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## The Chinggisid Crisis of the mid-fourteenth century: reasons and consequences

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### Abstract

This article analyses the collapse of the Mongol empire in the mid- to late fourteenth century (1330s to 1390s) across Eurasia, looking at three facets of the Crisis: environmental—focusing on climate change; epidemiological—exploring the Black Death’s impact on the fall of the Chinggisids; and political—mainly the dilution of the Chinggisid charisma due to the halt of expansion. We argue that the main facet of the Crisis was political, and that it derived from the nomadic culture of the Mongols. This was the same political culture that enabled them to establish their huge empire. However, an integral part of this political culture was the need to secure the support of the nomadic elites who were also the backbone of the Mongol army. This proved to be much harder in a reality of excessive natural disasters on the one hand and the erosion of the Chinggisid charisma due to the renunciation of the ideal of world conquest on the other. The result was a growing number of elite groups who contested for power while nominally retaining the framework of the Chinggisid principle, among whom the imperial sons-in-law played a significant part, as well as the shrink and fragmentation of the Chinggisid polities that survived the Crisis.

**Keywords:** Black Death; Chinggisid charisma; Chinggisid Crisis; Mongol empire; climate change

In the mid-fourteenth century, the Mongol empire was falling apart. By then, a century and a half after its founding by Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227), it was divided into four polities that were centred in China, Iran, Central Asia, and the Volga region. These polities were known, respectively, as the Yuan Dynasty or Qa’an *ulus*, the Ilkhanate or Ulus Hülegü, the Golden Horde or Ulus Jochi, and the Chaghadaid Khanate or Ulus Chaghadaid. Sharing genealogy, institutions, and ideological components while retaining a strong sense of Chinggisid unity, together these four polities composed ‘the Mongol Commonwealth’ that was nominally led by the Qa’an (Great Khan) in China. By the mid-fourteenth century, all Mongol khanates were embroiled in political and ecological crises that led to the collapse of the Ilkhanate and the end of Yuan rule in China, and considerably weakened the two steppe khanates. While the Chinggisids continued to rule parts of the steppe for centuries and the empire left an enduring legacy in various parts of Eurasia, the mid-fourteenth-century Crisis put an end to the Mongol Moment (1206–1368) in world history. This end is usually dated to 1368—namely, the retreat of the Yuan Dynasty to Mongolia. This event brought the Chinggisids back into the steppes, terminating their rule in the centres of the sedentary world that had made them so unique among nomadic empires. This considerably diminished the extensive

cross-cultural and commercial exchanges that characterised the Mongol Moment, which integrated the Old World under Mongol aegis. It also signifies the beginning of the deterioration of nomadic power vis à vis sedentary empires.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we analyse the collapse of the Mongol empire by looking at three facets of the Crisis: environmental—focusing on climate change; epidemiological—exploring the impact of the Black Death on the fall of the Chinggisids; and political—mainly the dilution of the Chinggisid charisma due to the halt of expansion. We argue that the main facet of the Crisis was political and that it derived from the nomadic culture of the Mongols. This was the same political culture that enabled them to establish their huge empire. However, an integral part of this political culture was the need to secure the support of the nomadic elites who were also the backbone of the Mongol army. This proved to be much harder in a reality of excessive natural disasters on the one hand and the erosion of the Chinggisid charisma due to the renunciation of the ideal of world conquest on the other. The result was a growing number of elite groups who contested for power while nominally retaining the framework of the Chinggisid principle, among whom the imperial sons-in-law played a significant part, as well as the shrink and fragmentation of the Chinggisid polities that survived the Crisis.

### Definition, time, and space

The Miriam Webster dictionary defines crisis as ‘an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome’.<sup>2</sup> In the Mongols’ case, this crucial time was rather long: we are speaking about the second half of the fourteenth century or, more precisely, the 1330s to 1390s. In terms of space, we are looking at the whole Mongol Commonwealth. Obviously, there were regional and temporal variations along this period, both among and within the khanates. In the mid-1330s, when the Ilkhanate collapsed, the Golden Horde was at its height under Özbeğ Khan (r. 1313–1341) and, while north and south China suffered a huge amount of natural disasters in the 1340s and the Black Death spread from Mongol Central Asia to Europe and the Middle East, Mongolia saw a building spree as part of the Yuan attempt to restore its waning legitimacy; archaeologically, there was no evidence of a crisis, which arrived in the following decades.<sup>3</sup> The period of the 1330s to 1390s thus covers the Crisis in all four khanates.

Before delving into the processes that created the Crisis, one thing should be made clear: the Crisis was not caused by any external threat or conquest; it was mainly an internal crisis. If there were exogenous forces, then they were natural, not human.

### Environmental crisis: climate change and its impact

The relationship between broader climatic as well as ecological phenomena and political change is intricate and a contentious politicised issue on its own. While it is seldom questioned that this cluster of factors did play a role, its scope, impact range and the chains of cause and effect are mostly still a matter of debate. The part that climate played in the rise of Chinggis Khan (r. 1206–1227), whose conquests took place in Mongolia’s wettest period in the second millennium, has attracted considerable scholarly attention,<sup>4</sup> while warm

<sup>1</sup> M. Biran and H. Kim, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, (eds.) M. Biran and H. Kim (Cambridge, 2023), pp. 1–4.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis> (accessed 9 December 2023).

<sup>3</sup> J. Bemmann, ‘Chinggisid rule over the Mongolian plateau and the archaeological evidence’, paper presented at the conference ‘Great Chinggisid Crisis: History, Context, Aftermath’, Bonn, 11–13 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup> N. Pederson et al., ‘Pluvials, droughts, the Mongol empire, and modern Mongolia’, *PNAS* CXL12 (2014), pp. 4375–4379. Although there had been wetter years in the past 2,000 years of Mongolian history on both an

weather in Mongolia and cold summers in China in the 1210s and the 1270s, respectively, might have facilitated the Mongol conquest of both the north and the south of the Middle Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the role of climate in the Chinggisid Crisis of the fourteenth century has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention and is hampered due to the uneven quality and dispersion of the sources.

The study of climate change combines two main kinds of sources: ‘the archives of nature’, namely climatic proxies; and literary and archaeological sources, or ‘historical archives’. The ‘archives of nature’ include, among others, proxies that derive from the chemical and structural signatures of rocks, fossils, and crystals; ocean and lake sediments; fossilised reefs; tree rings; ice cores; and solar radiation, which enable scientists to infer past temperatures and precipitation. The usage of the ‘archives of nature’, especially in the last two decades, has significantly expanded our understanding of the climate changes of the fourteenth century.<sup>6</sup> However, while paleoclimatology can be extremely helpful for sketching broader trends and developments, it rarely allows scientists to ‘zoom in’ on shorter time frames, and so it provides little information on specific years or even decades. Moreover, the data are often specific to a certain location and its extrapolation can be problematic. Additionally, by combining the data from both the climatic proxies and the ‘traditional’ primary sources, one is often tempted to fall into the determination trap, either assuming that, if a political crisis occurred, then a climatic one should be present, or vice versa.

As for the ‘historical archive’, as is well known, the primary sources for Mongol Eurasia are not evenly divided. Thus, obviously, we have far more indigenous literary sources for Mongol China and Iran, although, even there, the sources on the decades of the Crisis are usually meagre as opposed to those of earlier periods. Moreover, the coverage of climatic events is also uneven: whereas the Chinese sources, similarly to their European counterparts,<sup>7</sup> provide detailed information—though not necessarily accurate<sup>8</sup>—on various (usually extreme) events such as droughts, hail, and floods, the sources that are compiled in Arabic, Persian, and Old East Slavic<sup>9</sup> are much less specific or complete. Often, especially in the Ilkhanid case, they focus on military and political occurrences, almost ignoring extreme weather conditions.<sup>10</sup>

The Chinggisid Crisis coincided with the early stages of the ‘Little Ice Age’ (LIA, circa 1300–1850)—an era of cooler and quite unstable climate that followed the so-called

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annual and a centenarian scale, the years 1220–1229 were unique because they were ‘an exceptionally sustained period of moisture’ that lasted for over 15 years (*ibid.*, p. 4378, further p. 4376).

<sup>5</sup> J. L. Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History: A Rough Journey* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 369–370.

<sup>6</sup> A selection of recent studies includes: Pederson et al. ‘Pluvials, droughts’; N. Di Cosmo, S. Wagner, and U. Büntgen, ‘Climate and environmental context of the Mongol invasion of Syria and defeat at ‘Ayn Jālūt (1258–1260 CE)’, *Erdkunde* LXXV.2 (2021), pp. 87–104; P. Slavin, ‘The birth of the Black Death: biology, climate, environment, and the beginnings of the second plague pandemic in early fourteenth-century Central Asia’, *Environmental History* XXVIII.2 (2023), pp. 300–334, and see below.

<sup>7</sup> For collating European sources with climatic proxies, see B. M. C. Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (New York, 2016), esp. pp. 269–329; P. Slavin, *Experiencing Famine in Fourteenth-Century Britain* (Turnout, 2019); J. Preiser-Kapeller, *Der Lange Sommer und die Kleine Eiszeit. Klima, Pandemien und der Wandel der Alten Welt von 500 bis 1500 n. Chr.* (Vienna, 2021), esp. pp. 283–303.

<sup>8</sup> The Chinese concept, according to which natural disasters reflect Heaven’s dissatisfaction with the rulers, can lead to the invention of extreme weather events (e.g. snow in June) to express the dynasty’s loss of legitimisation. More practically, Mongol princes, aware of the court’s initially generous relief system, sometimes reported famine for getting relief (C. P. Atwood, ‘The empire of the Great Khan: *The Yuan Ulus, 1260–1368*’, in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, (eds.) Biran and Kim, p. 160).

<sup>9</sup> In order to avoid anachronism and following Matthews, we prefer to denote the language of the Rus’ chronicles as ‘Old East Slavic’ and not ‘Old Russian’ (e.g. D. Matthews, ‘Preterites in direct discourse in three Old East Slavic chronicles’, *Russian Linguistics* XIX.3 (1995), pp. 299–317).

<sup>10</sup> I. Landa, ‘Famines, state, and the stability of Mongol Eurasia: preliminary remarks’, *Central Asiatic Journal* LXVI.1–2 (2023), pp. 125–126.

'Medieval Climate Anomaly' (MCA, circa 900–1300), which was a period of relative stability and warm temperatures that allowed stable harvests, and thus encouraged and supported demographic growth all around the Old World.<sup>11</sup> In the last decades of the MCA, during the second half of the thirteenth century, the climate had already become more and more unstable all across Eurasia. This was manifested by an increase in winter extremes and unusually high precipitation. Moreover, the Wolf Grand Solar Minimum, which was a period of comparatively low solar activity, was set in motion. Starting in 1282 and continuing until 1342, it is often correlated with the beginning of the LIA and the decrease in the planetary surface temperatures.<sup>12</sup> The cooling of the planet was also strengthened by a range of massive volcano eruptions in 1257 (i.e. the famous Samalas volcano in the Indonesian island of Lombok) and later in 1269, 1276, and 1286 (the specific locations are still unspecified).<sup>13</sup> The incoming LIA started to exert its full power in the early decades of the fourteenth century.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the well-known 'Great Famine' of 1315–1317, which was part of the cold anomaly in Europe that lasted from 1315 to 1321, can be paralleled with the extremely cold and very snowy winter of 1308 that allegedly forced 868,000 nomadic households from the northern steppe areas of the Yuan Dynasty to flee southward, asking the imperial authorities for help and relief.<sup>15</sup>

The LIA showed itself in many areas and at different periods, including the fourteenth century, by increasing the frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, as well as by sharp variations in annual temperatures and a general downward cooling trend. Notably, these phenomena were not uniformly distributed nor readily apparent everywhere. As Hao Zhixin and his team have shown in their recent reconstruction of the temperature anomalies for China, the application of a regional approach and a look into smaller regional units (such as Northeast China, Northwest China, or the Eastern Tibetan Plateau) can provide a more nuanced way to look at climatic changes and limit

<sup>11</sup> For a broader discussion, see Brooke, *Climate Change*, pp. 352–382.

<sup>12</sup> Preiser-Kapeller, *Der Lange Sommer*, pp. 289–297; cf. Brooke, *Climate Change*, p. 382, for a different time range. For a discussion of the possible relationship between the solar irradiance and the climatic changes, specifically droughts, see e.g. Y. Kushnir and M. Stein, 'Medieval climate in the Eastern Mediterranean: instability and evidence of solar forcing', *Atmosphere* X.29 (2019), pp. 1–24, doi: 10.3390/atmos10010029; W. K. Schmutz, 'Changes in the total solar irradiance and climatic effects', *Journal of Space Weather and Space Climate* XI.40 (2021), pp. 1–13, doi: 10.1051/swsc/2021016).

<sup>13</sup> B. M. S. Campbell, 'Global climates, the 1257 mega-eruption of Samalas volcano, Indonesia, and the English food crisis of 1258', *Transactions of RHS* XXVII (2017), pp. 87–121; S. Guillet et al., 'Climate response to the Samalas volcanic eruption in 1257 revealed by proxy records', *Nature Geoscience* X (2017), pp. 1–7, doi: 10.1038/ngeo2875; B. Liu et al., 'The role of Samalas mega volcanic eruption in European summer hydroclimate change', *Atmosphere* XI (2020), pp. 1–17, doi: 10.3390/atmos11111182; M. Bauch, 'Chronology and impact of a global moment in the 13th century: the Samalas eruption revisited', in *The Dance of Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe: Environmental Stress, Mortality and Social Response*, (eds.) A. Kiss and K. Pribyl (London, 2019), pp. 214–232. For further eruptions of the second half of the thirteenth century, see Preiser-Kapeller, *Der Lange Sommer*, p. 288. Note that the exact location of the three eruptions mentioned under the years 1269, 1276, and 1286 is unknown, as the information about them comes from analysis of the so-called 'Dome C' ice core from Antarctica: M. Baroni et al., 'Persistent draining of the stratospheric <sup>10</sup>Be reservoir after the Samalas volcanic eruption (1257 CE)', *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres* CXXIV (2019), pp. 7083, 7085.

<sup>14</sup> Note, however, that some scholars set the beginnings of the LIA to 1400, while the periods from 1150 to 1400 are seen as a transition from the MCA to the LIA (Brooke, *Climate Change*, p. 383).

<sup>15</sup> S. Lian, *Yuan shi* [元史, *Official History of the Yuan*] (Beijing, 1976), chapter 22, pp. 496–497; T. Li, 'The Mongol Yuan Dynasty and the climate, 1260–1360', in *The Crisis of the 14th Century: Teleconnections Between Environmental and Societal Change?*, (eds.) M. Bauch and G. J. Schenk (Berlin and Boston, 2020), pp. 157–159; Landa, 'Famines', pp. 136–137. For the 'Great Famine', see I. Kershaw, 'The Great Famine and agrarian crisis in England 1315–1322', *Past & Present* LIX:1 (1973), pp. 3–50; P. Slavin, 'Market failure during the Great Famine in England and Wales (1315–1317)', *Past & Present* DDXXII (2014), pp. 9–49; Slavin, *Experiencing Famine*.

extrapolations.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the sometimes enormous differences in the precipitation levels both during the various phases of the fourteenth century as well as in different locations across Eurasia prevent us from making any general statement. This is visible even when the compared locations are relatively close together. Thus, although the tree-ring analysis that was conducted on trees located in the western Pamir-Alay mountains in Central Asia shows a significantly increasing precipitation level throughout the fourteenth century, an analysis that was based on the ratio of the stable isotope oxygen-18 ( $\delta^{18}\text{O}$ ) extracted from tree-ring cellulose in the Karakorum mountain range, less than 1,000 kilometres away, did not show any significant anomalies for the whole century.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the palynological analysis of the Aral basin as well as the dendrochronological records from the Sarydzhas Range in the central Tian Shan and the stalagmite analysis from the Alay indicate a dry and warm phase during the opening decades of the fourteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, recent analysis of pollen sediments from the Xiyaohe peat bog, located to the south of the middle Yangtze in today's north-western Jiangxi Province, suggests that the period of 1300–1340 (the 'early-LIA') had a strong tendency for low precipitation levels, whereas the increase in precipitation started only from 1340 onwards.<sup>19</sup> Even more complicated is the situation in Iran—specifically in its northern parts that adjoin the Caspian Sea—not least because much less analysis has been performed in those areas.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the tree-ring analysis that was conducted with species located around the Alborz Mountain Range indicates a slight cold anomaly during the first *circa* 60 years of the fourteenth century, and the analysis of the bat guano sediments in the Kolatarika Cave in Iranian Kurdistan seems to support the slow cold trend at this time.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, these proxies do not indicate an abrupt cold incursion during the first half of the fourteenth century, even though such developments are visible in other parts of Eurasia, as mentioned above.<sup>22</sup> The application of a regional approach to the study of various areas across Chinggisid Eurasia could be extremely helpful for understanding the variability of climate change in the fourteenth century but, for now, it remains a desideratum.

In most of China, however, the early stages of the LIA were primarily characterised by a row of significant weather occurrences that moved from one extreme to another. Intensive rainfall and floods were interchanging with prolonged periods of heavy droughts, and cold periods followed by warm peaks that were again followed by cold

<sup>16</sup> Z. Hao et al., 'Multi-scale temperature variations and their regional differences in China during the medieval climate anomaly', *Journal of Geographical Science* XXX.1 (2020), esp. p. 122, Fig. 1.

<sup>17</sup> For the tree-ring analysis from the Pamir-Alay, see M. Opała-Owczarek and T. Niedźwiedz, 'Last 1100 yr of precipitation variability in western Central Asia as revealed by tree-ring data from the Pamir-Alay', *Quaternary Research* XCI.1 (2019), pp. 89, 88–89; see further M. Opała-Owczarek and P. Owczarek, 'Dry and humid periods reconstructed from tree rings in the former territory of Sogdiana (Central Asia) and their socio-economic consequences over the last millennium', in *Socio-Environmental Dynamics along the Historical Silk Road*, (eds.) L. E. Yang et al. (Cham, 2019), esp. p. 208. For the exact location in the western Pamir-Alay area, see Opała-Owczarek and Niedźwiedz, 'Last 1100 yr', pp. 82–83.

<sup>18</sup> P. Slavin, 'From the Tian Shan to Crimea: dynamics of plague spread during the early stages of the Black Death, 1338–46', *JESHO* LXVI (2023), pp. 555–557, esp. 557, Fig. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Cui et al., 'Historical variations in mutation rate in an epidemic pathogen, *Yersinia pestis*', *PNAS* LX.2 2 (2013), pp. 577–582, esp. p. 48; for a statistical analysis of the precipitation extremes in the Chinese sources during the first half of the fourteenth century, see G. Chen and G. Zhang, *Yuandai zaihuang shi* [元代灾荒史, *History of the Famines of the Yuan Period*] (Guangzhou, 2020), pp. 90–91, esp. p. 91, Fig. 2–2.

<sup>20</sup> M. Kehl, 'Quaternary climate change in Iran: the state of knowledge', *Erdkunde* LXIII.1 (2009), pp. 1–17.

<sup>21</sup> V. Bayramzadeh et al., 'Temperature variability in northern Iran during the past 700 years', *Science Bulletin* LXIII (2018), p. 463, esp. Fig. 1; E. Darabad, M. Maghsoudi, and O. Rahimi, 'Bat Guano and historical evidence of climate changes in the west of Iran during the Late Holocene (Meghalayan stage)', *Acta Carsologica* XLVIII.2 (2018), esp. p. 244, Fig. 10–11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

incursions.<sup>23</sup> These climatic changes obviously affected the yields, as is evident from the Yuan record. The locusts, whose appearance was supported by climatic instability, similarly impacted the yields (even though the increased activity of the locusts had already been recorded in the Chinese chronicles since the late thirteenth century).<sup>24</sup> The reduced yields, in turn, led to hunger waves, and sometimes severe famines.<sup>25</sup> In the Yuan case, this encouraged the rise of popular rebellions that gathered momentum from the connection (typical of the Chinese political culture) between the increase in natural catastrophes and a decline in political legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> Fully aware of this connection, the Mongol authorities invested 20 to 30 per cent of the state budget in relief for the millions in need—both nomads and sedentary people.<sup>27</sup> Yet, the significant cold spells that are recorded in the Chinese sources, as well as most of the famines, locust attacks, and floods, occurred mostly from 1300 to the 1340s—notably in the late 1320s to early 1330s and the 1340s. The famines of the 1340s that hit the family of the future Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368–1398), among others, seemed to have been harsher than those of earlier periods: cannibalism was reported almost every year across north China.<sup>28</sup> The dynasty survived these challenges, although they not only tempered its legitimation, but also emptied its treasury, leading to severe inflation in its last decades. A relief in paper money that was sent in the 1350s lost its value by the time it reached its destination.<sup>29</sup> While climatic exceptionalist determinism is misguided in the Yuan case, natural disasters certainly played a role in the collapse of Mongol rule in China, side by side with other political, economic, and social developments.

Our knowledge on the other parts of Mongol Eurasia is much less detailed in terms of both paleoclimatic research and historical narratives. Moreover, the existing pieces of information are sometimes hard to put together. For example, while we are aware of severe famines that impacted Syria, Iraq, and southern Anatolia during the late 1310s and an extreme flood that occurred in Baghdad in 1325, the records that were left by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa *circa* 10 years later stress the flourishing agriculture and trade that were visible all around the southern Ilkhanate.<sup>30</sup> As for the Chaghadaid khanate, paleoclimatic studies of Kyrgyzstan, where one of the Chaghadaids' summer pastures was located, reveal a period of instability in 1326–1348, when drought and hot periods (notably in 1337–1339) alternated with damp and cold years.<sup>31</sup> The situation in Transoxania, where

<sup>23</sup> E.g. T. Brook, 'Nine sloughs: profiling the climate history of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, 1260–1644', *Journal of Chinese History* 1 (2017), esp. pp. 39–40, 43–44.

<sup>24</sup> For the specific years, see Chen and Zhang, *Yuandai zaihuang shi*, pp. 193–207.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Atwood, 'Empire of the Great Khan', p. 137, Fig. 2.4; Landa, 'Famines', p. 146, fn. 151.

<sup>26</sup> D. W. Pankenier, 'The cosmo-political background of Heaven's mandate', *Early China* XX (1995), pp. 121–176.

<sup>27</sup> See Li, 'Yuan Dynasty and the Climate', p. 166, 161–164, for further relief measures; Landa, 'Famines', pp. 133–137.

<sup>28</sup> Atwood, 'Empire of the Great Khan', pp. 165–166. Cannibalism is mainly a *topos*, yet it reflects the authors' evaluation of the severity of the famine.

<sup>29</sup> Brook, 'Nine sloughs', p. 38, esp. chart 2; for the locust attacks, see Chen and Zhang, *Yuandai zaihuang shi*, pp. 208–209; for the droughts, see *ibid.*, pp. 135–139; cf. Atwood, 'Empire of the Great Khan', p. 170. It remains unclear, however, whether the less-full records of the late Yuan decades present a distorted picture of the real situation in the 1350s to 1360s.

<sup>30</sup> al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad al-Birzālī, *Ta'rikh al-Birzālī (al-Muṭafī 'ala kitāb al-rawḍatayn)* (Beirut, 1327/2006), vol. 4, pp. 303–304, 475–476; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa al-a'lām*, (ed.) 'U. 'A. Tadmurī (Beirut, 1987), vol. 61, pp. 235–236; H. A. R. Gibb (trans.), *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* (New Delhi, 1999), vol. 2, p. 276. For an evaluation of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's information on the Mongols, see D. O. Morgan, 'Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and the Mongols', *JRAS* XI.1 (2001), pp. 1–11.

<sup>31</sup> H. Wang et al., 'Comparison of drought-sensitive tree-ring records from the Tien Shan of Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang (China) during the last six centuries', *Advances in Climate Change Research* VIII.1 (2017), pp. 18–25; Slavin, 'Birth of the Black Death', pp. 315–321.

the fourteenth century was much wetter than the thirteenth,<sup>32</sup> seemed to have been less extreme in the 1330s when Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited<sup>33</sup> but, later on, cold spells that resulted in considerable livestock mortality (*dzuds*) were reported there and are directly connected to the political affairs: an intense cold winter in 1346, in which the Chaghadaid khan Qazan (r. 1343–1347) lost most of his animals, contributed to his deposition the following year by amir Qazaqan (r. 1347–1358, and see below), who took over the khanate's western part.<sup>34</sup> In 1365, an epidemic that might have also originated in a cold spell badly inflicted the horses of the Eastern Chaghadaids who were trying to regain Transoxania. The outbreak forced the invaders to return to Moghulistan, thereby putting an end to the last reunification of the Chaghadaid khanate and facilitating the rise of Temür (Tamerlane, r. 1370–1405).<sup>35</sup>

The Jochid territories pose the greatest challenge for evaluating the effects of the LIA on both urban and nomadic populations. While much has been written on the collapse of the intercontinental trade routes during the mid-fourteenth century, amid both the political and social upheavals in the other Chinggisid domains, recent archaeological excavations depict a major decline in the urban trade hubs at the Volga only since the late 1360s to 1370s, which is later than one would have expected.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it seems that, at least in the western parts of the Khanate, the final blow was delivered by Temür in the 1390s.<sup>37</sup> The role of climatic factors in these events remains undocumented and unclear. The Rus' Old East Slavic sources—usually of crucial importance for climatic records in the Rus' territories—provide little information on climate extremes along the Volga or in the 'Horde' in general. Recently, Shakhmatov has suggested that there were *dzud* occurrences in the Golden Horde domains in 1361, but the scope of these events remains unverified.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the obvious role of the Black Death, to be discussed below, the significant rise in the Caspian and Aral sea levels might have played a significant role in the decline of the trade hubs around the Caspian and Aral seas during the fourteenth century but, here again, the lack of primary textual sources prevents the accurate correlation of scientific and historical data.<sup>39</sup> The Rus' chronicles report an extreme frequency of heatwaves in their domains during the mid-fourteenth century (especially in 1342, 1363–1368, 1371,

<sup>32</sup> Opała-Owczarek and Owczarek, 'Dry and humid periods'.

<sup>33</sup> Gibb, *Travels*, vol. 3, pp. 542, 550, 569. He stresses the ruins in Bukhara and Samarqand but was impressed by the region's thriving agriculture. M. Biran, 'Mongol Central Asia: the Chaghadaids and the Ögödeids, 1260–1370', in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, (eds.) Biran and Kim, p. 374. Al-'Umarī mentions multiple flourishing cities and stresses the role of the developed irrigation system in coping with the drought periods at more or less the same time, but he seems to cite pre-Mongol sources in this part (K. Lech (trans. and ed.), *Das Mongolische Weltreich: al-'Umarī's Darstellung der mongolischen Reiche in seinem Werk Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (Wiesbaden, 1968), pp. 129 (transl.), 57 (Ar.)).

<sup>34</sup> Sharaf al-Dīn al-Yazdī, *Ẓafarnāma*, (ed.) M. 'Abbāsī (Teheran, 1957), vol. 1, pp. 21–22. For the *dzud*, cold-caused disasters with high death causality among the livestock in the steppe, see B. Nandintsetseg et al., 'Cold-season disasters on the Eurasian steppes: climate-driven or man-made', *Nature Scientific Reports* VIII.14769 (2018), pp. 1–3.

<sup>35</sup> al-Yazdī, *Ẓafarnāma*, pp. 85–86; Niẓām al-Dīn Shāmī, *Ẓafarnāma*, (ed.) F. Tauer (Prague, 1937), vol. 1, p. 32, vol. 2, p. 22; Mu'īn al-Dīn Naṭanzī, *Muntakhab al-tawārīkh-i Mu'īnī* (Teheran, 1957), pp. 222–232; B. Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 51; Biran, 'Mongol Central Asia', p. 364.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. M. Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge, 2021), pp. 206–246; L. F. Nedashkovskij, *Zolotoordynskie goroda Nizhnego Povolzh'ja i ikh okrug* (Moscow, 2010), pp. 225–234.

<sup>37</sup> Favereau, *The Horde*, p. 287; Nedashkovskij, *Goroda*, pp. 209–210.

<sup>38</sup> R. Shakhmatov, 'The effects of key climate and historical events on Rus' principalities in 14th century: a comparison of historical records and climate proxies', paper presented at the conference 'The Phase of a Catastrophe: The Crisis of the 14th Century in Afro-Eurasian Context', Sapporo, 13–14 July 2023.

<sup>39</sup> L. S. Berg, 'Uroven' Kaspijskogo morja za istoricheskoje vremja', *Problemy fizicheskoj geografii* VI (1934), pp. 11–64; T. F. Khajdarov, 'Rubikon Zolotoj Ordy', *Golden Horde Review* IV.2 (2016), pp. 314–335; U. Schamiloglu, 'Climate change in central Eurasia and the Golden Horde', *Golden Horde Review* I (2016),

and 1374), but the impact on the Jochid population is unclear, as is the question of whether this phenomenon also hit the areas of the Horde.<sup>40</sup>

To wrap up, the fourteenth century was characterised by an increased frequency of extreme weather events in Eurasia. The exact distribution of these phenomena across the continent remains unclear; most of the available information concerns Europe and China. It is highly plausible that these events both elicited various social and economic calamities in the Chinggisid khanates and, in parallel, significantly impaired the ability of the Chinggisid governments to handle those. This was certainly true in China but, in most cases, the exact chains of cause and effect remain hard to specify. The climatic instability in turn also contributed to another facet of the Crisis—the epidemiological one.

### Epidemiological crisis: the Black Death

The recent COVID-19 crisis—a powerful manifestation of the ability of epidemics to leave their mark on human history—gave a boost to the study of historical pandemics, not least the lethal Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century that struck Europe, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, killing *circa* 50 per cent of the population and, in some places, even more.<sup>41</sup> Long before the twenty-first century, however, the geographical origin of the Black Death and its connection to the Mongols had been hotly debated, while, recently, the chronology of the plague also became a contested issue. While the story of how the Mongols brought the plague to Europe by catapulting infected corpses into Caffa on the Crimea in the 1340s was recently proven to be far from historical truth,<sup>42</sup> the integrated Old World that was created by the Chinggisids, which, among others, increased the connections between diverse ecological zones and the interactions of human and animals, certainly contributed to the rapid spread of the plague. It also affected Mongol polities, although the scope of its impact and the exact course of its dissemination are still matters of conjecture. Similarly to the case of the climate, the study of the plague was recently invigorated by combining scientific data, this time from the field of paleogenetics, namely the study of ancient DNA (aDNA), with literary and epigraphic sources. Similar to our historical sources, however, this ‘biological archive’ of aDNA can be unevenly distributed and is often of partial or less credible nature.

The paleogenetic study of the Black Death has made enormous strides in the last two decades. In 2011, an analysis of the aDNA of Black Death victims from a cemetery in London who had died in 1348–1349 established definitively that *Yersinia pestis* was the causal agent of the Black Death in Europe.<sup>43</sup> Two years later, a seminal study by Cui et al. identified, also on the basis of the London aDNA, a so-called ‘polytomy’ or ‘Big Bang’—a multifurcation event that preceded the Black Death whereby the main plague

pp. 15–16; but cf. P. Che and J. Lan, ‘Climate change along the Silk Road and its influence on Scythian cultural expansion and rise of the Mongol empire’, *Sustainability* XIII.2530 (2021), p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> E. P. Borisenkov and V. M. Pasetskij, *Ėkstremaal'nye prirodnye javlenija v russkikh letopisjakh XI-XVII vv.* (Leningrad, 1983), pp. 88–89.

<sup>41</sup> In the recent edition of Ole Benedictow’s book on the Black Death, it is clearly shown that the mortality rates in many of the European countries reached 60–65 per cent of the whole population (e.g. O. Benedictow, *The Complete History of the Black Death*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge, 2021), p. 696 for Spain (up to 65%), p. 729 for Italy (*circa* 60%), p. 767 for France (*circa* 58%), p. 862 for England (*circa* 65%)). Unfortunately, comparable counts for North Africa and Western or Central Asia do not exist.

<sup>42</sup> H. Barker, ‘Laying the corpses to rest: grain, embargoes, and *Yersinia pestis* in the Black Sea, 1346–1348’, *Speculum* XCVI.1 (2021), pp. 97–126.

<sup>43</sup> K. I. Bos et al., ‘A draft genome of *Yersinia pestis* from victims of the Black Death’, *Nature* CDLXXVIII (2011), pp. 506–510.



lineage (Branch 0) split into four new plague lineages (Branches 1, 2, and another short branch, which soon would split into two branches—Branches 3 and 4). Branch 1 was responsible for the Black Death in Europe. The ‘Big Bang’ was dated to the period of 1142–1339 and geographical origin to the Qinghai–Tibet region.<sup>44</sup> In 2018, the date was amended by Spyrou et al. to 1170 or 1196 ± *circa* 200 years.<sup>45</sup> This new dating also made the chronology of the Black Death a matter of controversy, as scholars, notably Monica H. Green and Robert Hymes, tried to locate its origins in the early thirteenth century, connecting its dissemination to the Mongol sieges and campaigns, especially in Baghdad (1258) and North China (1234), and looking for textual proof of this connection in the literary sources, placing the geographical origin of the plague in the Tianshan mountains in the China–Kyrgyzstan border and in the Qinghai–Tibetan plateau, respectively.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in the absence of paleogenetic analysis of aDNA from any late medieval Central Asian context, all the above theories remained hypothetical. The ‘game changer’ was the recent publication in the *Nature* journal of another study by Spyrou et al. that, for the first time, analysed the aDNA of three specimens from a late medieval East Syriac cemetery at Kara-Djigach in the Chuy Valley, northern Kyrgyzstan (about 11 kilometres south-east of the capital, Bishkek) that was associated with a 1338–1339 outbreak in the region. This graveyard had been known from the nineteenth century. It contained more than 600 tombstones, of which 456 are dated (1248–1345). Among these headstones, 114 (25%) are dated to 1337/1338 to 1338/1339 and, in ten of them, the cause of death is mentioned as pestilence (*mawtānā* in Syriac). The study revealed that: first, the ‘pestilence’ noted on the tombstones from 1338 to 1339 was indeed caused by the plague bacterial agent *Yersinia pestis*; second, the phylogenetic position of the Kara-Djigach genomes is situated right on the node (the ‘Great Polytomy Node’), which just preceded the ‘Big Bang’, representing its direct progenitor; and third, the Great Polytomy itself followed shortly after the Kara-Djigach outbreak.<sup>47</sup> Thus, we now know the geographical origin of the Black Death—north Kyrgyzstan, within the Tianshan mountain range or close by—and its chronological origin, which is firmly dated to the fourteenth, *not* the thirteenth, century, soon after 1338–1339. On the basis of epigraphical and historical sources, scholars estimated that the lethal eruption that created the ‘Big Bang’ might have started in 1341–1342.<sup>48</sup>

Despite this great advance in our knowledge about the plague, however, quite a few questions remain open, notably: How, when and to where did the plague expand from

<sup>44</sup> Cui et al., ‘Historical variations’; Slavin, ‘From the Tian Shan to Crimea’, pp. 514–515.

<sup>45</sup> M. A. Spyrou et al., ‘A phylogeography of the second plague pandemic revealed through analysis of historical *Yersinia pestis* genomes’, *Nature Communications* X.11 (2019), pp. 1–13.

<sup>46</sup> R. Hymes, ‘A hypothesis on the East Asian beginnings of the *Yersinia pestis* polytomy’, *The Medieval Globe* I (2014), pp. 285–308; R. Hymes, ‘Buboes in thirteenth-century China: evidence from Chinese medical writings’, *The Medieval Globe* VIII (2022), pp. 3–59; M. H. Green, ‘Four Black Deaths’, *American Historical Review* CXXV (2020), pp. 1601–1631; N. Fancy and M. H. Green, ‘Plague and the fall of Baghdad (1258)’, *Medical History* LXV (2021), pp. 157–177. For the Baghdad case, see also J. Brack, M. Biran, and R. Amitai, ‘Plague and the Mongol conquest of Baghdad (1258)? A re-evaluation of the sources’, *Medical History, First View* (2024), pp. 1–19, doi: 10.1017/mdh.2023.38. The thirteenth-century hypothesis of the plague was adopted by others (e.g. Favereau, *The Horde*, pp. 250–252; see also the more balanced treatment in P. Jackson, *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane: The Reawakening of Mongol Asia* (New Haven and London, 2023), pp. 148–161).

<sup>47</sup> M. A. Spyrou et al., ‘The source of the Black Death in fourteenth-century central Eurasia’, *Nature* DCVI.7915 (2022), pp. 718–724, doi: 10.1038/s41586-022-04800-3, and see also the supplementary materials on pp. 9–19; the study also examined tombstones from a smaller cemetery in nearby Burana, which contributed another four dated headstones (*ibid.*, pp. 19–22).

<sup>48</sup> Slavin, ‘From the Tian Shan’, p. 517; Slavin, ‘Birth of the Black Death’, pp. 300–334; cf. Green, who still opts for a thirteenth-century dating: M. H. Green, ‘Putting Asia on the Black Death map’, *The Medieval Globe* VIII (2022), pp. 61–89; M. H. Green, ‘A new definition of the Black Death: genetic findings and historical interpretations’, *De Medio Aevo* XI (2022), pp. 139–155.

the Tianshan to the Crimea? Did it also expand in other directions? And how did it impact the various Mongol khanates? Unfortunately, our sources are meagre and deficient, and we have nothing similar to the extensive writing on the Black Death in Europe or the Middle East.<sup>49</sup> In a seminal study that combines historical, archaeological, numismatic, epigraphical, and climatological data, Philip Slavin, who is one of the corresponding authors of the 2022 *Nature* article, tried to reconstruct the route of the plague from Kyrgyzstan to the Crimea via Urgench (in Khwārazm, in modern north Uzbekistan), where it is attested by Timurid chronicles in late 1345. From Urgench, it had reached Tana by spring 1346 and Caffa later that year, spreading to Constantinople by late April, to Sicily by June, and to continental Europe and the Arab Middle East in around 1347. Slavin explained the slow expansion of the bacteria in 1341–1345 by the decline of the Chaghadaid trade routes in the early 1340s, which is attested in the literary and numismatic sources, and was exacerbated by the growing instability in the Chaghadaid khanate and by the dry weather, which did not encourage the reproduction of fleas, who were the agents of the disease (though one can wonder about the chicken-and-egg causation here).<sup>50</sup> The plague advanced faster after reaching the more populated and better-connected Jochid realm in 1345, where trade was not interrupted and the wetter weather was also more appealing for fleas.<sup>51</sup>

Did the plague also advance eastwards? Chinese sources certainly report plenty of epidemics during the fourteenth century before and after the 1340s—some of them allegedly rather lethal. Yet, as Atwood recently concluded, these epidemics seem to have been regional and mainly by-products of other calamities, notably famines. There is no concrete evidence (e.g. description of typical plague symptoms) that connects these pandemics to the Black Death or suggests that China was inflicted in a way that was similar to Europe or the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> That the plague did not expand eastward might have to do with the above-mentioned collapse of the Chaghadaid trade routes in the 1340s, for which, in sharp contrast to other decades of the fourteenth century, we have no evidence of trade, diplomatic, or pilgrimage connections between the Yuan and the Chaghadaid realm. Other factors might have been: the dry climate in eastern Turkestan, through which the roads that led from the Tianshan to mainland China passed; the less-populated state of the roads that led from Kyrgyzstan to China in comparison with the routes that led to the Golden Horde; as well as the use therein of mainly equids (donkeys and horses, which are not plague-carriers) for transportation as opposed to the extensive use of camels (which are plague-carriers) in caravans that went to the Golden Horde.<sup>53</sup>

How did the plague impact the Mongol polities? Again, specific information is meagre and therefore there is a big room for speculation. Obviously, the plague exerted

<sup>49</sup> For the Black Death in Europe, see Benedictow, *Black Death*; for the Middle East, see M. W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, NJ, 1977). Historical sources on the plague in the Chaghadaid realm are mainly limited to sporadic mentions in Mamluk sources. Frustratingly, the most detailed reference, by the Mamluk historian Ibn Shākir al-Kutubi (d. 1363), which actually suggests a plausible route for the expansion of the plague, turned out to be a citation of a description of an eleventh-century plague eruption (Slavin, 'From the Tian Shan', pp. 520–522).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 556, 564–566.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 556, 566–570, 573.

<sup>52</sup> Atwood, 'Empire of the Great Khan', pp. 166–167; see also T. Brook, *Great State: China and the World* (New York, 2020), pp. 63–75. The assumption that the plague stemmed from China (i.e. *Khitay*, *khaṭā*) and originated in the Mamluk sources might have derived from a confusion in the meaning of the word *Khitay*. Originating from the ethnonym 'Khitān' (*qidan*), this term may indeed refer to north China or the whole of China, but it also denotes the realm of the Qara Khitai (1124–1218)—a Khitan Dynasty that ruled in Central Asia with its capital in Balasaghun (today's Burana) in Kyrgyzstan, close to the Kara-Djirach cemetery. See further M. Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Muslim World* (Cambridge, 2005), esp. pp. 90, 215–217.

<sup>53</sup> Slavin, 'From the Tian Shan', pp. 561–563; see also VÉR's article in this Special Issue.

considerable pressure on Mongol resources—both human and material—thereby intensifying internal rivalries. Yet, at this stage of our knowledge, a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the plague and the political and economic developments in the various khanates is often a matter of (minimal or maximal) interpretation. It is unclear, for example, how much the Mongols themselves were infected by the plague, though they certainly felt the repercussions of the havoc that the plague wreaked among their commercial partners in Europe and the Middle East. It is sometimes suggested that the plague spread less rapidly and had a lesser impact among dispersed nomads than within the dense ranks of urban dwellers.<sup>54</sup> Jackson calls for a qualification of this view, which does not take into account the concentration of people in the Mongol mobile courts (*ordos*), described as vast city-tents that comprised, in addition to the Chinggisids, courtiers, servants, and the accompanying traders, scholars, entertainers, etc.<sup>55</sup> Yet, the description of the Chobanid ruler of post-Ilkhanid Azerbaijan al-Malik al-Ashraf (r. 1343–1357), who, in 1347, was quick to escape the plague-inflicted city of Tabriz first for the less-populated pastures in the areas of Qarabagh (north of the city), where he spent the winter and later—in spring 1348—to Kurdistan (south),<sup>56</sup> may suggest that even royal nomads still enjoyed considerable advantages over non-mobile court and city dwellers (who had also tried to escape the plague), as their mobility enabled them to move quickly away from contagious locations (and perhaps also to space in their court). However, given the lower population density among nomads, even a lower demographic decline than in the densely populated cities—or, for that matter, in the crowded nomadic *ordos*—could potentially harm nomadic manpower and threaten the political and even economic stability.

In addition, it seems that the harm that the plague caused in the western khanates was not overall nor evenly divided, and hence people from regions that were less inflicted enjoyed a relative advantage. Thus, for example, in the post-Ilkhanid realm, the plague hurt northern Iran badly—Azerbaijan and the Caspian provinces—as well as Iraq, but there is no evidence that it struck southern Iran and the regions near the Persian Gulf. This might have given some breathing space to the polities in southern Iran, on the one hand, but undermined the chance of further unification on the other, as all the major contenders from the north were badly struck (even if less than their counterparts in Europe or Egypt).<sup>57</sup> Recurring waves of plague also hit Azerbaijan and Iraq in the late fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth. Interestingly, in 1369–1370, while describing a death toll that reached 300,000 a day (a clear exaggeration but an indication of the high human mortality), the Iranian historian Zayn al-Dīn Qazvīnī stated that the population and prosperity of the city were such that the effect of the plague was hardly felt,<sup>58</sup> perhaps implying that the ruling elite was less affected.

We know extremely little about the plague in the Chaghadaid khanate—the realm in which the plague originated. Apart from developments in the North Tian Shan region

<sup>54</sup> See J. Belich, *The World the Plague Made: The Black Death and the Rise of Europe* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2022), pp. 41–2, 79, cited in P. Jackson, ‘The crisis of the Mongol world’, keynote lecture read at the conference ‘Great Chinggisid Crisis: History, Context, Aftermath’, Bonn, 11–13 May 2023, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Jackson, ‘Crisis of the Mongol world’, pp. 9–10. For impressive descriptions of the Mongol *ordos*, see e.g. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 342–344 (the *ordo* of Abū Sa‘īd), pp. 482ff. (the *ordo* of Özbeg).

<sup>56</sup> Zayn al-Dīn b. Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazvīnī, *Zayl-i Tārīkh-i guzīda* (Teheran, 1372/1993), p. 86; Ḥāfīz Abrū, *Zubdat al-tavārīkh*, (ed.) K. Ḥ. S. Javādī (Tehran, 2001), p. 197; A. Fazlinejad and F. Ahmadi, ‘The Black Death in Iran, according to Iranian historical accounts from the fourteenth through fifteenth centuries’, *Journal of Persianate Studies* XI (2018), p. 65 (translating *wabā’* as cholera, and providing a wrong page of Qazvīnī’s *Zayl*).

<sup>57</sup> Fazlinejad and Ahmadi, ‘Black Death in Iran’, pp. 65–66; Jackson, ‘Crisis of the Mongol world’.

<sup>58</sup> Qazvīnī, *Zayl-i Tārīkh-i guzīda*, p. 86; Ḥāfīz Abrū, *Zubdat al-tavārīkh*, vol. 1, p. 449; P. Wing, *The Jalayirids* (Edinburgh, 2016), p. 117; Fazlinejad and Ahmadi, ‘Black Death in Iran’, pp. 66–67.

of today's Kyrgyzstan in 1338–1339, which severely harmed the Christian community near the Issyk K l, Mamluk and Iranian sources report a plague in Transoxania, notably Samarqand.<sup>59</sup> Yet, here too, there is no evidence that the plague attacked the khanate's south-western parts, notably south Khurasan—today's Afghanistan—that had been the power base of the Qara'unas (military commanders who originated in a United Empire garrison) or that it inflicted the Tarim Basin and the eastern parts.<sup>60</sup> If not a result of the dearth of sources, this uneven distribution of the plague that inflicted the power base of the reigning khan Qazan (r. 1343–1346) might have facilitated Qazan's deposition by the Qara'unas in 1347 and the separation of the eastern khanate that, in the same year, enthroned another khan, Tughluq Tem r (r. 1347–1363), thereby cementing the khanate's division. Samarqand, however, remained an important city under the Qara'unas following the early 1350s, thereby attesting that the damage was reversible.<sup>61</sup>

The Golden Horde was the Mongol polity that was mostly affected by the plague, even though the exact scope is difficult to specify. Mamluk sources noted that the plague struck the 'land of  zbeq' (Golden Horde khan, r. 1313–1341), while Western writers believed that the mortality among the 'Tartars' was especially heavy: thus, for example, the Franciscan J nos (Ioannis) of Eger reported about 300,000 (*trecentena millia*) 'Tatars' who died of the plague.<sup>62</sup> It appears that the military capacity of the Jochid *ulus* was impaired, at least in the short term (1347–1349), as indicated by the declaration of the King of Hungary in 1347 that he could leave his country to attack Naples without fearing a Golden Horde reaction, or in the taking-over of Galicia-Volhynia, formerly a Jochid tributary, by Casimir III the Great (r. 1333–1370), the king of Poland, in 1349, again without any reaction.<sup>63</sup> However, in 1356, the Golden Horde khan Janibeg (r. 1342–1357) was able to take (formerly plague-inflicted) Tabriz—a coveted goal of the Golden Horde since the 1260s and a former Ilkhanid capital—thereby attesting to the recovery of the Jochid military. Janibeg, however, passed away on his way back from Tabriz, so this achievement remained ephemeral.<sup>64</sup> Subsequent plague waves that hit the Jochid western troops following the early 1360s might have also affected Jochid politics.<sup>65</sup> Notably, in 1374, the troops of the amir and kingmaker Mamai were badly inflicted, thereby impairing his capacity to withstand the invasion by khan Toqtamish a few years later.<sup>66</sup> Such plague visits might have also exerted a longer-term effect on Jochid strength in the face of Tem r's

<sup>59</sup> P. Slavin, 'A rise and fall of a Chaghadaid community: demographic growth and crisis in "late-medieval" Semirech'ye (Zhetysu), circa 1248–1345', *JRAS* XXX.2 (2022), pp. 514–544; Fazlinejad and Ahmadi, 'Black Death in Iran', pp. 66–67; Dols, *Black Death*, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> On the Qara'unas, see P. Jackson, 'The Mongols of Central Asia and the Qara'unas', *Iran* LVI.1 (2018), pp. 91–103.

<sup>61</sup> Biran, 'Mongol Central Asia', pp. 358–362.

<sup>62</sup> Dols, *Black Death*, p. 50; Favereau, *The Horde*, p. 256; Jackson, 'Crisis of the Mongol world', p. 5; 'Chronicon Dubnicense', in *Historiae Hungaricae fontes domestici*, III, (ed.) F. M ty s (Leipzig, 1884), p. 148, cited in Jackson, 'Crisis of the Mongol world', p. 5. Note that, due to  zbeq's adoption of Islam as a state religion, the Golden Horde realm was often termed 'the land of  zbeq' in Mamluk sources, even after  zbeq's death.

<sup>63</sup> P. W. Knoll, *The Rise of the Polish Monarchy: Piast Poland in East Central Europe, 1320–1370* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 138, 140, cited in Jackson, 'Crisis of the Mongol world', p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> M. Grinberg, 'The Foreign Policies of Janibeg, Khan of the Golden Horde (1342–1357)' (unpublished MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017), pp. 63ff.

<sup>65</sup> Also note Slavin's important remark on the possible connection between the raids of the Novgorodian *ushkujniks* in this period and the spread of the plague from the Volga areas into the Rus' principalities in 1365–1365 (P. Slavin, 'Reply: Out of the west – and neither east, nor north, nor south', *Past and Present* CCLVI (2022), p. 342). For more on the Novgorodian *ushkujniks*, the Rus' pirates, see Landa's article in this Special Issue.

<sup>66</sup> *Nikonovskaja letopis' (Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisej)* (Saint-Petersburg, 1897), vol. 11, p. 21; see also T. F. Khajdarov and D. A. Dolbin, 'Vtoraja pandemija chumy v Zolotoj Orde i e  posledstvija', *Zolotoordynskoe obozrenie* II.6 (2014), p. 106.

attacks, thereby contributing to the future dissolution of the *ulus*. Schamiloglu suggested that the interference of princes of the more sparsely populated eastern Jochid realm in the khanate's politics after 1360 was related to the fact that they were less severely inflicted by the plague.<sup>67</sup> In general, the main effect of the plague in the Jochid *ulus* and elsewhere in the Mongol realm was economic: in the case of the Golden Horde, the provincial suspension of the military campaigns, the deterioration of tribute from the plague-inflicted Rus' territories, as well as the decline of the Horde's cities such as Bulghar must have harmed the Jochid revenues that were also damaged by the effect of the plague on their main trading partners in Europe and Egypt.<sup>68</sup> This, in turn, encouraged internal rivalries that came to the fore in the times of troubles (1360s to 1380s).<sup>69</sup> The deterioration of the Eurasian trade routes that became plague routes, combined with the effects of the climate change on Eurasian agriculture, meant that Mongol khans had less to distribute among their supporters. This was certainly an accelerator of the political aspect of the Crisis, to which we now turn.

### The political crisis

The Chinggisid political crisis was multifaceted. It included a genealogical aspect that originated in the extinction of the ruling lineages in several khanates; and a complicated ideological facet that stemmed from the dilution of the Chinggisid charisma due to the halt of expansion and a certain accommodation, notably the adoption of competing ideological concepts, religious and/or local by the members of the Mongol Commonwealth. The main manifestation of the Crisis was the rise of the *amirs* (military commanders) on the expense of the Chinggisids, among whom a central role was reserved for the Chinggisids sons-in-laws (*güregens*), who could claim a certain amount of Chinggisid charisma. Another main outcome of the Crisis was the fragmentation of the various khanates.

The political crisis reflects the problems that were inherent in nomadic rule and originated in the principle of collective sovereignty and the lack of an orderly succession system. According to the political culture of the steppe, Tengri (Heaven), the sky god of the steppes, bestows the right to rule on Earth (i.e. the heavenly mandate) and the charisma or good fortune (*suu*) required for holding it successfully upon a single clan, each of whose members—but only they—could theoretically be elevated to the position of a khan (or Qa'an, Great Khan). This meant not only that succession struggles were endemic, but also that the empire was conceived as the joint property of the whole royal clan, so the ruler was therefore expected to share its wealth and territory with his kin. This redistribution in turn contributed both to the dissolution of the empire to various polities and to the ongoing connections among the members of the Mongol Commonwealth, as well as placed a heavy economic burden on Mongol rulers.<sup>70</sup> In an attempt to secure power and limit potential struggles, however, each khanate centred the succession upon a leading lineage: among the Ilkhanids, these were the descendants of Hülegü's son Abaqa (r. 1265–1282); at the Golden Horde, the offspring of Jochi's son Batu (r. 1227–1255) ruled following the 1260s; the ruling lineage of the Yuan was that of the descendants

<sup>67</sup> U. Schamiloglu, 'The impact of the Black Death on the Golden Horde: politics, economy, society, civilization', *Golden Horde Review* V.2 (2017), p. 329; Jackson, 'Crisis of the Mongol world'; cf. Favereau, *The Horde*, pp. 252, 256–257.

<sup>68</sup> Note, however, that the activity of the trade in Bulghar can be seen in the sources until the early 1380s (M. D. Polubojarinova, 'Torgovlja Bolgara', in *Gorod Bolgar: Kultura, iskusstvo, torgovlja*, (eds.) P. N. Starostin, M. D. Polubojarinova, and R. F. Sharifullin (Moscow, 2008), p. 36).

<sup>69</sup> Favereau, *The Horde*, pp. 256–257.

<sup>70</sup> E.g. M. Biran, 'Mongol imperial space: between universalism and glocalization', in *The Limits of Universal Rule: Eurasian Empires Compared*, (eds.) Y. Pines, M. Biran, and J. Rüpke (Cambridge, 2021), p. 223.

of Qubilai's son Chinggis (d. 1286); and, among the Chaghadaids, it was the princes who originated in Du'a khan (r. 1282–1307). The tension between the ruling lineages and their Chinggisid competitors, as well as inside these lineages, often resulted in purges of potential rivals. In the mid-fourteenth century, however, two such lineages died out, while the two others were on the verge of annihilation. In 1335, the last Ilkhan Abū Sa'īd (r. 1316–1335) died without an heir and this also happened to the Golden Horde khan Berdibeg (r. 1358–1360), who, upon his accession, killed 12 of his brothers and one son, thereby exterminating the Batuid line. When Toghon Temür (r. 1333–1370) rose to the Yuan throne, he was the only living male descendant of Chinggis. As for the Chaghadaid khanate, in 1334, after several decades during which Du'a's sons ruled one after another, tension between lateral and lineal successors led to depositions, purges, short reigns, and challenge of the Du'aids by other lineages. When the Eastern Chaghadaids split from the western khanate in 1347, they were having a hard time in finding a prestigious candidate but eventually enthroned an alleged grandson of Du'a with a highly questionable genealogy. The selected heir, Tughluq Temür khan, however, managed to take power into his hands and became the ancestor of all future Moghul khans.<sup>71</sup> This extinction of the ruling lineages was not only due to frequent purges, but also amid the premature death of many Mongol khans and their low rate of reproduction, both better attested in (albeit much better documented) Iran and China. Thus, as shown by Melville, the reproductive power of the Ilkhans' ruling family deteriorated as time went by, despite marriages to several wives and the enjoyment of many concubines,<sup>72</sup> while only one Yuan emperor between Qubilai (1215–1294) and Toghon Temur (1320–1370) lived to be over 35 years old, thereby limiting the emperors' ability to leave mature heirs.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, both Abū Sa'īd, the last Ilkhan, and Toghon Temür, the last Yuan emperor, rose to power as minors who were backed by powerful ministers and were often manipulated by competing court factions—a phenomenon that was typical of sedentary rather than nomadic rulership. Whether this short life expectancy and low fertility rate resulted from the acculturation to a different environment and diet, notably increased consumption of distilled alcohol,<sup>74</sup> or—in the Yuan and Ilkhanid cases—also from a high number of relative marriages, namely several generations of marriages among the Chinggisids and specific families (known as the sons-in-law, *güregens*, and see below), they certainly hindered Mongol effective rule.

The end of the leading lineages, however, did not mean that there were no available Chinggisids of other lineages or branches. Yet, towards the mid-fourteenth century, the pretenders to the throne were not mobilising their supporters to compete for the throne, but mostly plucked from obscurity and elevated military commanders as puppet khans. Those were usually completely meaningless in the Ilkhanid case, while some of their counterparts in the western Chaghadaid realm fared better and even excelled on the field.<sup>75</sup> This attested both to the continuing relevance of the Chinggisid principle,

<sup>71</sup> For the history of the various Mongol khanates, see e.g. Biran and Kim (eds.), *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 19–396.

<sup>72</sup> C. Melville, 'The end of the Ilkhanate and after: observations on the collapse of the Mongol world empire', in *The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran*, (eds.) B. de Nicola and C. Melville (Leiden and Boston, 2016), pp. 318–319. On the reasons for this deterioration, see below.

<sup>73</sup> Qubilai's successor, Temur Öljeitü (1265–1307; r. 1295–1307), lived to 42 years old.

<sup>74</sup> J. M. Smith, 'Dietary decadence and dynastic decline in the Mongol empire', *Journal of Asian History* XXXIV.1 (2000), pp. 35–52; T. T. Allsen, 'Ögedei and alcohol', *Mongolian Studies* XXIX (2007), pp. 3–12; Melville, 'End of the Ilkhanate', p. 318.

<sup>75</sup> M. Bernardini, 'The Mongol puppet lords and the Qarawnas', in *Ferdowsi, the Mongols and the History of Iran: Art, Literature and Culture from Early Islam to Qajar Persia. Studies in Honour of Charles Melville*, (eds.) R. Hillenbrand,

according to which the khan's position was limited only to offspring of the Golden lineage, but even more to the erosion of the Chinggisid charisma.

The dilution of the Chinggisid charisma was the ideological facet of the political crisis. This was more of a process and less an abrupt change, such as the extinction of the lineages. The root of this process was the halt of imperial expansion. Military expansion not only provided employment, booty, and new territories for the Mongol nomadic troops, but also served as the main demonstration of the rulers' charisma.<sup>76</sup> However, after the conquest of Song China in 1276–1279 (and, in the other khanates, following the late 1250s), there was no major military victory that expanded the Chinggisid realm. That, by then, the empire had already reached the ecological borders of the steppe belt in all its fronts meant that further military expansion was costly and not easily gained. The Golden Horde and the Chaghadaids reverted to raids—in eastern Europe and north India, respectively—while the Yuan and the Ilkhanate used 'soft power' means, describing the flocking of people of various origins (including those outside the Chinggisid space) to their courts or their taking part in the Chinggisid commercial networks, as proof of accepting Chinggisid superiority. The Ilkhanids, however, still occasionally fought—without much success—with the neighbouring Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517).<sup>77</sup> Moreover, inter-Mongol conflicts forced the Mongol polities to keep significant troops on the internal borders of the Chinggisid space, thereby reducing their ability to expand further. In 1304, an inter-Mongol peace was concluded, but it soon led to a long and bitter conflict in Central Asia that also impacted the other Mongol states. By 1323, the Central Asian Chaghadaids were the last Chinggisids to acknowledge the nominal superiority of the Yuan Qa'an, while the mostly cold war between the Jochids and the Ilkhanids still lingered.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, in the same year (1323), the Ilkhanids signed a peace treaty with their erstwhile rivals, the Mamluks. This peace agreement with a non-Chinggisid power represented an explicit renunciation on the ideal of world conquest that had been an integral part of Mongol ideology and legitimation since the time of Chinggis Khan.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the end of expansion also had economic repercussions, as it diminished the booty—one of the major sources of redistribution—and obliged the government to give priority to other channels (e.g. taxation) that were more complicated to handle. The lack of military activity also reduced the armies' readiness for battle and weakened the solidarity between the rank and file and their Chinggisid overlords. In many cases, the soldiers' loyalty shifted to their direct commanders, often non-Chinggisids, while less-well-rewarded soldiers, mainly in China, chose to defect from their units. The fast replacement of short-lived khans, especially among the Yuan in the 1310s to early 1330s and the Chaghadaids in the first half of the fourteenth century, also diminished the khans' authority and enabled the military commanders to challenge it.

Was part of the ideological crisis derived from accommodation to the local conditions in each khanate? David Morgan argued that Mongols fell faster in China and Iran due to

A. C. S. Peacock, and F. Abdullaeva (London, 2013), pp. 169–176; Jackson, 'Crisis of the Mongol world', pp. 14–16; Jackson, *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane*, pp. 129–138.

<sup>76</sup> For the various functions and manifestations of charisma, see T. T. Allsen, 'Imperial ideology', in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, (eds.) Biran and Kim, pp. 451–455.

<sup>77</sup> R. Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995); R. Amitai-Preiss, 'Mongol raids into Palestine (A.D. 1260 and 1300)', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* CXIX.2 (1987), pp. 236–255; R. Amitai-Preiss, 'Whither the Ilkhanid army? Ghazan's first campaign into Syria (1299–1300)', in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)*, (ed.) N. Di Cosmo (Leiden et al., 2000), pp. 221–264; Biran, 'Mongol imperial space', pp. 236–240.

<sup>78</sup> Biran, 'Mongol imperial space', p. 240.

<sup>79</sup> R. Amitai, 'The resolution of the Mongol-Mamluk war', in *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, (eds.) R. Amitai and M. Biran (Leiden, 2005), pp. 359–390.

accommodation to the sedentary environment that contributed to their military collapse.<sup>80</sup> While Mongol identity was certainly transformed by ruling sedentary realms, as noted above, we doubt whether the change to a sedentary lifestyle played a major part in the Chinggisid collapse and how widespread it was among the Mongols, both elites and rank and file. Both Reuven Amitai and Yiming Ha convincingly argued for the continuous nomadic character of Ilkhanid and Yuan armies, respectively, and both contended that, even when Mongols were assigned land grants, few actually toiled the field, but merely employed farmers to do it for them while retaining the nomadic way of life.<sup>81</sup> This does not mean that there was no tension between nomads and sedentary people, or even between nomads who lived closer to the sedentary populations and those residing in the more open steppe (note e.g. the Transoxanian Ulus Chaghatay under Temür who referred to the Eastern Chaghadaids as *jete*, i.e. bandits).<sup>82</sup> Yet, no less important than the nomad–sedentary divide was the challenge that originated in the growing importance of non-Chinggisid ideologies in the Chinggisid realms: after the dissolution of the United Empire in 1260 and as part of their accommodation to their new environments, the Chinggisids adopted religious and local legitimations either to co-opt their subjects or to manifest their ideological independence. Thus, the three western khanates embraced Islam, following their rank and file, mostly before the Crisis, but in the Chaghadaid case during it, while Yuan China adopted Tibetan Buddhism mainly as court religion long before the Crisis. In addition, Yuan emperors followed the local Confucian trapping of rulership (although one of the most important Confucian institutions, the examination system, was adapted only in 1313 and in a very partial mode), while the Ilkhans—or their Iranian elites—revived the idea of Iran as a political unit that was separated from the rest of the Muslim world, thereby resuscitating the pre-Islamic local tradition.<sup>83</sup> The Chinggisid tradition was therefore only one part of the rulers’ legitimation. Moreover, the new ideologies could distance the Mongol khanates from one another and, in some cases, also cement closer relations between Mongol khans and (at least some of) their subjects. Notably, in the case of Islam, the new ideology could serve as common ground among non-Chinggisid elites, the rank and file Mongols, and the non-Mongol subjects, and a tool that could challenge the Chinggisid principle.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, in the three Muslim khanates, one of the manifestations of the Crisis was the challenge of Chinggisid rulers by non-Chinggisid Mongols. Michael Hope, followed by Timothy May, called this group ‘*qarachu*’. *Qarachu* in Mongolian means ‘commoner’ (i.e. non-Chinggisid), yet Hope and May use it as a more specific denotation to non-Chinggisid members of the Mongol elite who rose to power due to their forefathers’ early joining to Chinggis Khan’s ranks or their excellence in battle during the early conquests, which conferred hereditary privileges upon them.<sup>85</sup> However, as Ishayahu Landa

<sup>80</sup> D. O. Morgan, ‘The decline and fall of the Mongol empire’, *JRAS* XIX.4 (2009), pp. 427–437.

<sup>81</sup> R. Amitai, ‘Continuity and change in the Mongol army of the Ilkhanate’, in *Mongols’ Middle East*, (eds.) de Nicola and Melville, pp. 38–52, esp. pp. 44–45; Y. Ha, ‘Was there a military collapse in the late Yuan? A reconsideration of the Yuan garrisons and military response to the Red Turban Rebellion in the 1350s’, *Journal of Chinese Military History* XII.2 (2023), pp. 107–141.

<sup>82</sup> E.g. Biran, ‘Mongol Central Asia’, p. 359.

<sup>83</sup> Biran, ‘Mongol imperial space’, pp. 240–248; M. Biran, ‘Religions in the Mongol empire revisited: exchanges, conversion, consequences’, in *Empires and Gods—the Role of Religions in Imperial History*, (eds.) J. Rupke, M. Biran, and Y. Pines (Berlin and Boston, 2024), pp. 231–262.

<sup>84</sup> I. Landa, ‘The Islamization of the Mongols’, in *The Mongol World*, (eds.) T. May and M. Hope (London and New York, 2022), pp. 644–646, 649–650.

<sup>85</sup> M. Hope, *Power, Politics, and Tradition in the Mongol Empire and the Ilkhānate of Iran* (Oxford, 2016), p. 118 and *passim*; T. May, *The Mongol Empire* (Edinburgh, 2018), esp. pp. 338–347; see also Jackson, *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane*, pp. 113–114.



convincingly argued, the challenge for the Chinggisids did not come from every *qarachu*, but from a specific segment of the Chinggisid elite—the *güregens*, the imperial sons-in-law. The Chinggisid *güregens* were of two main kinds. First, and most relevant here, were tribal leaders, who were allowed to retain some of their original troops (as opposed to the *nöker* army, led by *qarachus*, that was composed of sundry tribes). The other kind of Chinggisid sons-in-law were heads of specific vassal countries (e.g. Uyghuristan, Korea, the Rus' *knjazes*, and the Armenian kings), who also had their own armies, yet they never challenged the Chinggisid throne. In the Chinggisid hierarchy, the *güregens* were located just below the Chinggisid princes, namely above the non-Chinggisid commanders (*qarachu*).<sup>86</sup> In the Yuan and the Ilkhanate, marriage alliances with the same families (e.g. lineages of the Qonggirad, Oyirad, Jalayir; Korean kings) for several generations were quite common, although new families could enter the *güregens*' circles when the need arose. These multigenerational relations meant that many of the Crisis period's *güregens* in the Ilkhanate and the Yuan would have a certain amount of Chinggisid blood, albeit mostly originating from their maternal side, and hence could claim a part in the Chinggisid charisma.<sup>87</sup>

The best-attested and earliest case of the *güregens*' claim for leadership was during the Ilkhanid realm, in which, after Abū Sa'īd's demise, competing new dynasties were established by multigenerational in-laws—Oyirad, Chobanids, Jalayirids. Despite their connection to the Chinggisid 'Golden' family, each of them needed—at least in the beginning—a Chinggisid puppet khan to justify their rule.<sup>88</sup> The Ilkhanid case served as a precedent for the other western khanates who experienced the Crisis later on, although, in their case, the acquisition of a *güregen* position was part of their legitimation process, not a precondition of usurpation. Thus, in the Chaghadaid khanate, both amir Qazaqan and, famously, amir Temür married Chinggisid princesses after seizing the throne, thereby making themselves *güregens* (although this did not replace their need for a puppet khan). The Jochid main kingmakers Mamai and Edigü also allegedly married Chinggisid princesses.<sup>89</sup>

But what about the Yuan case? Despite the existence of *güregen* dynasties in China, the pattern of the Yuan fall seems completely different from that of the other khanates. At first glance, it looks, as Atwood argued, like a classic example of the emblematic collapse of a Chinese dynasty: in addition to ineffective emperor and court factionalism, it included 'increasing banditry, sectarian and millenarian rebellions, roving bands and massacred cities, famine, epidemics, the division of the country into warlord regimes, and finally the emergence of a victorious new emperor to give order to the depopulated country'.<sup>90</sup> The main difference from other Chinese cases was, however, that the Yuan did not actually fall, but escaped back to Mongolia, where it remained known as the Northern Yuan (1368–1636)—a dynasty that, however, soon lost any real authority in Mongolia or elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> Although the Crisis was expressed mainly in elite conflicts in the western

<sup>86</sup> This hierarchical order is obvious in Yuan sources; it is less explicit in Ilkhanid chronicles. For the sons-in-law, see I. Landa, *Marriage and Power in Mongol Eurasia: A History of the Chinggisid Sons-in-Law* (Wiesbaden, 2023), esp. pp. 64–66.

<sup>87</sup> For a detailed discussion on the Yuan *güregens*, see *ibid.*, pp. 67–129; for the Ilkhanid case study, see *ibid.*, pp. 130–199; for Landa's criticism of Hope's and May's approach, see *ibid.*, pp. 197–199.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254–261.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 279–281 for the Jochids; for the Chaghadaids, see Biran, 'Mongol Central Asia', pp. 359–360; see further Landa, *Marriage and Power*, pp. 262–273.

<sup>90</sup> Atwood, 'Empire of the Great Khan', p. 159.

<sup>91</sup> On the Northern Yuan, see C. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York, 2004), pp. 407–411; V. Veit, 'The Eastern Steppe: Mongol regimes after the Yuan (1368–1636)', in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, (eds.) N. Di Cosmo, A. J. Frank, and P. B. Golden (Cambridge 2009), pp. 157–181; Ch. Dalay, *Mongolija v XIII-XIV vv.* (Moscow, 1983), pp. 132–139.

khanates, in China, popular rebellions that were typical of the Chinese political culture played a decisive part in the Yuan collapse.<sup>92</sup> There are only a few sporadic references to popular uprisings in the other khanates, such as when the future Sarbadarids in Khurasan were recruiting escaping slaves from the Ilkhanate<sup>93</sup> or when the people of Samarqand closed the city gates before the invading Moghuls in 1365.<sup>94</sup> Yet, such incidents do not even begin to come close to the magnitude of the Yuan rebellions.<sup>95</sup>

Why were the *güregens*, the Chinggisid sons-in-law, not major players on the Yuan scene? While Chinese sources provide an extremely detailed (though clearly incomplete) picture of the dynasty's in-laws, including many multigenerational cases, these actors seem to have vanished from the political scene in the Yuan's latter decades. Almost all known in-law families either ceased to appear in the records towards the accession of Toghon Temür or lost their positions, no longer playing major roles in Yuan politics.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, Toghon Temür's rise to power occurred shortly after the bloody War of the Two Capitals (1328), during which, and even more in its aftermath, purges swept the high ranks of the Qubilaid military. Moreover, the *güregens* and *qarachus* were not part of the competition, mainly because they did not have an independent legitimation basis: according to the Chinese political theory, when a dynasty loses the Mandate of Heaven, someone else is receiving it; hence, relation to a former dynasty has no legitimating value. Moreover, the Mongol or Semuren (non-Mongols and non-Chinese) commanders did not have common ground with the Chinese population that could enable them to gain legitimation for themselves, like Islam did for the commanders of the western khanates. Thus, sons-in-law took part in the Yuan army, but they did not try to appoint themselves as competing rulers of China.<sup>97</sup>

Such differences notwithstanding, when we look at the Northern Yuan 20 years later, after it had suffered a humiliating defeat from the Ming army in 1388, we see a situation that is quite similar to that of the western khanates: namely, the dilution of the Chinggisid charisma due to military defeats (i.e. lack of expansion) and the central role of the Oyirad *güregens*, whose appanage had been in Mongolia, in deposing the khan.<sup>98</sup> Here, too, we find various lesser Chinggisids, not only Qubilaid, but also Arigh Boqaid and Ögödeids, who are acting as competing or puppet khans. Yet, the failed attempt of the Oyirad leader Esen (1407–1454) to enthrone himself as the Northern Yuan Qa'an in 1453 attested to the continuous importance of the Chinggisid principle.<sup>99</sup> The similarities between the Northern Yuan case and that of the western khanates strongly suggest that the political crisis of the fourteenth century was deeply embedded in steppe politics.

<sup>92</sup> E.g. F. Wakeman, 'Rebellion and revolution: the study of popular movements in Chinese history', *The Journal of Asian Studies* XXXVI.2 (1977), pp. 201–237.

<sup>93</sup> J. M. Smith, *The History of the Sarbadār Dynasty 1336–1381 A.D. and Its Sources* (The Hague and Paris, 1970), pp. 111–112.

<sup>94</sup> Manz, *Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, p. 51.

<sup>95</sup> On the late Yuan rebellions, see e.g. F. W. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800* (Cambridge MA and London, 1998), pp. 517–534; D. M. Robinson, *Empire's Twilight: Northeast Asia Under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2009), esp. pp. 130–159. Popular rebellions as a pattern of dynastic change were extremely rare in the premodern Muslim world, whereas military mutinies or external invasions were the norm.

<sup>96</sup> Note e.g. the powerful Qonggirad in-law family under the Yuan in I. Landa, "'Loyal and martial" until the end: the Qonggirad princes of Lu 魯 in Yuan political architecture', *Monumenta Serica* LXVIII.1 (2020), pp. 138–167, esp. pp. 147–150.

<sup>97</sup> Landa, *Marriage and Power*, pp. 282–287; for the Korean king and his role in the Yuan army during the Crisis, see e.g. Robinson, *Empire's Twilight*, pp. 57–58; D. M. Robinson, *Korea and the Fall of the Mongols* (Cambridge, 2023), pp. 111–175.

<sup>98</sup> Landa, *Marriage and Power*, pp. 294–295.

<sup>99</sup> On Esen, see e.g. Atwood, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 170–171.

In conclusion, the Chinggisid Crisis of the mid-fourteenth century was basically a political crisis that originated in the dilution of the Chinggisid charisma after 150–200 years of rule, mainly due to the halt of expansion and the practical abandonment of the world conquest ideal, accelerated by the extinction or waning of the leading Chinggisid lineages. This political crisis was escalated considerably by the environmental crisis and the plague. Obviously, the Chinggisid Crisis was part and parcel of a larger Eurasian or even global crisis that took place in the fourteenth century: neither did the plague end at the borders of the Chinggisid domains, nor were climate fluctuations peculiar to the Mongol realm. The current situation of our sources, however, precludes a minute analysis of the intricate interactions between political and social history, and climatic and epidemiological shocks in the various *uluses*, as Bruce Campbell did for Western Europe.<sup>100</sup> Evidently, however, the ecological hazards and natural disasters exerted enormous pressure on the Chinggisid resources, thereby deteriorating the khanates' economic situation that was already burdened by the need to supply redistribution, as well as harming the notion of the Chinggisids as enjoying Heaven's favour. Nevertheless, the Chinggisid principle, while certainly manipulated, retained its importance throughout the Crisis years, notably in the steppe.

Was the Crisis the end of the Mongol empire? The Crisis put an end to the Mongol Moment in world history, but it did not eradicate either Mongol rule or the legacy of the empire. The Golden Horde, the Chaghadaids, and the Yuan all survived the Crisis and they or their splinter groups held power for centuries after it. Yet, they were very different from the pre-Crisis states. The post-Crisis Chinggisid polities were less centralistic and more dependent on their military elite than in the imperial period. Moreover, the Crisis severely disrupted the proto-global economic and cultural exchange that was so typical of the 'Mongol Moment'. The Mongols lost the connection to the ocean that had been a major part of the Eurasian integration that they had created and, moreover, they lost their rule in the centres of the sedentary civilisations. The Crisis thus brought the Chinggisids back into the steppe. Furthermore, partly due to the different world religions that were adopted by the various Chinggisid branches, after the Crisis, no nomadic leader managed to unite the steppe nomads. The Chinggisid Crisis was therefore the first step in the breaking of nomadic political power by the post-Mongol sedentary (or post-nomadic) empires—a process that culminated in the division of the steppe between Qing China and Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century.

Was the Crisis also an opportunity? It was, mostly for the non-Chinggisid members of the military elite who could use the decline of the khans to assert their rule. The most successful example is that of Temür, who combined Islamic legitimation with Chinggisid concepts (*güregen*, the use of puppet khans, imitating Chinggis Khan's behaviour), as well as stressing his own personal charisma. By conquering Iran, Iraq, and Transoxania and raiding Muscovy, Damascus, Ankara, Moghulistan, and Delhi, Temür established a dynasty that was famed for its cultural brilliance and eventually became a real competitor to Chinggis Khan as a source of legitimation in Eurasia.<sup>101</sup> And yet, the regional empires that rose from the debris of the Mongol Crisis—not only the Timurids (1370–1506), but also Ming China (1368–1644), Muscovy (1547–1721), and even the Ottomans (1299–1923)—all acted 'in the shadow of the Mongol Empire',<sup>102</sup> adapting

<sup>100</sup> Campbell, *Great Transition*, esp. pp. 395–401.

<sup>101</sup> For Temür and his debt to the Chinggisids, see e.g. Manz, *Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*; B. F. Manz, 'The empire of Tamerlane as an adaptation of the Mongol empire: an answer to David Morgan, "The empire of Tamerlane: an unsuccessful re-run of the Mongol state?"', *JRAS* XXVI.1–2 (2016), pp. 281–291; Jackson, *From Genghis Khan to Tamerlane*, esp. pp. 388–414.

<sup>102</sup> This is the title of Robinson's book dedicated to Ming's rise (D. M. Robinson, *In the Shadow of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, 2019)).

institutions and elements of the Mongols' imperial culture, with or without acknowledgement. Yet, these polities were free of, or at least found a better way to handle, collective sovereignty that had been a burden on Chinggisid rule. Nonetheless, the legacy of the Mongol empire, its memory, and institutions continued to affect Eurasia well into the (early) modern period.<sup>103</sup> The post-Crisis Chinggisids themselves, however, never managed to reassert the splendour, magnitude, or kingly authority of the Mongol empire.

### The articles in this Special Issue

While our discussion has focused on the general contours of the Crisis, the four successive papers touch upon specific facets of the Crisis in each of the four Mongol khanates. By dealing with both elites (Landa, Hope) and commoners or lesser elites (Vér, Yang), they offer a glimpse into the complexity, variability, and richness that a full discussion of this period requires. Based on a variety of sources—literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological—in multiple languages, they refer to political, military, and institutional developments; physical and social mobility; as well as social, ideological, and cultural changes. Importantly, these articles not only discuss the 'decline' or 'collapse' elements of the decades of the Crisis, but also highlight both continuities and innovative elements across Eurasia during the last part of the Mongol Moment.

Ishayahu Landa's study highlights the political and military challenges that occurred during the 'Turmoil' decades (1360s to 1380s) of the Jochid *ulus*, analysing the contest for power amid the perishing of the Batuid male lineages in 1359. By combining textual sources with numismatic ones, it maps the multiplicity of political reactions to the post-Batuid challenge, both in the political centre on the Lower Volga and in the various regions across the khanate. It illustrates the ideological and political variables that shaped the actions of the new power actors. The Chinggisid principle is one of these challenges. The other is the tensions between regional policymaking and the broader ambitions of those involved in the power struggles in and around Sarai, the Jochid capital. By deliberately bringing in a large number of case studies, regions, and reaction patterns, the author stresses the durability of the Chinggisid political vision that kept the Jochid *ulus* as a symbolic whole, long after the breakup of the Batuid power.

Marton Vér's study analyses the interregional overland mobility along the postal and pilgrim routes that connected northern China and eastern Central Asia in a broader time frame, beginning with the pre-Mongol West Uyghur state and continuing deep into the fourteenth century. Based on Uyghur and Middle Mongolian administrative texts and pilgrim inscriptions, it allows the reader to zoom in on the social reality of the trade, postal, and religious networks between the eastern Chaghadaid realm (today's eastern Xinjiang) and the Yuan north-western periphery (today's Gansu province). Vér persuasively not only shows the changes in the overland mobility in the period of the Yuan–Ming transition and the rise of the Moghuls in Eastern Turkestan, but also stresses the durability and the continuation of the postal and the pilgrim networks throughout the fourteenth century, albeit with a (plague-induced?) break in the 1340s. In this regard, Vér's article argues for a relativisation of the 'collapse' dimensions of the decades of the Crisis, calling for a more nuanced and regional analysis of the developments on the ground.

Qiao Yang's article also tackles the Yuan–Ming transition, but from a completely different angle. She focuses on the Zhu family—a local divination of school instructors from the city of Suzhou in south-east China—highlighting the strategies that these lesser elite members of the local society adopted for survival during the turbulent decades of

<sup>103</sup> For the Chinggisid legacy, see e.g. M. Biran and H. Kim, 'Epilogue', in *Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire*, (eds.) Biran and Kim, pp. 866–873.

dynastic transition. By working mainly with inscriptions on tombstones that were excavated in Suzhou in 2010, Yang's prosopographical study also contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the decades of the Crisis as well as the 'resilience' of social groups during the political disruption and their quick recovery under the new regime. This bottom-up perspective highlights the differences between the Yuan and the Ming in terms of human mobility, creative local adaptation to political upheavals, and the limits of state intervention in the periods of transition.

Finally, Michael Hope's study discusses the intellectual and cultural dimensions of the Chinggisid Crisis in western Asia, analysing the transition of the Iranian intellectual elites from Ilkhanid to post-Ilkhanid rule. Hope examines the ways in which four Persian verse histories that were based upon Rashīd al-Dīn's *Ta'rikh-i Mubārak-i Ghāzānī* and compiled throughout the fourteenth century reacted to the crises and decline of the Hülegüid house. Specifically, he focuses on the ways in which the biography of the famous Oyirad Amir Nawrūz (d. 1297), who was one of the most influential commanders of Ilkhan Ghāzān (r. 1295–1304), has been retold and reproduced by the later authors. For Hope, the retelling of the biography of the famous commander allowed the Crisis-period authors to recreate Nawrūz as an exemplary figure, to be emulated by the heroic personalities of their own time. Hope stresses that Ghāzān's time and his idealised past, incorporated in Nawrūz's biography, continued to be revived by the intellectual elites in Iran and Azerbaijan long after Ghāzān's death and the elimination of the Hülegüids, both as an element of cultural identity, but also as an answer to the challenges of the Crisis period.

Together, these articles highlight the complex nature of the Chinggisid Crisis of the mid-fourteenth century, during which both radical changes and clear continuities were intertwined. While the legacy of the Mongol empire continued to impact Eurasia for centuries after the breakup of the Chinggisid world order in the mid-fourteenth century, the exact process of the Chinggisid collapse and its impact and manifestations in the various realms and across centres and peripheries still deserve careful study. We hope that this Special Issue will be one step in this direction.

**Conflicts of interest.** None.