, Ilkhanid taxation and Jochid revenue are not compared as if they used compatible units or one fiscal design. The recurring tension between regular assessment and destructive exaction is central to the claim.

Relay, credentials and merchants

The imperial relay, paiza credentials and ortoq partnerships are based chiefly on Allsen's *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire, Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* and relevant chapters in Biran and Kim. The yam was an imperial priority network built from stations, replacement animals and local obligations, not an open public post. The late-thirteenth-century iron paiza described in the text is a Yuan object in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with silver-inlaid Phakpa script. It demonstrates material authentication in one region and reign, not a universal design for every Mongol credential. No continental station count is given because systems changed by region and date. Ortoq arrangements joined elite investment, trade privilege, credit and sometimes tax collection; they are not translated into one modern corporate form. Rubruck supplies the Karakorum account, including Guillaume Boucher and the silver fountain, while archaeology confirms a cosmopolitan imperial city without recovering the fountain itself.

Dynastic government and women

Anne Broadbridge's *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* and Bruno De Nicola's *Women in Mongol Iran* guide the discussion of ordos, property, marriage and regency. Töregene Khatun, Oghul Qaimish and Sorghaghtani Beki exercised political power through dynastic households and coalitions. Their authority is not used to infer general gender equality. The sequence from Ögedei's death through Möngke's election follows Morgan, Broadbridge, Juvaini and Rashid al-Din. The quriltai is described as a recognition and coalition mechanism, not a parliament or a rule-bound popular election. Purges after the 1251 succession are retained because they show how a disputed settlement became effective.

Rus, Hungary and the withdrawal of 1242

Peter Jackson's *The Mongols and the West* supplies the main analysis of the western campaign and European diplomacy. Carpini's account preserves close observations alongside the strategic fears of a papal envoy. Batu led the campaign, with Subedei among its senior commanders; attributing every operation to one man would overstate the sources. Ögedei's death in December 1241 affected the political setting, but the withdrawal from Hungary in 1242 is not explained as a mechanical rush by every prince to an election. Pasture, resistance, operational conditions, western consolidation and dynastic priorities remain relevant. The discussion of Béla IV's later fortification policy is a consequence of the invasion, not proof that one reform alone prevented a second conquest.

Möngke, Baghdad and the civil wars

Allsen's study of Möngke and Jackson's work on the Islamic world support the fiscal reviews, western expedition and Baghdad sequence. Möngke died in 1259 during the Sichuan campaign; the manuscript leaves the precise medical or violent cause unresolved because the sources differ. Hülegü withdrew much of his field force from Syria after the succession crisis began. The Mamluk victory at Ayn Jalut in 1260 checked expansion towards Egypt but was neither the first Mongol battlefield loss nor the final Ilkhanid attempt against Syria. The Berke-Hülegü war joined dynastic rivalry, territory, trade and religion, so no single motive is made sufficient.

Yuan China and failed overseas campaigns

Rossabi, Morgan and the Yuan chapters in Biran and Kim underpin the sequence from Xiangyang to Yamen, Khubilai's dynastic proclamation and the mixed institutions of Yuan rule. The Goryeo discussion follows the Korean material in the same comparative synthesis: the local dynasty survived under subordination, marriage ties and heavy military and fiscal demands rather than becoming one ordinary Yuan province. The Southern Song conquest ended in 1279; the Yuan title dates from 1271. Status categories favoured Mongols and many Central or West Asian servants, but real appointment and legal practice varied beyond one simple four-class diagram. The invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 failed through a combination of Japanese defence, maritime logistics, command and storms. The manuscript does not treat the storms as the sole cause or call either expedition proof of permanent Mongol naval incapacity. Fiscal strain, currency problems, rebellion, epidemic disease, environmental shocks and court conflict are kept as interacting pressures in the Yuan fall.

Regional Mongol states

Favereau guides the Golden Horde material; George Lane and Jackson support early Mongol Iran; Michal Biran's study of Qaidu supports the Central Asian challenge to Khubilai; Reuven Amitai-Preiss supports the Mamluk-Ilkhanid frontier. Yuan, Ilkhanate, Golden Horde and Chagatai lands are not presented as four equivalent countries created at one date. Ulus claims overlapped and changed. Ghazan's conversion in 1295 is important to Ilkhanid Islamisation but does not mark an instant disappearance of Mongol political identity. The Ilkhanate fragmented after Abu Sa'id's death in 1335, the Ming took Dadu in 1368, and Jochid and Central Asian successor traditions continued on different timetables.

Religion and exchange

Religious patronage and exchange draw on Allsen, Jackson, Rubruck and the religion chapters in Biran and Kim. Mongol courts could support Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Daoists and other specialists without recognising an equal individual right to belief. Exemptions, debates and patronage were political acts under Chinggisid supremacy. The account of cultural movement avoids an inventory of inventions supposedly carried west or east by the Mongols. Textiles, motifs, medical and astronomical knowledge, artisans and diplomatic information moved through specific courts and routes. Surviving elite objects demonstrate contact more securely than they demonstrate continent-wide participation.

The Black Death

Maria Spyrou and colleagues' 2022 *Nature* study of *Yersinia pestis* genomes from burials in the Chüy Valley near Issyk-Kul supports a Central Eurasian source close to the major fourteenth-century diversification associated with the Black Death. It does not establish one caravan, one Mongol policy, the Caffa siege as the unique transfer point or a complete route into Europe. The manuscript therefore treats imperial and commercial connections as possible conditions of movement within a larger ecology of hosts, vectors, ports, ships and regional outbreaks. Publication date, burial period and pandemic chronology are kept distinct.

Evidence limits

No private motive is assigned to a khan where political action is sufficient. No speech is presented as verbatim. Army size, city mortality, continental relay totals and universal tax rates remain outside the prose because the sources do not provide compatible definitions and coverage. Persian and Chinese administrative traditions illuminate some courts and fiscal systems far better than mobile households, ordinary women, rural communities and several Central Asian settings. Yuan, Ilkhanid and Jochid evidence is therefore identified at regional scale. Rubruck's court observations are documented eyewitness testimony but remain dependent on one traveller's access, interpreters and purpose. The Issyk-Kul genomes support a local Central Eurasian source near the major plague diversification; they do not supply a route map.

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