PAX MONGOLICA

DOCUMENT 1

The first few centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire have been called the 'dark ages', and at least from the point of view of the history of discovery this is not without reason. Not only were few if any new routes opened in this period, even the existing ones came in disuse. Trade between various regions of Europe became less. The first voyages to be made again, were pilgrimages, to Rome and the Holy Land. Later, but still well before the end of the first millennium, trade routes were renewed - first within the Mediterranean, later also on the Atlantic and Baltic. Through time, and especially after the first crusade (1096-1099), exotic goods, especially spiceries, were brought from Egypt and Syria by Italian traders. Italy in this period consisted of a number of city-states; the most important trade cities were Venice and Genova.

Around 1200, Genghis Khan united the Mongols, and established an empire that was to become the largest one the world has ever known, spanning the larger part of Asia, from Korea to Mesopotamia. Genghis's son Ogotai also threatened the countries of Europe: In 1238-1241 a Mongol invasion force conquered Russia and reached to Poland, Silesia and Hungary. Then they suddenly turned around: Ogotai had died, and a new Chan had to be chosen. But the Christian nations of Europe had learned of the power of the Mongols, and feared that they would come back.

When in 1243 Innocentius IV was elected pope, he sent out an envoy to the Mongols to ask them not to attack the Christian lands. This envoy was Giovanni de Piano Carpini. He left his monastery in 1245, and the next year he reached the Mongol court in Syra Orda, just outside the capital Karakoram. He met the new emperor Kuyuk Khan. Kuyuk Khan did not make any promises, but Carpini made useful observations about the Mongols, their habits, country and history.

Some years later, the European attitude towards the Mongols began to change: might they perhaps become allies in the fight against the Muslims in the Middle East? Louis IX, just landed on Cyprus to start the seventh crusade, received a Mongol envoy with just that offer, and a hint that the Chan might be converted to Christianity, in 1248. An envoy, Andrew of Longjumeau, was sent back to the Mongols, but was not received friendly: Kuyuk had died, and the empress-regent demanded tribute in exchange for peace. Nevertheless, a further envoy was sent to the Mongols, the Franciscan monk William of Rubruck. Like Carpini, he did not succeed in getting any Mongol promises of non-agression, but he did write an important report of his voyages and the Mongols.

Although the Mongol empire formed a threat for Europe, it also formed a possibility, especially for the traders. The *pax mongolica* gave them the opportunity to safely travel through large parts of Asia, all the way to China if wanted. Among the first traders to use this possibility were two Venetian brothers, Niccolò and Maffeo Polo. They had travelled first to Constantinople (Istanbul), then, in 1261, to Sudak on the Crimea. Not finding the trading possibilities they had hoped for, they travelled on to Sarai, a trading city on the Volga, in Mongol territory. Trade was successful here, but a fight between two different Mongol Chans made it too dangerous for them to return where they came, so instead they travelled on, first to Bulgar, then to Bukhara. There they joined a caravan for Cambaluc, the Mongol capital in China, where they met Kublai Khan. The Khan received them cordially, and asked them to return to Europe to ask the pope to send a large embassy of "wise men" to China.

In 1271, the Polo brothers set out for China again. They did not have the 100 wise men, but they had a number of presents from the pope, and Niccolò's son Marco. By way of Mesopotamia, Persia and Central Asia, they travelled to Cambaluc. There they remained for 17 years. Marco became an official for the Chan and travelled through the land. The Polos returned to Persia by sea, and in 1295 finally returned to Venice. Later, Marco Polo was taken prisoner-of-war in a war between Venice and Genova. In prison, he told his adventures to the writer Rusticello, and together they created *The Book of Marco Polo*. This book became the most important source of information about Asia in the centuries that followed, and a guide for explorers like Columbus.

DOCUMENT 2

Chingis Khan also established a messenger system, the *yam*. Outposts were established where horses waited to relay messages through the empire, greatly speeding up communications. Ogedei Khan, Chingis Khan's son and successor, further developed the system, complete with post stations, post horses, and a small settlement of employees at each station. Traders could follow these postal roads in safety. The Silk Roads—that off and on for centuries linked Europe, Africa, and the Far East in trade and cultural exchange—had been under the control of various local powers, became unsafe during times of conflict, and, therefore, fell in and out of use. Under Mongol protection, the Silk Roads flourished, and during the *Pax Mongolica* under Chingis Khan's successors, people commonly travelled the full length of the Silk Roads, greatly increasing cultural exchange. In this atmosphere Europeans such as Marco Polo travelled to the East and returned with tales of the Mongol empire.

Unfortunately, the Silk Roads also allowed diseases to spread. The bubonic plague travelled from Yunnan and Burma eastward to China and westward to Europe along the roads of the Mongol empire. Cities were ideal hosts for rats, and outbreaks of the plague occurred from time to time. However, the massive outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe was indirectly caused by the deliberate actions of a Mongol military maneuver. Under Janibeg Khan, the last Khan of the
Golden Horde, the Mongols were fighting against the city of Caffa, located on the Black Sea in Crimea, when they witnessed an outbreak of the plague. Just before fleeing the disease, the Mongol commander catapulted plague-ridden corpses over the walls of the city. The disease was carried to European ports by boat and eventually became the Black Death that decimated medieval Europe.

**DOCUMENT 3**

Few subjects provoke more heated debate than the impact of the Mongols. Were they primarily a destructive force, leaving a swath of ashes and barren earth, or did they create conditions for the flourishing of cities, trade and cultural exchange across Eurasia? Evil or good? The answer, in fact, is not quite so simple, since it very much depends on when and where we look. Riazan's tragedy at the hands of the Mongols in 1237 is no more "typical" than is prosperity of Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde, at the time of Ibn Battuta's visit nearly a century later. Yet both are real, and their descriptions not mere propaganda on the part of the Christian monks.

Most narratives about the Mongol invasion and rule were written by sedentary peoples whom the nomadic Mongols had conquered. The traumas of war and the burdens of occupation by a culturally alien people naturally loom large in such accounts. Even those who arguably benefited by working for the Mongols were unable to overcome their dislike for their masters, a dislike often rooted in cultural prejudice.

Can we actually measure the negative effects of the Mongol invasions? We tend to fall back on narratives of destruction, in part because there are no reliable series of data. That the destruction was real certainly is confirmed by archaeological sources. Yet the pattern of devastation is uneven, and there is little evidence to suggest that the Mongols destroyed just for the fun of it. Those who resisted indeed were slaughtered and their cities often razed. Yet, as we shall see, the Mongols do seem early on to have appreciated the importance of sedentary centers and trade; it simply would not have been in their interest to leave behind only a wasteland.