

Notes for Topic 5: The Conquests of the Mongols

1 Amateur History

1. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (1206-1368 AD), the Mongols built an empire that, at its maximum extent, included parts of Korea, Central Europe, India, and the Middle East. Given the small population of the Mongols, the Mongol Empire is among the most extraordinary achievements in history.

2. The Mongol empire was mostly built through conquest. The Mongols were exceptionally skilled horsemen and their wars were extremely violent. Some historians argue that a greater share of the world's population died in these wars than any other conflict in history. Major Mongol armies were nearly undefeated on the battlefield (at least not when fighting other Mongol armies).

3. Despite the brutality of their conquests, the Mongols were harsh, but also somewhat benevolent, rulers. They were unusually tolerant of local religions and customs, as long as they received their tribute and subjugated lands dared not rebel. They also opened up different parts of their empire to trade. Trade flourished to such an extent both within the empire, and to other parts of the world, that the Mongol empire has been described as the first example of globalization.

4. The Mongols' most successful emperor was Genghis Khan who had united what had been a rivalrous set of clans and started to forge the empire. After his death (the cause of which is not known, but I suspect it was a freak gasoline fight accident), the Mongols began a series of division and reunification cycles before disintegrating for good in the mid-late fourteenth century.

5. The Mongol empire lasted for about 150 years. Its undoing was its division into sections. Over time, each section adopted the identity and customs of the local population. In doing so, they lost the military acumen that allowed for the Mongol conquests in the first place.

2 Core Concepts for this Topic

1. *Gains to Trade.* Wars have started over access to trade. The rationale for trade is *comparative advantage*. Consider an example of two societies: one nomadic and the other agricultural (the

example of the Mongol and Chinese may be useful). The nomadic society is adept at producing horses but poor at producing grain. Assume it takes 100 hours to make a horse (at the horse factory) but 500 hours to make a unit of grain. The ratio is what matters here: 5 horses can be bred in the time it takes to make one unit of grain.

Now consider the agricultural society. Assume it takes them 200 hours to breed a horse and 200 hours to make a unit of grain. The ratio is now one-to-one.

The agricultural society has a comparative advantage at producing grain because the cost of producing grain (in terms of horses) is lower. One unit of grain costs them one horse, whereas, for the agricultural society, one unit of grain costs them five horses. Conversely, the nomadic society has a comparative advantage at producing horses. Note that comparative advantage is a relative concept, what matters is the ratios.

Trade works because it allows each society to specialize in the production of the good that they are relatively good at producing (have a comparative advantage in). Here, the nomadic society specializes in horses and then trades them for grain, which the agricultural society specializes in producing. If the trade is free from coercion, then both sides benefit. This idea explains many of the trade patterns that we see in the modern world. the United States is relatively efficient at producing high tech goods and services like education. It generally exports these to economies that are relatively good at producing goods that rely on low-skilled labor.

Not all trade is voluntary. Plunder is another version of trade where one side takes resources from another. In this situation, both sides obviously need not benefit.

2. *Institutions* is a broad term that refers to structures that promote better economic performance. The term is somewhat vague, but often used to describes means to protect property rights, encourage innovation, and enhance the ability to freely trade within the economy, or with other economies. A sound legal system that protects against theft is one example. Another is a police force or freeway system that allows people and goods to move in a safer and more efficient way.

The relationship between institutions and economic performance is complex. Do solid institutions lead to wealthier economies? Or are better institutions a luxury that wealthy economies are able to afford? This is the type of complex causal question that social scientists grapple with. It shows why simply observing that wealthier economies have better institutions doesn't tell us much about what causes what. This is an illustration of the cliché that "correlation does

not mean causation.” In this case, most economists think that causation is flowing in both directions meaning that better institutions do cause better economic performance.

3. **Kin-based** institutions are the set of social norms governing descent, marriage, and post-marital residence.¹ examples include whether marriages are arranged, how property is passed down, and whether descent is traced through the maternal or paternal lines.

Issues of kinship can have important economic effects. One example is when the English forbade Irish landowners from passing their estates down to a single heir, instead requiring them to divide. This led to small estates and economic disaster. Another is evidence that societies which encourage marriage with relative outsiders (*e.g.* not first cousins) are more open to outside ideas and perform better in the long-term.

3 Big Questions

1. How did the Mongols, with a population around 1 million, forge the largest empire the world have ever seen, and how did it last for 150 years?

Prior to the twelfth century, the Mongols were a disunited group of nomads with a population far smaller than the Chinese to the south and east, or the states of Europe and the Middle East to their west. Despite this, they somehow managed to create an empire that dwarfed the Roman Empire at its peak.

The Mongol Empire is the largest continuous empire the world has ever seen. At the time of its peak, after Khubilai Khan’s final conquest of southern China, in 1279, it extended from the coasts of southern Siberia, Manchuria, Korea and China down to Amman in the east all the way into Hungary, Poland and Belarus in the west, and from the northern borders of Indochina, Burma and India, the shores of the Persian Gulf, the southern border of Iraq across Syria and the southern coast of Turkey in the south up to a latitude of approximately 60 degrees N in Russia and Siberia

The second remarkable quality of the Mongol conquests is their unlikelihood. In the twelfth century the Mongols “were not a linguistic or an ethnological group but simply the dominant tribe of one of the tribal confederations that inhabited

¹Bahrami-Rad, Duman and Beauchamp, Jonathan and Henrich, Joseph and Schulz, Jonathan, Kin-Based Institutions and Economic Development (August 25, 2022).

the Mongolian steppes” (Fletcher 1986, p. 13). The Mongols gave their name to the Mongol confederation as well, but neither the tribe nor the confederation is likely to have consisted simply of ethnic or linguistic Mongols. The same applied to the Tatars, the Naimans and the Kereits, the three other main confederations in Mongolia. All of them contained ethnic or linguistic Turks too.

Altogether, the population of the Mongolian steppes is likely to have numbered no more than around a million people or so in the twelfth century (Fletcher 1986, p. 22), and perhaps only half that number (de Hartog 1989, p. 53), an incredibly small number for a people who just after the turn of the century would embark on a territorial expansion that would not end until the largest continuous empire that the world has yet seen had been created.

The first key to the Mongols’ success is that they were very good at killing people. The mongol army was easily the best in the world ins its time, and time Genghis Khan is arguably one of the best generals in military history.

In the thirteenth century, the Mongol army was the best army in the world. Its organization and training, its tactical principles and its structure of command would not have been unfamiliar to a soldier of the twentieth century. By contrast, the feudal armies of Russia and Europe were raised and run on the same lines as they had been for several hundred years and their tactics would have seemed unimaginative to the soldiers of the Roman Empire.

-Findley and Lundhal, page 2014, quoting Chambers (1979)

The Mongols acquired territory mostly through conquest or the threat of conquest. At first glance, however administering and controlling all this territory with such a small population seems impossible. The Mongols reputation for brutality was critical to create an incentive for conquered territories not to rebel, despite the lack of a large occupying force. Cities that resisted the Mongols were mercilessly annihilated. Those that submitted, however, were incorporated into the empire.

Annihilating all but totally subservient opponents ensured that Temujin (Ghenghis Khan) could win wars with relatively small armies, because he did not need to leave large numbers to police conquered opponents.

--Jones, Chapter 9, page 317

Another component of Mongol rule was its unusual tolerance for religions. The Mongol themselves were mostly pagan but Mongol leaders, especially Genghis Khan, felt little need to impose their religion on conquered territories. This further reduced incentives to rebel. Furthermore, the Mongols were able to exploit continuing religious divisions within their empire.

The Mongols in general assumed a very practical attitude towards religion, and Chinggis Khan used it to realize his own aims. He allowed complete freedom of worship, “a religious tolerance that makes the Christian Europe of his day seem barbarous by comparison (Brent 1976, p. 43). This practice was not dictated simply by conviction but also because it could be used to manipulate rivalries between Muslims, Buddhists and Christians in the conquered territories (Onon 1993, p. xiii) and extract from each creed what best served the interests of the khan (Foltz 1999, Chap. 6).

-Findley and Lundhal, page 193

2. Although the Mongols are best remembered for their military conquests, the Mongol empire also ushered in an extraordinary of trade and migration within the empire, and sometimes with other economies. Why was trade so important to the Mongols and why did it flourish within the Mongol empire?

We begin by considering why the Mongols themselves valued trade. As nomads, they had a comparative *disadvantage* in agricultural and manufactured goods. Producing these goods effectively required a more sedentary way of life which the Mongols were not especially interested in. Trade was thus more important for the Mongols than other, more diversified, economies. Their first preference was to acquire these goods through plunder. Once plundering was exhausted, however, they reverted to trade, particularly with conquered parts of the empire.

The nomads needed trade, but with that exception, the Mongols had no alternatives for the creation of non-nomadic wealth to preying on sedentary agriculturalists, and trade could never yield such huge benefits as plunder. This, however, was not something that isolated bands or tribes could carry out on their own. It required organization on a larger scale. At the same time, it provided an incentive for such organization because it boosted the benefits to the community.

Organization offered not only internal peace but also the opportunity of enrichment at the expense of outside groups.

-Findley and Lundhal, page 189

The next issue is how the Mongols promoted trade within their empire. The key was creating institutions that promoted trade by protecting property rights. The Mongols had a strong legal code, along with an effective police force which, along with draconian punishments (in one infamous case, Genghis Khan locked convicted criminals in a room and forced them to listen to Ed Sheeran on blast for 24 hours. They were driven mad and even Khan's allies were horrified by the cruelty.) prior to the Mongol empire, overland travel between Europe and Asia was nearly impossible. While not easy, such travel became possible under the Mongols.

Trade does not only allow people and goods to move. It also allows for the exchange of technologies and ideas. The Mongols were especially open minded about adopting foreign technologies. After conquering much of China, they adopted Chinese shipbuilding and its use of paper currency. They adopted Persian siege technology to assist with further conquests. The Mongols even supplemented their kumis (fermented mare's milk) with rice wine and beer. Before the Mongols destroyed the city of Merv (in Persia), they carefully, and later copied, its sophisticated irrigation system.

Yet weighed against their appalling legacy of slaughter, waste, and genocide was the fact that the Mongols rebooted the whole shape of trade and interaction across Asia and the Middle East. The severely policed order they imposed on their conquered territories created a relative period of peace sometimes known by historians as the Pax Mongolica. It permitted epic journeys of overland exploration, and an easier transfer between east and west of technologies, knowledge, and people. It may also, as we shall see in Chapter 13, have allowed for the transmission of the worst pandemic in world history.

The mongols pioneered the administrative tools of a global empire: a world-class postal system, universal law code, rationalized and decimalized military reform, and an extremely harsh but efficient approach to metropolitan planning

--Jones, Chapter 9, page 314

3. The Mongol empire lasted 150 years, a very long time for such a small population. Its impact, however, would be far reaching and some historians consider it an integral part of the

Black Death/Colombian Exchange/Industrial Revolution nexus that brought about the modern era. Why do they make this case?

One of the key economic aspects of the Mongol empire was an unprecedented movement of people.

For all that they had destroyed worlds. the Mongols also opened them up for exploration. Even during roman times, the Far east had been beyond the horizon of a single traveler– the silk and other commodities traded from China had arrived only via indirect trade, and India was scarcely any better known. Now under Mongol hegemony, all that would change—at least for a time.

- Jones, Chapter 9, page 328

European powers, acting out of a mix of religious evangelicalism (which failed miserably), fear, diplomacy, and commercial interests began to send envoys east. The most famous is Marco Polo, A Venetian who traveled east between 1271 and 1295.

In Persia, he observed, where there was a busy market for transporting horses for sale in India, people in many markets were “brutal and bloodthirsty... forever slaughtering one another.” But they left merchants and travelers alone, because they themselves lived in terror of the Mongols, who imposed “severe penalties on them.” In China, where paper money was used, the advanced attitude towards macroeconomics meant the Great Khan “had more treasure than anyone else in the world.” Along major roads throughout the empire, he observed, trees were planted along the roadside to increase both the safety and aesthetic appearance of the thoroughfare. All of that mattered, for it showed how a new, commerce-focused and globally connected world was coming to life under the Pax-Mongolica– the vast trading zone pacified and policed by the khans.

- Jones, Chapter 10, page 353

As we learned during the covid-19 pandemic, however, the easy movement of people also may mean the easy movement of disease. The Black Death originated in Central Asia, near the heart of the Mongol empire in the 1330s. The plague itself devastated the Mongols. The empire, however, made it far easier for the plague to spread to other parts of the world. An exact counterfactual is hard to construct. Perhaps, if the Mongol empire didn't exist, the

Black Death would have remained a localized event? We cannot be sure. It likely would, at a minimum, have been far less severe if commercial connections had been at their pre-Mongol levels.

The Mongol empire allowed Europeans unprecedented access to luxury goods including silk, certain spices, and Starbucks. The collapse of the Mongol empire in the thirteenth century, however, once again made trade between Europe and Asia very difficult (though not impossible). European demand these types of goods was a major motivation behind the age of discovery that followed. European explorers sought renewed access to Asian markets by sailing around the horn of Africa. Columbus was famously trying to reach Asia when he sailed the ocean blue. There is thus a plausible connection between the Mongols and the Colombian exchange?

Other connections are possible, but harder to pin down. Did the exchange of ideas accelerate the age of discovery or industrial revolution? It is possible but difficult to prove. Some historians have argued that the Mongols' relaxed attitude toward religion led to religious tolerance several centuries later, including in the United States. I confess to being skeptical.