

THE MONGOLS' MARK ON GLOBAL HISTORY

Position: Mongols were civilized

The Barbarian Stereotype

Most Westerners accept the stereotype of the 13th-century Mongols as barbaric plunderers intent merely to maim, slaughter, and destroy. This perception, based on Persian, Chinese, Russian, and other accounts of the speed and ruthlessness with which the Mongols carved out the largest contiguous land empire in world history, has shaped both Asian and Western images of the Mongols and of their earliest leader, Chinggis Khan.

Such a view has diverted attention from the considerable contributions the Mongols made to 13th- and 14th-century civilization. Though the brutality of the Mongols' military campaigns ought not to be downplayed or ignored, neither should their influence on Eurasian culture be overlooked.

A New Look at Mongol Contributions

The Mongol era in China is remembered chiefly for the rule of Khublai Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan. Khublai patronized painting and the theater, which experienced a golden age during the Yuan dynasty, over which the Mongols ruled [also see The Mongols in China: Cultural Life under Mongol Rule, below]. Khublai and his successors also recruited and employed Confucian scholars and Tibetan Buddhist monks as advisers, a policy that led to many innovative ideas and the construction of new temples and monasteries.

The Mongol Khans also funded advances in medicine and astronomy throughout their domains. And their construction projects – extension of the Grand Canal in the direction of Beijing, the building of a capital city in Daidu (present-day Beijing) and of summer palaces in Shangdu (“Xanadu”) and Takh-ti-Sulaman, and the construction of a sizable network of roads and postal stations throughout their lands – promoted developments in science and engineering [also see The Mongols in China: Civilian Life under Mongol Rule, below].

Perhaps most importantly, the Mongol empire inextricably linked Europe and Asia and ushered in an era of frequent and extended contacts between East and West. And once the Mongols had achieved relative stability and order in their newly acquired domains, they neither discouraged nor impeded relations with foreigners. Though they never abandoned their claims of universal rule, they were hospitable to foreign travelers, even those whose monarchs had not submitted to them.

The Mongols also expedited and encouraged travel in the sizable section of Asia that was under their rule, permitting European merchants, craftsmen, and envoys to journey as far as China for the first time. Asian goods reached Europe along the caravan trails (earlier known as the “Silk Roads”), and the ensuing European demand for these products eventually inspired the search for a sea route to Asia. Thus, it could be said that the Mongol invasions indirectly led to Europe’s “Age of Exploration” in the 15th century.

Pax Mongolica: The Mongolian Peace

The Mongols promoted inter-state relations through the so-called “Pax Mongolica” – the Mongolian Peace.

Having conquered an enormous territory in Asia, the Mongols were able to guarantee the security and safety of travelers. There were some conflicts among the various Mongol Khanates, but recognition that trade and travel were important for all the Mongol domains meant that traders were generally not in danger during the 100 years or so of Mongol domination and rule over Eurasia.

Mongol Support of Artisans

The Mongols did not have their own artisan class in traditional times because they migrated from place to place and could not carry with them the supplies needed by artisans. They were thus dependent upon the sedentary world for crafts, and they prized artisans highly.

For example, during Chinggis Khan's attack on Samarkand, he instructed his soldiers not to harm any artisans or craftsmen. Craftsmen throughout the Mongol domains were offered tax benefits and were freed from *corvée* labor (unpaid labor), and their products were highly prized by the Mongol elite.

The Mongols' extraordinary construction projects required the services of artisans, architects, and technocrats. When Ögödei, Chinggis Khan's third son and heir, directed the building of the capital city at Khara Khorum, the first Mongol capital, or when Khubilai Khan directed the building of Shangdu (also known as "Xanadu"), his summer capital, as well as the building of the city Daidu (the modern city of Beijing), all required tremendous recruitment of foreign craftsmen and artisans. [also see [The Mongols in China: Civilian Life under Mongol Rule](#), below].

Artistic and Cultural Exchange under Mongol Rule

The Mongols' favorable attitude toward artisans benefited the Mongols themselves, and also ultimately facilitated international contact and cultural exchange.

The Mongols recruited artisans from all over the known world to travel to their domains in China and Persia.

Chinggis Khan's Four Great Legacies

Tolerance. One of Chinggis Khan's greatest legacies was the principle of religious tolerance. In general, Chinggis provided tax relief to Buddhist monasteries and to a variety of other religious institutions. And though Chinggis himself never converted to any of the religions of the sedentary peoples he conquered (he remained loyal to Mongolian shamanism), he was quite interested in Daoism, particularly because of the Daoists' pledge that they could prolong life. In fact, on his expedition to Central Asia Chinggis was accompanied by **Changchun**, a Daoist sage from China, who kept an account of his travels with his Mongol patron. Changchun's first-hand account has become one of the major primary sources on Chinggis Khan and the Mongols. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Religious Life under Mongol Rule](#), above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's policy of religious tolerance.]

Written Language. The creation of the first Mongol written language was another legacy of Chinggis Khan. In 1204, even before he gained the title of "Chinggis Khan," Chinggis assigned one of his Uyghur retainers to develop a written language for the Mongols based upon the Uyghur script. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Cultural Life under Mongol Rule](#), above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's commissioning of a Mongol script.]

Trade and Crafts. A third legacy was Chinggis's support for both trade and crafts, which meant support for the merchants and artisans in the business of trade and craft. Chinggis recognized early on the importance of trade and crafts for the economic survival of the Mongols and actively supported both. [Also see [The Mongols in China: Life for Artisans under Mongol Rule](#) and [Life for Merchants under Mongol Rule](#), both above, to compare Chinggis's legacy to Khubilai Khan's support artisans and merchants.]

Legal Code. Chinggis also left behind a legal code, the so-called *Jasagh*, which consisted of a series of general moral injunctions and laws. The *Jasagh* also prescribed punishments for transgressions of laws relating particularly to pastoral-nomadic society.