

THE NOMAD AS EMPIRE BUILDER:
A COMPARISON OF THE ARAB AND
MONGOL CONQUESTS

History records innumerable assaults by the barbarian nomads of the steppes and deserts on the realms of civilization. In some cases, the invaders overturned an organized state, as the Hyksos did Egypt, the Ephthalites northern India, and the Kin northern China. In others, they were thrown back, as the Huns were from the Roman Empire and the Avars from Byzantium and Frankland. Some shed their barbarism and acquired the arts of civilization, like the Magyars and the Ottoman Turks, others remained illiterate pastoralists to the end, like the Scythians and the Cumans. Two created world empires as a result of conquests the scope and magnitude of which still grip the imagination. These were the Arabs of the seventh century and the Mongols of the thirteenth, whose spectacular achievements pose problems concerning the interrelationship of nomadic and sedentary societies and of the nature of the "drives" which impel pastoral peoples to burst out of their homelands not simply to raid and plunder but to establish political domination over their civilized neighbors. The Arab and Mongol conquests also raise the question why the

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former cleared the ground for the erection of a distinctive new world culture and the latter did not.

The historian who seeks to answer the manifold queries which a study of these nomadic imperialisms poses is faced at the outset by a startling contrast in documentation. Virtually no contemporary accounts of the Arab conquests have come down to us: the Byzantine and Arabic chroniclers of the late *eighth* century are our first witnesses for the conquests of the *seventh*,¹ and we can therefore never recapture the "feel" of this outpouring from the Arabian deserts or understand how the men of that age reacted to it in the way in which, for example, the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris enable us to discern dimly how the life of a cultivated Gallo-Roman provincial was affected by the Gothic invasion of Gaul. The Mongol onslaught on civilization took place, by contrast, in the full light of history. Chinese and Persians, Franks and Armenians, tell us what happened and write of what they saw and heard at the time. Merchants and missionaries travelled the length and breadth of Asia, interviewed the Mongol leaders, and watched the working of the mighty military machine created by the genius of Chingis Khan. Our information in this case is impressively copious and based on the observations of intelligent and educated men of many different races, from the Persian bureaucrat Juwaini to the Flemish Franciscan William of Rubruck.

With this caution in mind, we may approach our first problem: what triggered off these explosions?

We may remind ourselves that in ancient and medieval times the majority of the human race did not belong to settled societies, but were in Greco-Roman parlance "barbarians," hunters, fishers or shepherds dwelling in tents or forests, governed by tribal custom, knowing nothing of a territorial state, incapable of building cities and destitute of a written literature. Civilizations (Chinese, Hindu, Persian, Greco-Roman) were mere cases in deserts of barbarism and were under constant threat of attack from nomadic tribes. Although these primitive peoples were found

¹ The earliest surviving Arabic account of the conquest is the *Futub al-Buldan* of al-Baladhuri, who died in 892: Eng. tr. Hitti & Murgotten, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, 2 vols., New York, 1916-24.

all along the broad "steppe belt" stretching from the Sudan to Mongolia, the real nursery of nomadism was always Central Asia, from the days of the Hiung-nu and Yue-chi before the Christian era to those of the Uzbeks and Kalmuks of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Negro peoples of the Sudan were shut off from the civilized fringe of North Africa by the dreary wastes of the Sahara, and the untamed Berbers, who lived north of that desert, though they might on occasion break through to the coast, never crossed the sea to threaten Europe till the Arabs enlisted their support at the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries and led them to the conquest of Spain and the invasion of France.

Once, and once only, did the tide of nomadism flow vigorously out of Arabia. Bedouin *raids* on the towns and villages of Syria and Iraq had been going on since the dawn of history, and occasionally an Arab tribe would set up a semi-civilized kingdom on the edge of the desert, as the Nabataeans did at Petra or the Palmyrenes at Tadmur, but *conquests* only occurred at the rise of Islam. It was the fashion a generation ago to subscribe to the Becker-Caetani thesis that these conquests were explicable almost wholly in economic terms, and that the preaching of Muhammad was a mere occasion, not a cause.² It was argued that the population of Arabia was rising, that climatic change had enlarged the desert at the expense of the town, thereby precipitating the decline of the old agricultural society of the Yemen (a decline symbolized by the famous "bursting of the dam" of Ma'rib in the sixth century), that nomadism was on the increase, and that shortage of food and grazing-land forced the Bedouins into a policy of military expansion northwards. Even if Islam had never been, the defenders of this theory seem to say, the Arab conquests would have taken place all the same. In further support of their contention that the new religion had little or nothing to do with it, they pointed out that the average Bedouin tribesman was notoriously secular-minded and had no firm religious belief, and that the invaders made no attempt to force their newly-acquired

² L. Caetani, *Studi di storia orientale*, Milan, 1, 1911, "L'Arabia preistorica e il progressivo essiccamento della terra." C. H. Becker, *Islamstudien*, Leipzig, 1, 1924, "Der Islam als Problem" (Reprint of an article published in 1910).

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faith on the conquered. These considerations no longer carry the conviction they did fifty years ago. Islam provided an incentive, a rallying-cry, a unity which had never before existed among the Arabs, and though economic motives are not to be denied, it is improbable that a long, vigorous effort could have been so sustained without the impetus of religious zeal.³ Islam was admittedly an *urban* faith, to which the Bedouins adhered more out of self-interest than genuine conviction, but the conquests were led and organized by townsmen like Abu Bakr and Omar, who were sincere believers and honestly thought that God had given their people the dominion of the world.

Even if we accept the theory that the resolve to attack the Byzantine and Persian territories was a direct consequence of the *Ridda*, the existence of Islam is necessary to explain what happened. Many tribes which had acknowledged Muhammad in his lifetime, renounced allegiance to his party at his death, on the ground that their compact with him was a purely personal one and did not bind them to loyalty to his successors. This falling away from Islam, known as the *Ridda* or apostasy, was resisted by the Medinan chiefs, and with some difficulty the revolt was suppressed. Abu Bakr and Omar realized, however, that the best way to keep the Bedouins within the fold was to appeal to their instinct for war and plunder and to mobilize them in a common profitable enterprise, namely, foreign conquest. Hence the momentous decision was taken to launch military expeditions against Iraq and Syria, a decision which meant that Islam would not stay contained within the Arabian peninsula. Whether this is the whole truth is doubtful, but in any case religion cannot be excluded from the argument. "Heaven is before you, the devil and hellfire are behind you!" is a cry which must have had *some* moral or propagandistic value: no Arab armies had been urged forward in this manner before. When Othman became Caliph in 644, he set to work to prepare a canonical version of

³ "Islamic ideology alone gave the Arabs that outward-looking attitude which enabled them to become sufficiently united to defeat the Byzantine and Persian empires. Many of them may have been concerned chiefly with booty for themselves. But men who were *merely* raiders out for booty could not have held together as the Arabs did." W. Montgomery Watt, "Economic and Social Aspects of the Origin of Islam," *Islamic Quarterly*, 1, 1954.

the Koran, because so many "reciters" of the holy book had been killed in action and there was a danger that the full text would be lost. Was this not surely an indication of the strength of religious motives?

It is doubtless true that the astonishing success of the Arab invaders was due partly to the weakness and disunity of the civilized states which were their chief targets of attack. Byzantium and Persia had fought one another to a standstill in a war that had dragged on for twenty-five years. The Sassanid kingdom was prostrated by war-weariness, and collapsed like Russia in 1917. The Christian Empire rested on a stronger basis, and had been pulled together by Heraclius, but it was racked by religious quarrels, and the Copts and Syrians, Monophysites almost to a man, had no stomach for fighting for their Greek Orthodox masters who had persecuted their church. But against this must be set the fact that the Arabs had no superior military techniques and no tradition of military discipline. Their camels indeed gave them a great mobility, but they brought no "secret weapons" against their foes. Indeed they were woefully deficient in everything but small arms, and had at first no siege-engines with which to batter down fortified strongholds. We have no precise information of the size of their armies, but it is unlikely that they outnumbered the forces which the Byzantine Emperor and the Sassanid Shah could put into the field. Moreover, what is most surprising is not the *initial* success of the Arabs, but the continued victorious advance which carried them eastwards across the Tigris, the Oxus and the Indus and westwards all round the southern shores of the Mediterranean. They encountered the most tenacious resistance, not from the troops of civilized nations, but from nomads like themselves, such as the Berbers and the Turks. Even when internal feuds and civil wars were raging at home, the drive on the frontiers went on. Surely some tremendous inner compulsion was pushing them forward, and this can only have been supplied by Islam itself.⁴

⁴ The most remarkable of recent investigations into the origins of Islam have been carried out by Dr. W. M. Watt in his two studies, *Muhammad in Mecca* (Oxford, 1953) and *Muhammad in Medina* (Oxford, 1956), wherein he strives to explain the Prophet's success as a response to a total social situation,

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We may therefore venture to formulate as a principle that nomad aggression is at its maximum when set in motion partly by a powerful religious impulse.

How, then, does this apply to the Mongols?

At first sight the stimulus of a religious faith, which in the case of the Arabs animated the leaders if not the rank and file, would seem to have been lacking in the Mongols. Muhammad was a prophet, Chingis only a warrior. Yet on closer inspection we find clear evidence of a very strong religious "drive" behind the Mongol conquests. The ancient religion of the Asian steppes differed in one important particular from that of the Arabian deserts. While sharing a common nature-worship with the Bedouins, the Turco-Mongolian peoples, ranging over the limitless spaces of the heartlands of Asia, developed the belief that they were destined, under *Tengri* (heaven, the sky-god), to rule the world.⁵ As early as 584, a Turkish khagan, writing to the emperor of China, styles himself "born of the Sky, the Son of Heaven of the empire of the great Turks."⁶ And a successor

the new religion being specially adapted to a society changing from a nomadic to a mercantile economy. Against the charge of neo-Marxism brought against him by G.-H. Bousquet he has defended himself in the article cited above. Bousquet himself seems to play down unduly the non-religious elements, in his "Observations sur la nature et les causes de la conquête arabe," *Studia Islamica*, 6, 1956, for which he has been criticized by M. Rodinson, "The Life of Muhammad and the Sociological Problem of the Beginnings of Islam," *Diogenes*, No. 20, 1957. See Rodinson's summary of the controversy in his "Bilan des études mohammadiennes," *Revue historique*, 229, 1963.

The conquests themselves have not yet been adequately studied from the socio-religious standpoint. If and when this work is undertaken, the comparison made by Eduard Meyer in 1912 between Islam and Mormonism could perhaps be pursued further. The historical circumstances of mid-nineteenth century America prevented a great upsurge of conquest on the part of the Mormons, who could only ride forth (a new Hijra!) and colonize Utah. But the Mormon trek to the West is unthinkable without Muhammad and the Koran.

⁵ On the ancient religion of the Asian steppes, see J.-P. Roux, "Tängri. Essai sur le ciel-dieu des peuples altaïques," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 149-150, 1956.

⁶ P. Pelliot, "Neuf notes sur des questions d'Asie Centrale," *T'oung Pao*, 26, 1929. Cf. J.-P. Roux, "La religion des Turcs de l'Orkhon des VII^e et VIII^e siècles," *Rev. de l'Hist. des Relig.*, 161, 1962.

a generation later proclaims on the famous Orkhon inscriptions: "When the blue Sky was created above and the black Earth below, in between man was brought into being, and my ancestors rule over the sons of men."⁷ No doubt this politico-religious universalism owed something to the influence of China, whose emperor was also the Son of Heaven ruling by its mandate. The khagan is the divinized representative of Tengri, and military success over neighboring tribes or over the Chinese easily generated the hope and expectation that world dominion, their manifest destiny, was speedily to be accomplished by the victorious tribe or confederation.⁸ These beliefs and concepts survived even the conversion of certain Turco-Mongolian peoples to Islam or Nestorian Christianity or Buddhism: they remained in their purest and strongest form among the Mongols proper, who in Chingis Khan's day still clung to their ancestral shamanism unaffected by contact with the higher religions.⁹ The brilliant victories of Chingis convinced him and his people that global mastery was theirs, for so Heaven must have decreed. Their task was clearly to establish the reign of peace and justice throughout the world: resistance to them was resistance to Heaven itself and must be punished accordingly. It is impossible to doubt that this unshakable faith was a source of enormous moral strength to the Mongols. Once Chingis had shown that he could conquer, they took for granted that their day had come and that nothing could withstand them.

Chingis wrote no Koran, but he did formulate the *Yasa*, or code of law, which was first promulgated on his assumption of supreme power at the *kuriltai* of 1206 and was ever afterwards treated by his people with the veneration due a divine ordinance.¹⁰ It is difficult to form a just estimate of the *Yasa*,

⁷ V. Thomsen, *Inscriptions de l'Orkhon*, Helsingfors, 1896, p. 97.

⁸ See O. Turan, "The Ideal of World Domination among the Medieval Turks," *Studia Islamica*, 4, 1955. The *khagan* told the Byzantine envoys in 568 that the spirits of his ancestors had revealed to him that it was time for his people "to invade the whole world." *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, tr. Chabot, Paris, 1905, 3, 150.

⁹ N. Pallisen, "Die alte Religion der Mongolen," *Numen*, 3, 1956. See also the supplementary volume (London, 1927) of Howorth's *History of the Mongols*.

¹⁰ On the *Yasa*, see V. A. Riasanovsky, *Fundamental Principles of Mongol*

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for no complete copy is known to exist, and only fragments have come down to us. Its provisions range from the lofty enjoinder of toleration for all creeds to details of army organization and the prescription of the death penalty for theft, adultery and in the case of a merchant, a third bankruptcy. Curious primitive superstitions about the sacred elements are reflected in severe prohibitions against urinating in water or on ashes and washing clothes in running streams. The Yasa was presumably designed to meet the needs of an expanding empire, to be superimposed on rather than to supplant customary tribal law, to help bind together the many nations now under Mongol sway. Chingis's son Jagatai was appointed the special guardian of the Yasa; copies were kept in the treasury of the Mongol princes and consulted on occasion as an oracle, and each Khan began his reign by solemnly confirming its validity. Legends gathered round it: the Armenian historian Gregory of Akner tells us that an angel appeared to Chingis in the guise of an eagle with golden feathers and recited the Yasa to him, while bidding him "rule over many countries."¹¹ One is inevitably reminded of the recitation of the Koran by Gabriel to Muhammad, and just as the Koran was supplemented by the *Hadith* or traditions of the Prophet so was the Yasa supplemented by the *bilik*, sayings or maxims of Chingis, in which the great conqueror expresses opinion, gives advice or tells stories of his life.¹² Clearly Chingis was something more than a brilliant soldier and outstanding chieftain to his people: he was the spokesman of Heaven, the executor of the Divine Will, perhaps even a mortal god, for his cult flourished in Mongolia down to our own day. Even the Communists have felt obliged to build a special shrine to house his supposed relics.¹³ His Yasa achieved

Law, Tientsin, 1937, where all the relevant texts are translated and commented on, and G. Vernadsky, "The Scope and Content of Chingis Khan's Yasa," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 3, 1938.

¹¹ Gregory of Akner, *A History of the Nation of the Archers*, tr. Blake & Frye, Harvard, 1954, c. 2.

¹² The surviving fragments of the *bilik* are collected in Riasanovsky, cited above.

¹³ On the cult of Chingis, see the article by Pallisen, cited above, R. A.

widespread fame. Even the Mamluks of Egypt, the bitterest enemies of the Mongols, adopted it as the basis of their public law.¹⁴

Nowhere is this religious imperialism more strikingly displayed than in the orders of submission dispatched by the Great Khans to the sovereigns of Europe.¹⁵ These astonishing documents usually began with: "We by the power of the Eternal Heaven (*Mongke tengri*), Supreme Khan of the great Mongol nation, our order..." Guyuk, in his letter of 1246 answering Innocent IV's complaint that the Mongol had wantonly attacked Christian nations and committed dreadful atrocities, told the pope: "I do not understand these words of yours. The Eternal Heaven has slain and annihilated these lands and peoples, because they have neither adhered to Chingis Khan nor to the Khagan, both of whom have been sent to make known Heaven's command." Mongke haughtily warned Louis IX in 1254: "In Heaven there is only one Eternal Sky, on Earth there is only one Lord, Chingis Khan, the Son of Heaven," and he went on: "When by the power of the Eternal Heaven the whole world from the rising of the sun to the setting shall be at one in joy and peace, then it will be made clear what we are going to do: if when you have

Rupen, "Mongolian Nationalism," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 45, 1958; C. R. Bawden, "Some Recent Work in Mongolian Studies," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental & African Studies*, 1960, and the reports of modern travelers in Mongolia, e.g. Henning Haslund, *Mongolian Journey*, Eng. tr. 1949, p. 119.

¹⁴ A. N. Poliak, "The Influence of Chingis Khan's *Yasa* upon the General Organization of the Mamluk State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental & African Studies*, 1941.

¹⁵ The imperial edicts and letters of the Mongol Khans have been closely scrutinized since Abel-Rémusat published his great pioneer study, "Les relations politiques des princes chrétiens avec les empereurs mongols," in the *Mémoires* of the French Academy of Inscriptions, tom. 6 & 7, 1822-24. See P. Pelliot, "Les Mongols et la Papauté," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, 23, 24, 1922-24; W. Kotwicz, "Formules initiales des documents mongols aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*, 10, 1934; and E. Voegelin, "The Mongol Orders of Submission to the European Powers," *Byzantion*, 15, 1941. The most accessible and accurate translations are in C. Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission*, London, 1955. The text of the Mongol demand for surrender addressed to the Mamluks of Egypt by Hulegu in 1260 is given in Maqrizi, tr. Quatremère, *Histoire des sultans Mamelouks*, Paris, 1837, 1, 101.

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understood the decree of the Eternal Heaven, you are unwilling to pay attention and believe it, saying, 'Our country is far away, our mountains are mighty, our sea is vast,' and in this confidence you bring an army against us, we know what we can do. He who made easy what was difficult and near what was far off, the Eternal Heaven, knows." The conviction that the Divine Sky was fighting for them and that they had a mission to unify mankind and bring peace and order to the world was one of the strongest forces urging the Mongols on to global conquest.¹⁶

We may now turn to a second point: nomad conquerors never establish a durable political order unless they have previously been in touch with civilized societies and are intelligent enough to keep the traditional machinery of administration running in the lands which they occupy.

Neither the Arabs nor the Mongols were savages living in remote isolation. Arabia had been subjected to external influences since the days of the Assyrians: in the Yemen the kingdoms of Saba (Sheba, later Himyar) Ma'in, Qataban, etc. enjoyed a high degree of prosperity because of the region's natural fertility and its position athwart what was then one of the main highways of international trade, and on the northern border kingdoms like those of Ghassan and Hira arose under the protection respectively of the Romans and Persians, and through them some knowledge of Greek and Iranian culture filtered through to the oases of the interior. Jewish and Christian communities were established in most of the main centers of Arab life. Islam grew up not in the deserts but in the towns, and the men of Mecca and Medina were traders and businessmen who knew the value of records and good administration. Omar, the second Caliph, was mainly responsible during his ten years' rule (634-644) for laying down the principles on which Syria, Iraq and Egypt were to be governed: the officials of the old regime were encouraged to stay at their posts, the natives were guaranteed continued possession of their lands, houses, shops and businesses and allowed to follow their ancient laws and customs, and Arab

¹⁶ W. Korwicz, "Les Mongols, promoteurs de l'idée de paix universelle," *Rocznik Orient*, 16, 1950. For Tengri as a war god, see the article by Roux cited in note 5.

tribesmen were forbidden to acquire property outside Arabia.¹⁷ Full toleration was extended to Jews and all sects of Christians. Governmental ordinances were published in the local tongues: not till fifty years later, in the reign of Abd al-Malik (685-705), did Arabic become the official language of the Caliphate. Thus once the initial fighting was over, the Arab Empire came into being with the minimum of disturbance, and the conquerors, whose leaders were far from unlettered, learnt from their subjects the arts of civilized administration.

The Mongols were, it is true, farther removed than the Arabs from the centers of civilization. Their home lay in the relatively remote upper Onon Basin; they had no towns, nothing comparable to Mecca or Medina or Ma'rib, and no written literature or even oral poetry as rich as that produced in sixth-century Arabia. It is a mark of the genius of Chingis that he realized the intellectual poverty of his nation and the necessity of borrowing heavily from his more advanced neighbors. For steppe society was not all of a piece: some tribes were primitive hunters, some pastoral nomads, some combined livestock breeding with non-irrigated agriculture, and a few led a semi-commercial life in small towns enclosed by mud walls.¹⁸ The most advanced were the Uighurs,¹⁹ a Turkish-speaking people who had once inhabited Kara-korum in Mongolia and had later been forced to migrate to the Altai country, where a place named Bish-balik ("Five Towns"), probably in the Chu Valley, became the center of their power. Here, near the famous Silk Road, they were exposed to the many influences emanating from Persia, India and China, and to the preaching of Manichaen, Buddhist and Nestorian missionaries, all of whom made converts among them. Caught up in the trading activities of the region, they were obliged to learn writing, and they provided themselves with an alphabet derived apparently from Soghdian. The Uighur script

¹⁷ See the article "Omar b. al-Khattāb" in the *Enc. of Islam*, and the references cited therein.

¹⁸ For the different "layers" of steppe society, see Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, 2nd ed., Boston, 1951, part 1.

¹⁹ See G. Vernadsky, "Notes on the History of the Uighurs," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 56, 1936.

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became widely diffused over the steppe, and Chingis, acquainting himself with it, resolved to employ it for his own language.²⁰ An Uighur official, T'a-t'a-tung'a, was charged with the task of creating an imperial chancery, instructing young Mongol princes in the use of the script, and publishing the Khan's decrees in the new written Mongolian. Chingis sought talent wherever he could find it; he was wholly destitute of race-prejudice, and his successors followed his example of employing generals, administrators, officials and advisers from men of all countries which the Mongol arms subdued. One of the luckiest of his "finds" was Ch'u ts'ai, a member of the Khitan dynasty of North China which the Mongols overthrew. Chingis took him into his service, and allowed the shrewd and brilliant civil servant to persuade him not to massacre the urban population of China and turn the country into pasture. This tamer of Mongol ferocity showed his master that war and conquest would be of no avail if the subjugated lands were not properly and efficiently administered and that regular taxation was better than indiscriminate plunder. He repeated this lesson to Chingis's successor Ogedei, telling him: "The Empire was created on horseback, but it won't be governed on horseback."²¹

None the less, the Khans were perhaps less successful than the Caliphs in building up an efficient civil service to run the Empire, precisely because they were products of a more barbarous and backward society.²² The Caliphs were not Bedouin shaikhs,

²⁰ P. Pelliot, "Les systèmes d'écriture en usage chez les anciens Mongols," *Asia Major*, 2, 1925.

²¹ See the biographies of these persons collected from the Chinese sources in Abel-Rémusat, *Nouveaux Mélanges Asiatiques*, Paris, 2, 1829.

²² It may be noted here that the social and economic background of the Mongol conquests still awaits detailed investigation. The first serious studies were made by the great Russian orientalists of the last generation, V. V. Barthold and B. J. Vladimirtsov. As early as 1896 Barthold detected a class conflict in late twelfth century Mongolia between the nomad aristocracy (to which Chingis belonged) and the ordinary tribesmen, and saw in Jamuka, the chief of the Borjigin clan, the friend and later the rival and victim of Chingis, a champion of democracy against the nobles. See his *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*, Leiden, 1, 1956, Eng. tr. p. 32. Vladimirtsov, while not accepting this, argued in his life of Chingis (Eng. tr. 1930) and his study of Mongol society (Fr. tr. *Le régime social des Mongols*, 1948) that the old clan community was

but townsmen from the commercial aristocracy of Mecca: the Khans were nomad tribal chiefs writ large, who revelled in the freedom of the boundless steppes and thought of towns as prisons. Indeed, the massacre and destruction the Mongols perpetrated in city after city (in Nishapur in 1221, we are told, not only men, women and children but the very cats and dogs in the streets were slaughtered),²³ exercises in genocide to which no parallel is to be found in the Arab conquests, may possibly be ascribed, not so much to a cold and callous military design to terrorize their foes into submission, as to a blind unreasoning fear and hatred of urban civilization. Only reluctantly did they come to realize the necessity of a fixed capital, a centralized administration for their rapidly expanding imperial domain, and chose for that purpose the old settlement of Kara-korum, a "city" by courtesy, whose crude building of mud and plaster excited the surprise and contempt of envoys and visitors from civilized states; the Flemish Franciscan, William of Rubruck; scornfully pronouncing it inferior to the Paris suburb of St. Denis! The Mongol conquests proceeded by two stages, the first resulting in the unification of the Eurasian steppe from Manchuria to Hungary (this was relatively easy, and had been largely achieved once before, by the Turks in the sixth century), the second in the more difficult and protracted subjugation of old, settled territorial states like China and Persia. The former could be run by a primitive civil service staffed by clerks and secretaries from the Uighurs and other Turco-Mongolian peoples who were not

being broken up and replaced by what he called "feudal nomadism." This interpretation was for a time generally accepted by Soviet historians, e.g. Grekof and Yakubovsky in their study of the Golden Horde (Fr. tr. *La Horde d'Or*, 1939), but has been sharply attacked by L. Krader, "Feudalism and the Tartar Policy of the Middle Ages," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1, 1958, who points out the total absence of a lord-serf relationship among the Mongols, and according to A. M. Belenitsky, "Les Mongols et l'Asie Centrale," *Journal of World History*, 5, 1960, has now been abandoned by Soviet scholars themselves, who have decided that a nomad economy cannot be purely feudal and define the social relations of thirteenth century Mongolia as "semi-feudal, semi-patriarchal." Cf. Owen Lattimore, "The Social History of Mongol Nomadism," in *Historians of China and Japan* (ed. Beasley & Pulleyblank), London, 1961.

²³ D'Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols*, The Hague, 1834, 1, 290.

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wholly unlettered: the government and exploitation of the latter demanded a highly trained and educated bureaucracy with an expertise the Mongol did not possess or understand. The Khans came to feel themselves in a painful dilemma. They despised city-dwellers and held aloof from them, fearing that the virile and martial qualities of their people would be lost in the enervating luxury of wealthy towns.²⁴ But how could these lands be properly governed and taxed without putting power back into the hands of the old ruling class? A partial solution was found in the lavish employment of foreigners. Even Kubilai, who was credited with a deep admiration for Chinese culture, was careful to exclude the old mandarin class from all but subordinate office,²⁵ and China during his reign was run by Muslims from the Arab and Persian lands, Nestorian Christians from Turkish-speaking races, and Europeans like the Polos.²⁶ In Persia the native officials could not be so easily dispensed with, and members of old bureaucratic families like Juwaini and Rashid al-Din Fadl-allah served the Il-khans, but even here non-Persian Christians, Jews and Buddhists were given high ministerial rank wherever possible.²⁷

²⁴ Chingis was alleged to have warned his people against this. "After us the descendants of our clan will wear gold-embroidered garments, eat rich and sweet food, ride fine horses, and embrace beautiful women, but they will not say they owe all this to their fathers and they will forget us and those great times." Quoted from the *bilik* in Riasanovsky, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²⁵ "Il ne plaça jamais aucun Chinois dans le ministère, et il n'eut pas pour ministres d'état que des étrangers qu'il sçut choisir avec discernement... Plusieurs Chinois, gens de lettres et tres-habiles qui vivoient à la cour de Houpilaihan (*sic*), pouvoient rendre à ce prince les plus grands services dans le gouvernement de ses états s'ils en eussent été chargés, mais on ne leur confia que des emplois subalternes." De Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine*, tom. 9, Paris, 1779, p. 460, translating the annals of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty. A good critical study of the life and reign of Kubilai is much to be desired. Odd that, despite Marco Polo (and Coleridge!), no biography of this great ruler appears to exist in any European language.

²⁶ Though Marco Polo governed a Chinese city for three years, he seems to have been ignorant of the Chinese language. Yule-Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, London, 1903, 1, 29, note.

²⁷ For Mongol rule in Persia, see B. Spuler, *Die Mongolen in Iran*, 2nd ed. Berlin, 1955, and Ann S. K. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, London, 1953, c. 4. The most valuable contemporary sources are Juwaini, *tr.*

In consequence the Mongols remained strangers in these lands, hated alien conquerors, an army of occupation, putting down no roots, and winning no loyalty. It is significant that their rule was much more short-lived in civilized countries than in the steppe lands. The Khanate of Persia disappeared in 1335, only eighty years after Hulagu's invasion of 1255, and the Mongols were driven from China by the nationalist Ming uprising in 1368, only ninety years after Kubilai had destroyed the Sung dynasty in 1279. But the Golden Horde, which ruled the steppes of south Russia from its headquarters on the lower Volga, survived until 1480, and the descendants of Chingis's son Jagatai continued to reign over what is now Turkestan till the second half of the seventeenth century.

The questions arise here: why was the collapse of the huge Mongol Empire much more rapid than that of the Caliphate, and why did the conquests of Chingis and his successors not call into existence a great Mongolic civilization comparable to the brilliant Arabic civilization which arose a century or so after the expansion of Islam?

The rise of the Mongol power had in many respects paralleled that of the Arab: in each case, the aggressor was helped by the weakness and disunity of his foes. The rottenness of the Sassanid Empire had its counterpart in the rottenness of the Khwarazmian Empire. The bitter strife between Orthodox and Monophysite in the Byzantine world was matched by the Sunni-Shi'ite feud in Islam and the violent contest between the Sultan Muhammad and the Caliph Nasir on the eve of the Mongol invasion. The political anarchy which delivered Russia into Mongol hands resembles the confusion and fecklessness which allowed the Arabs to overturn the Visigothic kingdom in Spain in a single battle. With the long exhausting war between Byzantium and Persia may be compared the internal dissensions of China, divided between the Kin and the Sung, which enabled the Mongols to play off one against the other and in the end to destroy both. But here the parallel ends. The Arab Empire remained a going

Boyle, *The History of the World Conqueror*, 2 vols. Manchester, 1958, and Rashid al-Din, tr. Quatremère, *Histoire des Mongols de la Perse*, Paris, 1836.

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concern for two hundred years, at least until the death of Harun al-Rashid in 809: the Mongol broke up in less than a century, and Kubilai, the last of the Great Khans, was only the fifth to hold that rank. It is, of course, easy to point in explanation to the sheer size and unwieldiness of the Mongol realm, and to the split in the ruling family on the occasion of the election of Mongke or Mangu as Great Khan in 1251, when the house of Tuli supplanted that of Ogedei, a change comparable in some ways to the overthrow of the Omayyads by the Abbasids in the revolution of 750. But clearly the matter goes deeper. It was more even than the trouble already alluded to, the difficulty a ruling class of inexperienced and untutored nomads must find in maintaining political control over sophisticated sedentary societies. The root of the matter was the irresistible attraction which civilizations exert on nomads when the latter are encamped among them, combined with the fact that the Mongols did not possess a "higher" religion of universal appeal and their subjects did.

The great civilizations which developed in the valleys of the Hwangho and Yang-tse and in the Iranian plateau radiated, so to speak, waves of influence which spread into the steppelands of Central Asia along the commercial routes running north and south of the Tarim Basin. Chinese culture in a diluted form, and occasionally Chinese political control, penetrated as far west as Kashgar and Yarkand: Persian influences spread beyond the Oxus and Jaxartes, and the regions now known as Turkestan were occupied for centuries by peoples of Iranian speech. When the Turks entered history in the sixth century and moved rapidly westwards as far as the Crimea, they soon experienced the rival "pulls" of China and Iran, and the division between "Eastern Turks" and "Western Turks," which wrecked the strength and unity of their empire, reflects this cultural cleavage and foreshadows the similar cleavage among the Mongols. Unlike the early Turks, whose rule was confined to the steppes, the Mongols completely subjugated China and Persia, and were in consequence much more exposed to the subtle spell of these distinctive civilizations. Kubilai, the last of the Great Khans, was also the first Mongol Emperor of China, who took the

decisive step of abandoning Kara-korum in Mongolia and transferring the center of empire to Khan-balik (Cambaluc, modern Peking). His brother and rival, Arik-boga, acting whether he consciously wished to or not as the representative of the old conservative Mongol traditionalism, set himself up as Great Khan at Kara-korum: his defeat by Kubilai in 1264 marked the victory of the "civilizers" over the "barbarians." Kubilai and his party however much they might distrust the Chinese scholar-gentry and hold them at arm's length, grew more and more receptive to Chinese manners, customs, ideas, art and ideology and posed as patrons of Chinese culture.²⁸ In the West, Persia took captive her Mongol conquerors, as she had done the Arabs: the Il-khans finished up, like the Arab Caliphs, as passable imitations of the Sassanid Shahs. But the Sinised Mongol and the Iranized Mongols entered into two totally different cultural traditions and spiritually drifted further and further apart. Moreover, the Mongol leadership itself was divided over this aping of foreign manners: the old-fashioned repudiated it as a betrayal of the national past.

Yet something like this had happened to the Arabs, who had entered into the heritage of Greek and Persian culture and whose "conversion" to civilization had been followed by a great florescence of intellectual and artistic life, expressed through the medium of the Arabic language. Nothing of the kind took place in the case of the Mongols, who found themselves involved in a fateful struggle for the soul of Asia on the part of the three

²⁸ The literature on Mongol China in European languages is depressingly meagre. The only important monograph in English is H. F. Schurmann, *Economic Structure of the Yüan Dynasty*, Camb., Mass. 1956, a translation of and commentary on two chapters on economic and financial matters in the *Yüan shih*, the official history of the dynasty. Some idea of social conditions in China under Mongol rule may be gathered from the notebooks and jottings of one Yang yü, a scholar official who died in 1361, translated by H. Franke as *Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte Chinas unter der Mongolenherrschaft*, Wiesbaden, 1956. The civil service examinations in the Confucian classics were revived in 1313; see H. Franke, "Could the Mongol Emperors read and write Chinese?" *Asia Major*, new series, 1953. Some useful indications of the way Mongol policies and practices in China had been anticipated by earlier nomad invaders, notably the Ch'i-tan (Liao), are given in K. A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, "History of Chinese Society, Liao 907-1125," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 36, Philadelphia, 1949, especially the "general introduction," pp. 1-35.

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great world religions—Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.²⁹ The Mongol leadership was at the outset committed to none of them, and unlike the Arabs, it had not recently acquired a prophet, a sacred book and a firm conviction of the possession of all truth. It was pulled this way and that, and had to grapple with issues the Arabs never had to face.

Notwithstanding the powerful religious drive behind the Mongols, their primitive paganism was bound to be eroded by contact with the higher faiths, of which before the conquests of Chingis they had known little or nothing. Buddhism was the most widespread religion of China and Eastern Asia generally; it had converted a large number of the Uighur Turks, and was not unknown in Transoxiana and Eastern Persia. Islam had won over most of the West Turkish peoples as far east as Kashgar and as far north as the Bulgars of the middle Volga, but had never penetrated into Mongolia. Christianity in its Nestorian form had been carried into the heart of Asia, as far east as Manchuria, and though expelled from China in 845, had converted the Keraites,³⁰ Naimans and Onguts, tribes living to the south-west of the Mongols, had captured a portion of the Uighurs, and was well organized from its bases in Persia and Iraq.³¹ From the 1240s onwards the Nestorians were joined by intrepid missionaries from Latin Christendom, some of whom, like John of Plan Carpini, William of Rubruck and Friar Odoric, have left invaluable descriptions of their travels and of conditions at the Mongol court.³² The curiosity of the Mongols was aroused as they learnt

²⁹ Much material relating to the religious situation in Central Asia in the Mongol age is contained in E. Bretschneider, *Medieval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources*, 2 vols., London, 1888, and Yule-Cordier, *Cathay & the Way Thither*, Hakluyt Society, 4 vols., London, 1913-16.

³⁰ On this important Christian people, whose chief was almost certainly the original "Prester John," see D. M. Dunlop, "The Keraites," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 11, 1943-46.

³¹ For the Nestorian Church in Asia, see P. Pelliot, "Chrétiens d'Asie Centrale et d'Extrême-Orient," *T'oung Pao*, 15, 1914; Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan*, London, 1928; A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before 1550*, London, 1930 (a most valuable collection of source-material); and L. E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*, Cambridge, 1933.

³² The narratives of John of Plan Carpini and William of Rubruck are

more of these competing faiths. Chingis himself sought wisdom from a holy Taoist monk of high repute, Ch'ang Ch'un, who was summoned to attend him on his great Western campaign in 1219-24, and was greeted with the words: "Sainted man, you have come from a great distance. Have you a medicine of immortality?"³³ Chinkai, a Nestorian Kerait, was confidential adviser to Chingis and his successors Ogedei and Guyuk. Mongke, who received William of Rubruck and other Western envoys, was fond of listening to religious debates, and once remarked that these different creeds were like the fingers of the hand, in that they were essentially sprung from the same base.³⁴ Kara-korum in those days was filled with monks and priests, lamas and bonzes, all cherishing the hope that this huge uncommitted Empire would be won to their particular faith. For a time Christian expectations ran high. The Mongol ruling family married into Turkish Christian clans: Tuli had a Nestorian Kerait wife, Hulegu's mother and wife were both Christians, and Mongke and Kubilai had Christian mothers. Guyuk was reported to have been baptized, and Sartak, the son of Batu, the conqueror of Russia, was pretty certainly a Christian. Hulegu was strongly anti-Muslim; he horrified Islam by sacking Baghdad in 1258 and killing the last Caliph, and when his attempt to conquer Mamluk Egypt came to grief at Ain Jalut in 1260, he and his successors, the Il-khans of Persia, sought an alliance with the Crusaders and the Western powers against the Muslims, promising to help the West recover Jerusalem and hinting that they might turn Christian. Had they done so, the history of the world would indeed have been changed. But in the end the Mongols in the east turned Buddhist and those in the West Muslim. Christianity suffered a crushing defeat, and faded out of Asia.

The reasons for these momentous decisions are not far to seek. When the conquests were over, the Khans had to keep

available in the Hakluyt series, tr. W. W. Rockhill, London, 1900, that of Friar Odoric in *Cathay & the Way Thither*, vol. 2, 1913.

³³ See the account of this interview in A. Waley, *Ch'ang Ch'un, Travels of an Alchemist*, London, 1931.

³⁴ William of Rubruck, tr. Rockhill, p. 235.

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them, and this could best be done by identifying themselves as far as possible with their subjects' beliefs and customs. They were far from popular as it was, and it would be folly to be anti-Muslim in Persia or anti-Buddhist in China.³⁵ Kubilai, while maintaining the old Mongol policy of tolerating all cults, showed more and more favor to the Buddhists. Marco Polo (or rather Ramusio) tells us that when his father and uncle urged him to adopt Christianity, he replied in effect that he could not risk the opposition of his nobles and "other people who are not attached to the faith of Christ."³⁶ Hulegu's great-grandson Ghazan accepted Islam in 1295, and followed up his conversion by sharp measures against Christians, Jews and Buddhists.³⁷ There was no great civilized Christian state in Asia, so the Mongols doubtless felt they had no choice save between Buddhism and Islam. But by so choosing, the one in China, the other in Persia, they hastened the disruption of their vast realm.³⁸

³⁵ The unpopularity of Mongol rule in China and Persia was accentuated by the extortion and corruption of their fiscal agents. The claim of Soviet historians that the peasant masses were reduced to serfdom under the Khan would seem to be substantiated at least as far as Persia is concerned. See the evidence collected by Lambton, *op. cit.*, who notes that owing to the Mongol policy of exempting clergy and religious officials of every creed from taxation, the *qadis* prospered, merged with the landlord class, and ceased to fill their former role as mediators between the people and the government. For fiscal maladministration in Mongol China, see de Mailla, *op. cit.*, pp. 401-461 (reign of Kubilai). For peasant revolts in the ex-Sung provinces, see Schurmann, *Economic Structure*, and his article, "Mongol Tributary Practices," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 19, 1956.

³⁶ Yule-Cordier, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, 1, pp. 348-349, note.

³⁷ The conversion of the Mongol leadership in Persia to Islam was clearly prompted by the desire to win popular support against the Mamluks of Egypt (who since Ain Jalut had posed as champions of Islam against the wicked "pagans" who had destroyed the Caliphate) and the Golden Horde, the Il-Khans' rivals for the domination of the western half of the Mongol Empire.

³⁸ It may be asked why the Golden Horde did not turn Christian and adopt Byzantine-Slav culture, holding sway as it did over Orthodox Russia? To this it may be replied that Russia was a marginal land so far as the Horde was concerned, and the heart of the khanate (the lower Volga) was in a Turkish-speaking region, already partly Islamized before the Mongol invasion. Even so, permanent conversion to Islam was delayed here longer than elsewhere in the Mongol West. Batu's son Sartak is said to have been baptized, and though his uncle Berke, who succeeded him in 1257, was strongly pro-Muslim, the ruling house was not finally converted to Islam till the reign of Ozbeq (1312-1340). The close relationship

The Mongols in East and West thus adopted a ready-made culture, and created nothing for themselves. As Pushkin remarked: "The Tatars had nothing in common with the Moors. If they conquered Russia, they gave us neither algebra nor Aristotle!" At first there were signs that a respectable native Mongol literature might develop: the famous *Secret History*, the epic of the Mongol nation, compiled about 1250 or later, is a vigorous and spirited blend of fact and legend not unlike the best of the Icelandic sagas.³⁹ But this remained an isolated phenomenon, and whereas Arabic grew into a noble international language of science and philosophy as well as of pure literature, Mongolic never really emerged from the shadows to become anything more than the vehicle for the propagation of folktales.⁴⁰ One obvious reason for the contrast was the fact that Arabic, since the publication of the Koran, was for millions of men a sacred tongue, the one chosen by God for his final revelation to humankind, and was read and recited in the original wherever Islam spread. Under the Caliphs, Greek and Syriac, Pahlawi and Coptic, dwindled to be the speech of small minorities, and Arabic rose to a position of unchallenged supremacy, never to be replaced, so long as Islam might last, as the *lingua prima* of Muslims. But there was no Mongolic Koran or Bible or Gita or Avesta, and even the *Yasa* had to be translated into the languages of the Great Khan's subjects.

Not only did Mongolic possess no religious aura, it was the speech of a far from numerous people. It has been calculated (on not very precise data, admittedly) that the population of Mongolia in Chingis's day was no more than a million or so,

between the Horde and Mamluk Egypt, based on common hostility to the Il-Khans of Persia, almost certainly tipped the balance against Christianity. See R. Grousset, *L'Empire des Steppes*, 4th. ed., Paris, 1952, pp. 470-483.

³⁹ See Arthur Waley's translation, *The Secret History of the Mongols and Other Pieces*, London, 1963. Professor Cleaves of Harvard is preparing a new critical edition and translation.

⁴⁰ The conversion of the Mongols to Lamaist Buddhism in the late sixteenth century produced a faint literary renaissance, and a few mediocre chronicles were composed in the next age. See C. Ž. Žamcarano, "The Mongol Chronicles of the Seventeenth Century," *Göttinger Asiatische Forschungen*, Wiesbaden, 3, 1955.

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and Rashid al-Din tells us that at the time of the conqueror's death in 1227 the Mongol Army numbered 129,000 men. These are not high figures, and they indicate, not only what a heavy drain of Mongol manpower the conquests imposed, but also how the Mongols were, so to speak, swallowed up in their own creation. The Mongol imperial expansion was not a migration of people seeking fresh territories to settle, but a resolute bid by Chingis to seize the empire of the steppes at a time most favorable to the execution of such a design, the military machine he built being of such excellent construction that it went on operating almost automatically after his death. Whereas it was decades before the Caliphs drafted Berbers, Khurasanians and Turks into the Arab armies, Chingis was prepared at an early stage to recruit Keraites, Naimans, Uighurs, Alans, Tanguts and other non-Mongol tribes into his forces, nor did a man need to be of Mongol birth to reach the highest command.⁴¹ In the end the army of the Khans was more Turkish than Mongol in composition, and the vast conquests were not accompanied by large-scale Mongol settlement. The Mongols were too few in number to impose their language on their Empire, and it is no more widely diffused today than it was before the time of Chingis. Little trace of Mongol appears to survive in Persia or Russia or any other land which once owed allegiance to the Great Khans.⁴² Even at the height of their imperial greatness, the language most commonly employed in their chancery was not Mongol but Persian, which for a time was a kind of *lingua franca* throughout Asia and even acted as link between China and the West.⁴³

Barthold remarked that "the policy of reconciling two incompatible things—nomadic life and intellectual culture—was

⁴¹ See H. Desmond Martin, "The Mongol Army," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1943.

⁴² See, however the remarks on Mongol and Turkish loan-words in Persian in G. Doerfer, "Prolegomena zu einer Untersuchung der altaischen Lehnwörter im Neupersischen," *Central Asiatic Journal*, 5, 1959-60.

⁴³ P. Pelliot, "Notes sur l'histoire de la Horde d'Or," *Œuvres posthumes*, 1, Paris, 1949, pp. 164-165. Guyuk's letter to Innocent IV in 1246 was written in Persian, the original being found in the Vatican archives in 1920. Marco Polo used Persian in China, but not Chinese! Persian continued to be studied in China even under the Ming dynasty.

the weakest spot in Chingis Khan's system, and the principal cause of its fall."⁴⁴ In the case of the Arabs, the nomadic element was kept under fair control by the urbanized leaders (after the conquests the turbulent Bedouin soldiery were corralled in camp-cities like Basra, Kufa, Fustat and Kairawan), the new religion of Islam supplied not only a driving force but a language already divinized in the eyes of the faithful, the Arab race and speech was spread over a wide area from Khurasan to Spain,⁴⁵ and the ancient civilizations of Persia and the Greco-Roman world began to exert their influence on Muslim society largely through the medium of the Nestorians and other Syriac-speaking Christians. The possession of Islam, a thing purely Arab in origin, immunized the Arab invaders against the creeds of their more civilized subjects.

The Mongols were in a different position. Their leader, a genius of war, built a gigantic empire, but was after all the nomad chief of nomads. The religion of the steppes, the cult of the sky-god, was a powerful stimulus to conquest, but the Mongols nonetheless had no prophet and no Koran, and were thus in a sense at the mercy of the "higher religions." A small nation, they were soon hopelessly outnumbered in their own empire, made no permanent settlements outside their original homelands, and within a century or so retreated back to their native pastures. Nothing that they possessed could serve as an effective nucleus for the building of a new civilization, nothing like Islam was there to provide the peculiar flavor or distinctive language of a higher culture. The Nestorians, who had helped to educate the Arabs, were but poorly equipped to educate the Mongols, for they themselves had suffered a cultural decline in the intervening centuries, were more scattered and isolated and removed from the original sources of their intellectual life.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ W. Barthold, *Turkestan down to the Mongol Invasion*, Eng. tr. 1958, p. 461.

⁴⁵ On the spread of the Arabic language, see A. N. Poliak, "L'Arabisation de l'Orient sémitique," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 12, 1938.

⁴⁶ William of Rubruck, who strikes one as an intelligent and relatively unprejudiced observer, gives a highly unfavorable account of the Nestorian clergy he met at Kara-korum whom he portrays as ignorant and immoral. On the other

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The contrast cannot be more strongly pointed than by considering the case of Persia, which was conquered both by the Arabs and the Mongols. The Arab conquest transformed the whole life and ethos of Iran, a clean break was made with the Sassanid and Zoroastrian past, the nation began its history afresh, its ancient language was submerged and when it later revived was choked with Arabic words which modern patriotism has scarcely managed wholly to expel. The Mongol conquest roared over Persia like a hurricane, yet when it had passed, the character of the nation had undergone little change. The Persians had accepted the Arab religion, but the Mongols accepted the Persian religion. Cultural continuity was maintained, despite enormous physical damage, and the Persian language was not only almost unaffected by Mongol but actually rose to be virtually the official language of the Mongol Empire.

In the light of these considerations, it is perhaps permissible to draw these conclusions:

1. Pure nomadism could never hold an empire.
2. Successful nomad imperialism required an ideology, i.e. the leadership had to be impelled by something more than a tribal chief's desire for plunder and booty, had to possess some non-material aim or goal. The early Turks and the Mongols both had the *idea* of world dominion and the *ideal* of universal peace and justice under their rule.
3. To become empire builders, as distinct from mere raiders, the nomad leadership had to be previously in contact with peoples of a higher culture, to be aware, however vaguely, of the problems of civil administration as well as of military conquest, and be able to draw on educated personnel outside its own ranks to run the occupied territories.
4. Conquest of a sedentary society by nomads most often resulted in the latter being ultimately absorbed in that society and losing their language and national identity. This was due to the fewness of the invaders and the strong "pull" a sophisticated

hand, the life of the Nestorian missionary Rabban Sauma (Eng. tr. Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan*), who visited Europe at the close of the thirteenth century, affords a brighter picture of his community. A good critical study of Nestorianism in medieval Asia is urgently needed.

society commonly exerts on an unlettered one. The Hun language vanished completely. The Bulgarians were speaking Slavonic a few generations after crossing the Danube in 679. The Mongols of the Golden Horde, a small ruling class dominating Turkish peoples, became rapidly Turkicized. If the leaders tried to prevent absorption by a policy of segregation, including a ban on marriage between the invaders and the natives, the conquerors remained a mere army of occupation and were finally thrown out leaving scarcely a trace of their presence behind them. The Mongols in the end "evacuated" China as the Goths did Italy.

5. Nomad religion was usually of a primitive type, with a rudimentary organization and no written sacred literature. Hence it had no appeal to more advanced peoples. Nomads were by contrast often impressed by the appurtenances of the higher religions (temples, priesthoods, sacred books), and barbarian conquerors commonly embraced the faith of their subjects. Thus in Europe the Germans, Vikings and Magyars turned Christian, the Mongols in the East adopted Buddhism, and those in the West, Islam.

6. The strongest basis for nomad imperial power was, as Ibn Khaldun noted,⁴⁷ a "higher" religion which taught them unity and restraint. Of all the nomad conquerors, only the Arabs possessed such a thing. They received a prophet and a holy book *before* they set out on their conquests; they entered the lands of their civilized neighbors with a full conviction of spiritual superiority, and they never forgot that Arabic, being the language in which God had revealed himself to man, was immeasurably above the speech of Greeks and Persians and Hindus. Mongol had no such advantage. The Arabs were under no temptation to embrace religious faiths which they knew were but caricatures of their own, and wherever they went, the holy language of the Koran went with them. Hence it became possible to build an Arabic civilization, but not a Mongol one.

⁴⁷ See the section in Ibn Khaldun's *Muquaddimah* (Eng. tr. London, 1958, vol. 1, pp. 305-306) entitled: "Arabs can obtain royal authority only by making use of some religious colouring, such as prophecy or sainthood, or some great religious event in general."