

EAST BAY HISTORIA



Vol. 7, 2023

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VOLUME 7, 2023

The annual publication of the Alpha Rho Theta chapter of Phi Alpha Theta
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East Bay Historia is an annual publication of the Department of History at California State University, East Bay and the Alpha Rho Theta chapter of Phi Alpha Theta. It aims to provide Cal State East Bay students with an opportunity to publish historical works and to give students the experience of being on an editorial board and creating and designing an academic journal. Issues are published at the end of each academic year. All opinions or statements of fact are the sole responsibility of their authors and may not reflect the views of the editorial staff, the Department of History, or California State University, East Bay.

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East Bay Historia's mission is to promote the study of history at Cal State East Bay, give history majors and non-history majors alike opportunities to express their passion for the subject, and to empower students, faculty, and staff who are studying or are interested in history.

Cover image by Natalie Gallegos

This publication uses sans serif fonts and increased line spacing in order to increase accessibility for dyslexic readers.

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First Edition: May 2023
Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to those who have struggled in the fight for equality and the preservation of human rights. All systems of oppression are interconnected, as humans are to the environment, as environmental justice is to both social and racial justice.

“Peace cannot exist without justice, justice cannot exist without fairness, fairness cannot exist without development, development cannot exist without democracy, democracy cannot exist without respect for the identity and worth of cultures and peoples.”

-Rigoberta Menchu



Illustration by **Koda Dowdle**, Chico State

Where Did the Mongols Go?: How Chinggis Khan's Legacy Was Erased Via a Racialized and Colonizing Discourse

By Maria Kaj

Abstract: This article explores why historians have repeatedly characterized the thirteenth-century Mongols as savage barbarians, despite their legacy as a world power that promoted cultural exchange and advanced law, art, and science along the Silk Road. It analyzes the contrasts between what Chinggis Khan and his descendants did versus how popular narratives described them. Contemporary ideas developed by scholars of Ethnic Studies and American history demonstrate the racialized and colonizing discourse at work. Ultimately, the essay shows a historical discourse portrays the Mongols as uncivilized, defines them by their atrocities, criticizes their nomadic lifestyle, and minimizes them on historical maps.

How can these two differing and contradictory images of the Mongols be reconciled? Were they bloodthirsty murderers, rapists, and destroyers who simply sought booty from civilizations they conquered? ...Or, after the initial invasions, did they seek to stabilize the areas they ruled? Did they contribute to peace by unifying such countries as China...Did the unity the Mongols imposed on much of Asia have salutary effects on culture?

— Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction*¹

1 Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

The Mongol Empire was the largest empire in human history, an empire which facilitated the exchange of trade, artworks, and innovation to cultures across the Asian steppes. Despite this, many historical portrayals describe Chinggis Khan (Westernized as “Genghis Khan”) and his descendants as bloodthirsty savages, warriors from the womb who left only destruction in their wake.² While Julius Caesar is often lauded for his bold leadership, and even the Ottoman leader Suleiman is graced by Western historians with the honorific “Magnificent,” Chinggis is described as illiterate and cruel. Chinggis established a writing script and new legal code, but historians emphasize that he ravaged cities and worshiped horses and water. His grandson Khubilai (Westernized “Kubilai”) built palaces, revised the tax system, and patronized artisans, but he is often dismissed as a corpulent hedonist, and his palace, Xanadu, treated as a mythical place. The *Pax Mongolica* brought porcelain to Iran, and gunpowder, printing, and paper across Asia to Europe, but—the historians frown—what about those 30,000 deaths at Bukhara or the destruction of the library in Baghdad?

These contrasts may seem confusing. Yet scholars of Ethnic Studies or American history are likely to see parallels between depictions of this centuries-old culture and narratives of the United States. The white supremacist lens through which the history of the Mongols has been filtered is easier to understand to those familiar with settler colonialism and inter-ethnic dynamics.³ This essay will address how race theory can shed light on the colonizing discourse, which helps explain these two versions of the Mongols and will show how a society that promoted commerce, law, religious tolerance, and artistic patronage has been routinely distorted in four ways: 1) characterized as primitive; 2) defined chiefly by its atrocities; 3) criticized for being nomadic; and 4) ultimately minimized on the historical map.

Plunder Wealth and Embrace Beauties

Reducing the impact of the Khan conquests is no small feat since the Mongols were no small blip of an empire. At their largest (Figure 1), they stretched from the Pacific to Austria, from Siberia to the Indian Ocean. In 1206, when forty-three-year-old Temujin was

2 Variations in spelling of Mongol names occur (Chinggis, Cingis, Jinghiz, Genghis). My translation source is Rossabi because his choices balance words that convey the flavor of the classical Mongolian script while using Romanized letter combinations digestible for those familiar with English.

3 Works on race theory in this essay include: Dean Saranillo, *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) and Candace Fujikane, “Mapping Wonder in the Māui Mo'olelo on the Mo'o'aina: Growing Aloha'aina Through Indigenous and Settler Affinity Activism,” *Marvels & Tales* 30, no. 1 (2016), 45-69. I am also indebted to Dr. Michael Schulze-Oechtering Castañeda's History 600 class at Cal State East Bay for exposing me to these ideas.

Where Did the Mongols Go?

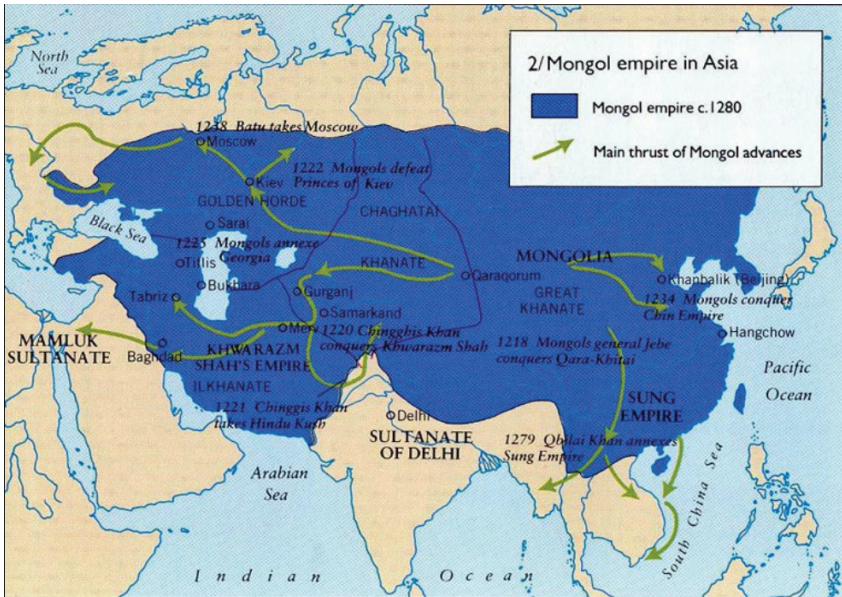


Figure 1: Extent of the Mongol Empire at 1280, <https://worldcivilizationsbcad.weebly.com/mongol-empire.html>

named Chinggis Khan (“Fierce Ruler”), he and his offspring ruled this vast terrain as four massive territories. Each of these divisions—the Yuan Khanate (China), the Il-Khanate (Asia Minor), the Chaghadai (Eastern steppes), and the Golden Horde (Western steppes/ Russia)—remained under Mongol control well into the next century. Another grandson launched the Mughal dynasty in India. In the end, the last of Chinggis’ line ruled in Bukhara until the Red Army invaded in 1920, after nearly 700 years of Mongol reign, one of the longest dynasties in history.⁴

Across the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols wielded a formidable military capability, though they also put down roots. They built cities, created bureaucracies of record keepers and tax collectors, and invested in science and mathematics. The decades of peace that followed their conquests, called the *Pax Mongolica*, fostered trade along the Silk Road. As a result, Persian palaces received prized Chinese porcelains, still displayed today in Middle Eastern museums.⁵ Arab astronomers worked in the Maragha (Iranian) observa-

4 Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: Crown, 2005), 9.

5 Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 102.



Figure 2: Movie poster for *The Conqueror*. Directed by Dick Powell and Oscar Millard. RKO Radio Pictures, 1956.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Conqueror_\(1956\)_film_poster.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Conqueror_(1956)_film_poster.jpg)

tory at Hulegu Khan's direction.⁶ Emissaries from the pope traveled unmolested across Eastern Asia and China, requesting help with the Crusades. Although their Christian demands for aid were rebuffed, the pope's messengers returned with information about cutting-edge technology: paper, the block printing press, and gunpowder. Such devices would transform Europe.

However, many students of history might find this description of the Mongol empire unrecognizable. A more familiar view is the cinematic version, such as in the 1956 movie, *The Conqueror* with John Wayne and Susan Hayward (Figure 2). Wayne, in skin-darkening and "almond-eye" makeup, pulls a white-gowned Hayward to him while barking, "I am Temujin...Barbarian...I fight! love! I conquer...like a Barbarian!" Hayward plays Temujin's wife Borte, who in real life was from a neighboring tribe, but her skin and eyes are not altered, a not-so-subtle suggestion that "dark" Wayne has kidnapped "white" Hayward.

This approach to depicting the empire is still being used in *Game of Khans*, a video game from 2022, where mustachioed warriors compete to "plunder wealth" and "embrace beauties" and to see who can out-drink, out-fight, and out-ravage their opponents.⁷ Above all, they can "return with glory," with glory being defined as a buxom maiden screaming for help. This latter aspect manages to be racist, sexist, and illogical all at once, as scantily-clad light-skinned women are thrown on horseback by dark-skinned brutes galloping through the snow.

While video games rely on examples of hyper-masculinity for their appeal, descriptions of Mongols as inhuman are just as plentiful in mass-produced histories. For instance, in the *Time-Life* series on world history, the opening paragraphs in the chapter on "The Mongol Hordes" portray the empire as one of wall-to-wall violence:

30,000 defenders slaughtered... palaces razed...resplendent capitals of Islam... totally destroyed... the most opulent city in Russia, reduced to ashes...[the world] reeled under an onslaught of unprecedented ferocity ... [from this] detestable nation of Satan. 'Piercing the solid rocks of the Caucasus, they poured forth liked devils from the Hell of Tartarus. They swarmed locust-like over the face of the earth...'⁸

The book's cover portrays a Mongol warrior in a menacing pose, his brown face further obscured in shadow. Negative dismissals of the Khans continue with the sons and grandsons of Chinggis. Succes-

6 Rossabi, *The Mongols*, 104.

7 The "return with glory" view for *Game of Khans*, a role-playing game currently owned by Clicktouch Co. Ltd, can be seen on <https://apkamp.com/com.dc.gok.google.by.scrolling.through.the.game.advertisements>.

8 *The Mongol Conquests: TimeFrame AD 1200-1300* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1989), 9.

sor Ogedei was brought down by “debauchery.”⁹ Grandson Hulegu is “the butcher of Baghdad.”¹⁰ Even Khubilai, whose palaces at Shangdu and the capital city of Dadu caused chronicler Marco Polo to declare them “the greatest cities he had ever seen,” is ultimately just another barbarian. After defeating the Song dynasty armies to unite and rule China for decades, Khubilai’s reign is brushed aside as “a disaster.”¹¹

While the *Time-Life* books were written in the 1980s, current mass market histories still play the same tune of Mongolian savagery. In a 2021 best-selling history on the Middle Ages, *Power and Thrones*, author Dan Jones calls out the Mongols for their “gross bloodlust” as well as their “predilection for fighting...and holding lavish, drunken banquets.”¹² While Jones grudgingly admits that they succeeded in promoting trade and freedom of religion, he defines them as single-minded: “To predators, everything looks like prey, and there was still plenty for the Mongol generals to feed on.”¹³ To be sure, the Mongols were ruthless in conquering cities and killed many soldiers and civilians in their military campaigns. Yet similar campaigns on behalf of, say, the Romans are described differently. To the same author, for example, the Roman’s “overwhelming armed force” accompanied “state-of-the-art social, cultural, and legal systems that Romans considered to be virtuous.”¹⁴ Both empires acquired territory with merciless force; both created legal codes and promoted artisans. Yet, only one empire is linked with the idea of virtue.

The question is, “why?” Why are the Mongols pictured as fiends emerging from hell? One answer is to look at who is telling the stories, to expose what contemporary experts refer to as “the parochialism of the academy.”¹⁵ For example, the books in the *Time-Life* source list were published in London, and its “consultants” on Asia are from Cambridge, Oxford, and London University. As Edward Said put it in his classic book *Orientalism*: “European culture [gains] in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient,” distilling Asia down to “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality.”¹⁶

But there is more to this portrayal than mere racism. Name-calling by White historians has also been applied to the civilizations of China, India, and Arabia. The Mongols are defined as barbarians, no matter

9 *The Mongol Conquests*, 24.

10 Dan Jones, *Powers and Thrones: A New History of the Middle Ages* (New York: Viking, 2021), 337.

11 *The Mongol Conquests*, 27-8

12 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 344, 323.

13 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 321.

14 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 17.

15 George Lipsitz, “Race as a Relational Theory: A Roundtable Discussion,” in *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice*, eds., Ramón A. Gutiérrez, Daniel Hosang, and Natalia Molina (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 31.

16 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Vintage Books ebooks, 1994), 3-4.

how many palaces they built or languages they invented.¹⁷ Money collected to maintain their government is labeled booty rather than taxes, “the extraction of wealth at the point of sword.”¹⁸ Despite giving religious exemptions to priests and distributing alms to the poor, the Mongols have always been reduced to those who “plunder wealth” and kidnap maidens.¹⁹

Studies of racism and settler colonialism in the United States may shed additional light on this question. In his book *Unsustained Empires*, Dean Saranillo explains how local scholars used the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair to establish a racial hierarchy for visitors. At the “White City,” international cultural displays were ranked by University of Chicago sociologists along the Midway, organized according to a “sliding scale of humanity.” One end grouped together the “savage races,” such as Africa, indigenous North Americans, and Hawaiians, while the other end exhibited the “Teutonic” tribes. This hierarchy was “a contrived racial order where primitives, Orientals, ethnic whites, and whites were seen along a linear march from barbarism to civilization in ascending order.”²⁰

Saranillo, whose book focuses on racism in Hawaii, further recounts how the 1893 Cyclorama exhibit of Kilauea prominently featured the Hawaiian volcano goddess Pelé. Audiences were intended to make comparisons between Pelé and the recently overthrown Queen Lili’uokalani, seeing “the pacification and domestication of an irrational and belligerent Native woman by white masculine science.”²¹ If such a linear display were historical, the designers would likely place the savage Mongol “hordes” among the barbarians at the far end. However, to do so, Chinggis Khan cannot be seen as an emperor, law-giver, and promoter of trade. Like the transformation of Lili’uokalani into Pelé, Chinggis Khan must become a bloodthirsty villain in the shadows to be put in his proper place.

The Wrath of Khan

Beyond representing Mongols as merely primitive, the second way that historians skew the Mongol legacy is by fixating on their military atrocities. Mongol histories rarely start with Chinggis’ rise from poverty or the unification of the tribes, but instead with gruesome statistics from their invasions: 30,000 soldiers killed in Bukhara; 1,400,000 civilians massacred in Herat; nine sacks full of ears; pyramids of skulls,

17 For example, Kenneth Harl’s entire lecture series is called *Barbarian Empires of the Steppes*.

18 Jo Ann Cavallo, “Marco Polo on the Mongol State: Taxation, Predation, and Monopolization,” *Libertarian Papers* no. 7 (2015), 158.

19 Rossabi, *The Mongols*, 30, 49.

20 Dean Itsuji Saranillo, *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai’i Statehood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 42.

21 Saranillo, *Unsustainable Empire*, 58.

etc. The violence is labeled wasteful and unprecedented.²² This reductionist view, however, glosses over important details.

While Mongols did attack and raze cities, their goal was neither massacre nor wholesale destruction. As with other empires, the Khan's aim was to accumulate wealth and administer cities brought under their rule; it was not in their best interests to eliminate people. They *did* conquer cities, burn buildings, and kill civilians. They also left alone populations that agreed to their demands for tribute and used tax assessors. Khan invaders allowed civilians to evacuate at times, though they executed those who did not leave or who tried to hide valuables. Opposing forces used captives for public sport; when captured by Persian or Indian troops, Mongol soldiers might be dragged behind horses, fed to dogs, or crushed by elephants for public entertainment.²³ But the Mongols did not torture or maim, and severe treatment was for populations that resisted or rebelled. They did not attack those who submitted.²⁴

Moreover, atrocities are a by-product of war and are standard among those who see themselves atop the cultural pyramid. For instance, when the Venetians sacked Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade, they pulled down the horses atop the Hippodrome and remounted them proudly atop their own Basilica of St. Mark's. The Romans not only invented crucifixion but would execute men *en masse*, like the 6000 crucified after the Spartacus uprising.²⁵ In World War II, the Nazis bombed London; the Allied Air Force, in turn, carpet-bombed Dresden into rubble. World armies have a horrific legacy of swallowing cities and normalizing atrocities as part of their conquests, especially when the fight is the "good fight."

Scholars have also pointed out that Mongol casualties were often exaggerated. Frequently, the numbers of dead listed are several times the estimated population of cities at the time. Jack Weatherford, in *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, notes that often the casualty numbers were (a) physically impossible given the time frames and (b) reflected so many civilians—hundreds at a time—that potential victims could easily have run away or overwhelmed individual soldiers.²⁶ Or in other cases, the details are provided not for accuracy but for characterization. For instance, chronicles mention that

22 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 324.

23 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 114.

24 While some populations complained bitterly of the "yoke" of the Khans (especially the Russian princes), the idea of subjugation was more philosophical than practical. Many suggest the Mongol Empire's acceptance of all religions, use of local administrators, and assessment of tax/tribute standards would seem like little change for the majority of conquered populations. See Timothy May, *The Mongol Empire: The Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 76-91 and Kenneth W. Harl, "Pax Mongolica and Cultural Exchange: Lecture 32," *The Barbarian Empires of the Steppes* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2014).

25 *Empires Ascendant: TimeFrame 400 BC-AD 200* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1989), 71.

26 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 118.

a Mongol warrior queen whose son died in battle decrees that everything living—even the dogs and cats—be executed. This is intended to illustrate the rage of a grieving mother and to enhance the propaganda encouraged by the Mongols themselves to hasten submission of other cities.²⁷

Exaggerations of destruction were not limited to casualties, either. One often repeated story focuses on the sack of Baghdad and the burning of the libraries. This example may provide clues to a dynamic that goes beyond portraying Mongols as primitive. Baghdad in 1258 was the “Mother of Cities,” the center of Islam and the site of the Abbasid caliphate.²⁸ For centuries it had been a center of innovation for science and medicine, earning the ninth-century designation of “House of Wisdom,” as well as being famed as a place of superb art and architecture. Baghdad also gave birth to both algebra and Scheherazade. Still, by the eleventh century, the city had been racked by repeated “violence and upheaval,” and the centers for development in Muslim science had been moved elsewhere around the Mediterranean.²⁹

When Hulegu Khan, Chinggis’ grandson, approached Baghdad in the winter of 1257, he first sent envoys with a list of demands and grievances to the Caliph. The Caliph waived the demands away as preposterous, but Hulegu’s army was large, and he had acquired gunpowder from the East. Following a month of laying siege, Hulegu’s army broke through. The Mongols ordered people to surrender weapons and evacuate, but many still refused to comply, and the invaders executed those who stayed.³⁰ A three-week campaign of looting and slaughter did occur, at the end of which, even a mostly positive portrait of the Mongols concludes: “Decades later, [Baghdad] was still mostly a ruin.”³¹

Many accounts of the destruction of the Baghdad further reference a detail mentioned by a sixteenth-century biographer, Qutb al-Din al-Nahrawali:

They threw the books of the Baghdadi colleges into the Euphrates . . . so many that they became a bridge on which the riders and footmen passed, and the color of the river changed

27 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 114.

28 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 180.

29 Violet Moller, *The Map of Knowledge: A Thousand-Year History of How Classical Ideas Were Lost and Found* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2020), 82-93.

30 Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 183. However, Weatherford is among the few also to mention that Hulegu’s mother and his two wives were Christian, and that it was Christian troops, particularly from Armenia, who performed much of the looting and slaughter, burning down mosques especially.

31 Ian Frazier, “Invaders: Destroying Baghdad,” *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2005, accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/04/25/invaders-3>.

| into black from their multitude.³²

This reference to “rivers of ink” repeatedly surfaces when historians write about the siege of Baghdad.³³ However, some scholars argue that this was another fabrication. Michal Biran, for example, specifically examined claims about the libraries’ destruction, which allegedly “ushered in the decline of Islamic civilization and the rise of the west,” and found that several of the key details were wrong.³⁴ For example, Al-Nahrawali named the wrong river. Similar library-destruction stories accuse Mongols of building mangers with the books when they never used mangers to feed their horses.

Furthermore, a Mongol inventory completed shortly after the invasion showed that many books were confiscated by the army rather than thrown into the water. The historian Violet Moller reaffirms that Hulegu’s armies ransacked the libraries to gather, not destroy, scientific books on astronomy and alchemy.³⁵ Biran argues that by taking the books, the Il-Khanate, later formed by Hulegu, re-established the libraries’ collection within a few decades until it surpassed the pre-conquered inventory.

So why the false emphasis on destroying all books? Why must the Mongols look worse than any other culture in the violent history of empires? While it is tempting to add the desecration of knowledge as one more piece of evidence for placing the Khans at the far end of the racial hierarchy, the “rivers of ink” story may serve other purposes. Biran believes that the “anachronistic” accounts, written centuries after the actual event, serve Islamic scholars by lamenting the decline of Islam. For Anglo-European historians, there may be other factors at work, in particular when the narrative is about two groups in central Asia fighting each other.³⁶

The 1258 invasion of Baghdad was an inter-ethnic conflict of great interest to European Christians. When the Mongols lined up against the Abbasid army, they attacked the heart of the “heathen” world that had dogged Christians since the rise of Islam. Yet, while Hulegu Khan was placing his siege engines in Persia, Louis IX of France had just finished fighting Muslims in Egypt as part of the Seventh Crusade. For two hundred years, the Catholic Church had been drumming up

32 Michal Biran, “Libraries, Books, and Transmission of Knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62, no. 2-3 (2019), 470.

33 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 116.

34 Biran, “Libraries, Books, and Transmission of Knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad,” 465.

35 Moller, *The Map of Knowledge*, 83.

36 A small, often-overlooked note is that during the battle, as military buildings and mosques were destroyed, the Christian churches were left standing. Hulegu Khan’s wife was a Nestorian Christian, so he wanted the churches spared. However, it doesn’t support the “savage” narrative to point out that the Mongols in Baghdad allied with Christians, which may be why it’s rarely included. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 183.

its own holy war, calling aristocrats from across Western Europe to journey thousands of miles across land and sea (in heavy armor) to invade the Middle East. Under the guise of orders from the pope, knights were stripping Arabian cities of wealth—Damascus, Acre, and Aleppo. Had they been Mongols, it might have been called plunder rather than faith and zeal.

Compared with the Crusades, the Khan army was not attempting a holy war against a faraway enemy but simply approaching a city within their sphere of influence. To bend a seemingly logical contest between two formidable Asian armies requires the story to emphasize the savagery of the attack, characterizing it as something far worse than anything happening between Christians and Muslims off on the banks of the Red Sea. Thus, one reason for highlighting the cruelty during the sack of Baghdad was to deflect attention away from the sack of Jerusalem.

Refusing to Settle

Even beyond false claims of library books destroyed or exaggerated casualty numbers, a third way that historians dismiss Mongol culture as backward is in emphasizing their inferiority as nomads. Despite acknowledging the tactical advantage of the horse-archer armies, historians traditionally label the mobile culture a primitive one:

Compared with the Chinese, the Mongols were certainly barbarous. Whereas the Song and the Jin built cities of palaces and prospered from an agriculture-based economy, the Mongols were tent-dwelling nomads whose primitive lifestyle was dictated by harsh climatic conditions. The greater part of their lives was spent on horseback.³⁷

Horse-centered cultures dominated the broad steppes of Asia for centuries. The Khan armies were descendants of a dozen other groups—the Xiong Nu, Gok Turks, Huns, Scythians, Pecheneges, Seljuk Turks—all of which had successfully battled against Muslims, Greeks, Romans, and Chinese for a thousand years.³⁸ Still, scholars from sedentary cultures centered around urban or agricultural environments found it hard to conceive of a successful nomadic empire.

Another problem with the categorization of Mongols as solely nomads is that they *did* build. First, as archaeologists have noted, medieval Asian nomads constructed permanent corralling and transfer

37 *The Mongol Conquests*, 11.

38 Kenneth W. Harl's *The Barbarian Empires of the Steppes* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 2014) provides the accounts of how these nomadic tribes achieved military and commercial success, starting with their domestication of horses.

facilities to support the exchange of trade and animals.³⁹ Moreover, Baghdad and Bukhara were both rebuilt after they were invaded. Ogedei constructed a capital at Kharakhorum, while Khubilai built a new capital of Dadu (Great Capital). This new Chinese capital housed an impressive palace, later to become the Forbidden City in the modern city of Beijing. Further, Khubilai rebuilt Shangdu, which Marco Polo called “a vast palace of marble cunningly worked... so well kept & adorned that it is a most noble thing of great delight.”⁴⁰

However, this new Shangdu was perhaps too otherworldly for scholars to comprehend. English poet Samuel Coleridge called it Xanadu and stamped the “stately pleasure-dome” as one conceived in a dream. Xanadu is also the name given to the mansion built in *Citizen Kane*, described in the movie as one of the most marvelous places ever built. Yet the Xanadu of Orson Welles or Samuel Coleridge is just a myth, impossible to imagine as a palace built by the Mongols, who have been so carefully defined as mere nomads.

The Diminishing Map

This view of nomadic culture may be the rationale that explains a final type of distortion as historians manipulate the legacy of the Mongols on historical timeline maps. This last instance of a colonizing filter shows how objective standards can be harnessed to create a subjective portrait. In timeline maps, different cultures are compared to establish a sense of their relative influence. On the long end of the scale is time, which typically runs from the “dawn” of Sumeria or Egypt (3000-4000 BCE) to “today” (2000 CE). The other axis lists geographical locations. A 2017 map created by Schofield & Sims displays the diversity of cultures in rows for the Americas, Africa, and Asia, included alongside Europe.⁴¹ Like other maps of this type, the Roman Empire sprawls across time and space (Figure 3).

The purpose of such maps is to regulate events and to apply a scientific approach to organizing history. Yet, the map is less than scientific in proportion. According to this modern map drawn by European scholars—Schofield & Sims is in Manchester, UK—the Mongols are hardly represented (Figure 4). In the 1200-1400 period, the Khan empire is drawn as multiple disconnected circles, each very small. This

39 Joshua Wright, “A Possible Archaeological Case of the Taxation of Medieval Eurasian Nomads,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58 (2015), 267-292.

40 Marco Polo, “Marco Polo, The Description of the World,” in Morris Rossabi ed., *The Mongols and Global History* (New York: Norton & Company, 2011), 128-129.

41 “World History Timeline,” (London: Schofield & Sims, 2017). The 2017 version is at least more inclusive than those which included “history” according to the Bible or only showed cultures within the longitude of the Mediterranean. For a version that includes Biblical events (and mermaids), see Sebastian Adams, “Adams Chronological Chart or Map of History Fold-out,” (United States: MasterBooks, 1990) or at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adams_Synchro-logical_Chart_or_Map_of_History

Where Did the Mongols Go?

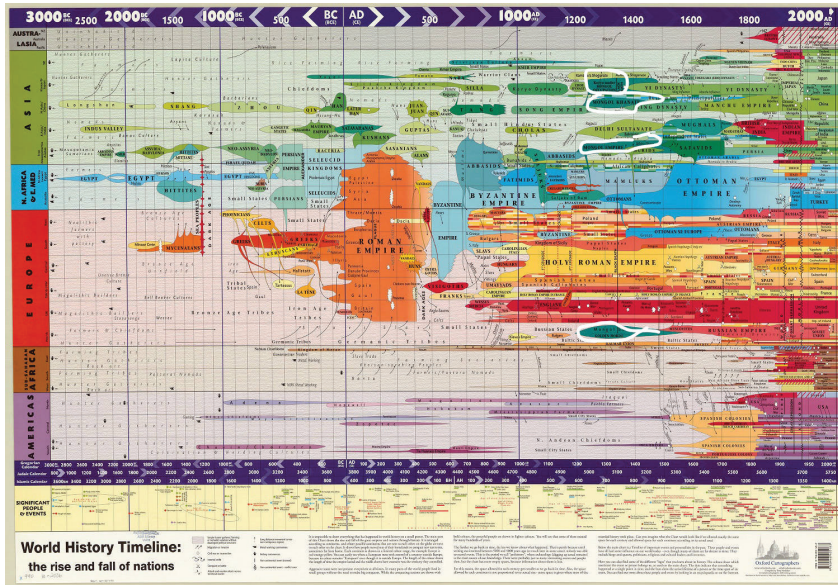


Figure 3: “World History Timeline,” Schofield & Sons, 2017. White circles (added by the author) reflect Mongol States.

misrepresentation is further enhanced when Russia is placed next to Africa rather than Asia, which strands the green Khan circles far from their other connected Asian territories. Thus, while the map purports to be regulating time and space, neither the dates nor the relative space is correctly proportioned.⁴²

Not only is the Mongol Empire itself fractured, but the spaces it occupied—Asia, Russia, China—take up significantly less room than their actual geographic size. The fact that mapmakers still allot Europe a disproportionately large size reflects the traditional Eurocentric view that more things “happened” in Europe. Yet it seems absurd, for instance, that the thirteenth-century Holy Roman Empire, which covered one-third of Europe, appears much bigger on the timeline map than the Mongol territories, which enclosed nearly the entire continent of Asia.

The arrangement seems to “prove” the valueless state of the Mongol empire by making it disproportionate and separating groups that should be joined with separate circles.⁴³ Contiguous territories are

42 The map also gives more space to events of more recent occurrences.

43 This is not suggesting that the mapmakers schemed to distort the Mongol Empire on purpose. Rather, the structures they used to place white cultures as most important—which appear rational—also created choices which irrationally denigrated other groups, like the Khans.

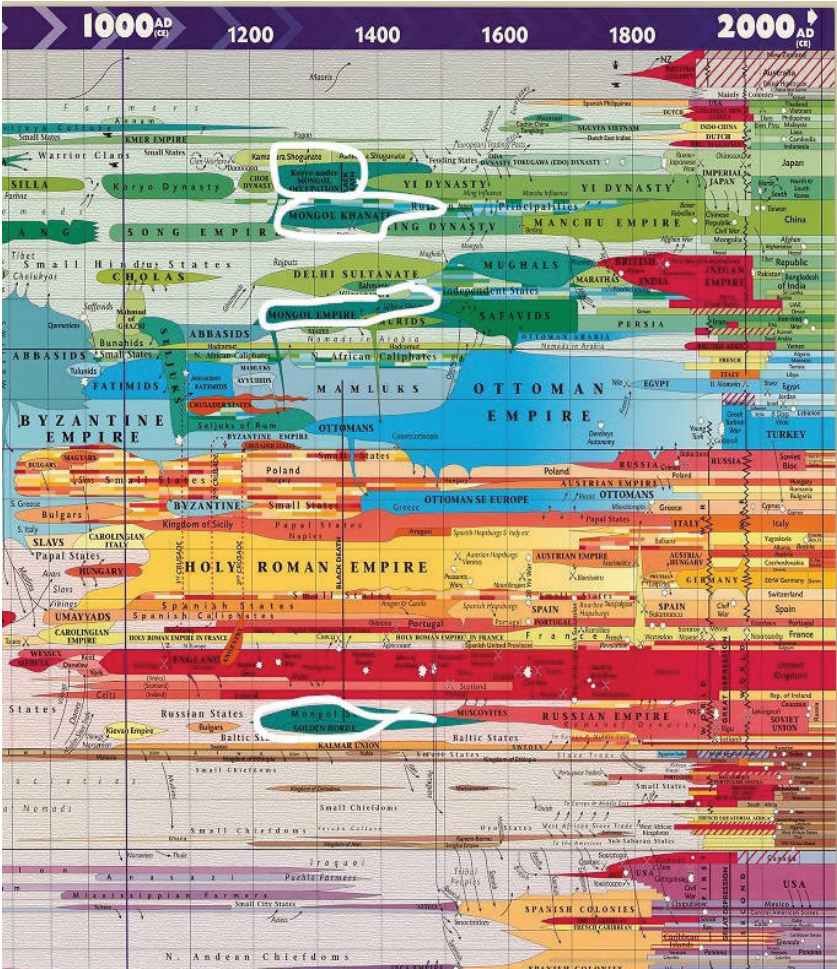


Figure 4: Close up of 13th-21st centuries. White circles (added by the author) reflect Mongol States. "World History Timeline," Schofield & Sons, 2017.

deliberately split—Africa is literally divided. Yet, the scientific designer of the map can claim that these are not choices but rather the "result" of how the empire must be depicted once the map allots space to Europe, Asia, or Russia. Cartography scholar Candace Fujikane also reflects on how maps can be used to justify a white supremacist mindset. In an analysis of maps used in Hawaii, Fujikane notes that "under the conditions of a settler colonial capitalist economy, the state engages in the structural operations of subdivision, of producing *terra nullius*, 'land belonging to no one, 'eviscerating the land of history

and its meaning.⁴⁴ Fujikane was talking about a chart used by Maui developers who wanted to argue that “unused” land had no value and ought to be cultivated with shopping centers, corporate plantations, or tourist sites. The argument attempted to ignore that the land was “in use” by indigenous Hawaiians as part of an ecosystem that supported their culture, even though it was supposedly vacant. Yet Fujikane could just as easily have been referring to the steppes of Asia, also characterized as vast and valueless and often referred to as a place that has more animals than people. Or, in this case, a population of non-white nomads, neither deemed colonizers nor settlers, whose accomplishments are thus downgraded.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Narratives of the Mongol Empire have undergone something of a renaissance recently, for a few reasons. First, the fall of the Soviet Union and the creation of independent republics in Eastern Asia opened up opportunities for archaeological and archival research where the empire was concentrated. Also, China began supporting a wave of research. Lastly, interest by European and American scholars in shedding racist approaches to their work has helped rehabilitate Chinggis Khan’s reputation. In decades to come, textbooks may provide more balanced viewpoints of the Mongol legacy.

The interest from China, though, has had a downside. A recent exhibit of artifacts from Inner Mongolia planned for a museum display in Nantes became embroiled in controversy when the Chinese government demanded that the exhibition not refer to “Genghis Khan” or the “Mongol Empire” and to label the Mongol artifacts as Chinese.⁴⁶ Instead, the museum decided to display other artifacts from Ulaanbaatar in order to keep the original references, and the fight over who owns the empire will likely continue. Moreover, information about the empire available to the average history buff still carries the stamp of bias. Although many biographies now describe a multi-faceted portrait of Chinggis as a military genius and expansionist emperor, he is also routinely referred to as a “warlord” or having a “fighting gene.”⁴⁷

44 Candace Fujikane, “Mapping Wonder in the Māui Mo’olelo on the Mo’o’āina: Growing Aloha’āina Through Indigenous and Settler Affinity Activism,” *Marvels & Tales*. Vol. 30: (2016), 47.

45 Another American scholar, Daniel Hosang, coins the term “racial innocence” when talking about how people deny the existence of racism by pointing to other factors, such as when white parents argue that school integration is impossible because children are too young to be bused over long distances. Daniel Martinez Hosang, “The Changing Valence of White Racial Innocence: Black-Brown Unity in the 1970s Los Angeles School Desegregation Struggles,” in *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition*, edited by Josh Kun and Laura Pulido, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 3.

46 Agence France-Presse, “China insists Museum Not Use the Words ‘Genghis Khan,’” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2020.

47 Spencer Mizen, “Genghis Khan: The Mongol Warlord Who Almost Conquered the World,” *History Extra*, 2023, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/geng->

This idea was furthered by a study in 2003 that estimated 8% of men in Asia might share a Y-chromosome haplogroup which carried a unique signature traceable to the Asian steppes.⁴⁸ Suddenly, dozens of articles sprang up claiming that this showed how Chinggis was “prolific” or “fecund” and personally fathered so many children across all of Asia that 16 million men could now claim direct ancestry with the randy conqueror.⁴⁹ Other scientists later pointed out that DNA science was not quite that precise and that having similar haplogroups might have localized the origins down to a tribe or localized region, but not necessarily an individual. Still, calculations immediately proceeded based on the legends of Chinggis many concubines and how many maidens he might have kidnapped.

Thus, the distortions applied to the Mongol empire have ranged from manipulations of their territory on maps to obsessions with only certain aspects of their culture. They are portrayed as savage, illiterate killers, and wanderers whose territory was fractured. It seems appropriate to close this essay with a quote from an eyewitness to the invasion of Bukhara: “They came, they saw, they sapped, they burned, they slew, they plundered and they departed.”⁵⁰ Even the historians who see the Mongols as facilitating cultural exchange open their books with that quote. Hence, the historians’ enduring Mongol metaphor is not one of emperors and rulers, but of locusts. The view of the Khan legacy is not primarily how they encouraged trade across the Silk Road during the *Pax Mongolica* or how they valued mathematics and artisans. The idea of a peaceful Mongol emperor watching dancers perform or querying an Arab astronomer, seems absurd on its face. Defined as uncivilized and bloodthirsty nomads who refused to settle, the Mongols have always been perceived as destructive forces who dissipated into the wind, ultimately “departing” off the face of the timeline map itself.

[his-khan-mongol-warlord -conquered-world-china-medieval/](https://www.cri-genetics.com/blog/curious-research-information-are-most-asian-men-descended-from-genghis-khan/).

48 CRI Genetics, “Curious Research Information: Are Most Asian Men Descended from Genghis Khan?”, CRI Genetics Blog, 2023, accessed March 9, 2023, <https://www.cri-genetics.com/blog/curious-research-information-are-most-asian-men-descended-from-genghis-khan>.

49 Nicholas Wade, “A Prolific Genghis Khan, It Seems, Helped Populate the World,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2003.

50 Jones, *Powers and Thrones*, 311; Rossabi, *The Mongols*, 28; Rossabi, “Introduction,” in *The Mongols and Global History*, 1.

