Chapter 3: Nomadic Empires

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Why was trade so significant to the Mongols?

The Mongols lived in the steppes, where harsh winters, brief dry summers and scarce resources supported only pastoralism and hunting-gathering. They did not take to farming and had no cities, so they could not produce everything they needed. They therefore traded and bartered with their sedentary neighbours in China, exchanging horses, furs and trapped game for agricultural produce and iron utensils. This benefited both sides. Trade was not free of tension, since each side used military pressure to improve its profit. United Mongol lineages could force China to offer better terms, and trade was sometimes dropped in favour of plunder. Later, under Mongol rule, Silk Route commerce peaked and extended north to Karakorum.

Q2 Why did Genghis Khan feel the need to fragment the Mongol tribes into new social and military groupings?

Unifying the Mongol tribes and conquering other peoples made his army a very mixed body, including willing allies like the Uighurs and defeated groups like the Kereyits. Genghis Khan wanted to erase old tribal identities, so that clan and tribe loyalties would not rival loyalty to him. In the old steppe decimal system (units of 10s, 100s, 1,000s and notionally 10,000), clans and tribes stayed together. He broke up the old groupings and spread their members across new units, and the largest, the tuman of about 10,000, mixed many tribes and clans. Moving out of one's unit without permission was harshly punished. The new units served under his four sons and chosen captains (noyan). This gave soldiers a new identity derived from Genghis Khan and made the army a disciplined, effective force.

Q3 How do later Mongol reflections on the yasa bring out the uneasy relationship they had with the memory of Genghis Khan?

The yasa began as yasaq, meaning law, decree or order, and the little we know of it concerns administrative rules on the hunt, army and postal system. By the mid-thirteenth century it had come to mean Genghis Khan's legal code, probably really a compilation of Mongol customs. The Mongols, a numerical minority ruling sophisticated urban societies, used it to protect their identity, claiming a sacred law from an ancestor-lawgiver like Moses or Solomon. Yet they also distanced themselves from Genghis Khan. As rulers of settled lands, his descendants could not appear as heroes to sedentary subjects in his way. Il-Khanid chronicles praised him but exaggerated his killings and expressed relief that those times were over. Even 'Abdullah Khan's Muslim prayer at Bukhara's festival ground was described as according to the yasa, showing how its meaning had been reshaped.

Q4 'If history relies upon written records produced by city-based literati, nomadic societies will always receive a hostile representation.' Would you agree with this statement? Does it explain the reason why Persian chronicles produced such inflated figures of casualties resulting from Mongol campaigns?

Only partly. The steppe dwellers left almost no literature, so we depend on city-based writers, who often gave ignorant and biased reports and called nomads primitive barbarians. But the statement is not true 'always'. Many literati, such as Buddhist, Confucian, Christian, Turkish and Muslim writers who travelled to or served the Mongols, wrote sympathetic accounts, even eulogies. Hostility alone does not explain the inflated casualty figures either. The Il-Khanid chronicles of Iran were produced under the Toluyid rulers, who wanted to contrast themselves with past rulers, including Genghis Khan, and expressed relief that the great killings were over. An eyewitness report put 400 defenders at the Bukhara citadel, while an Il-Khanid chronicle claimed 30,000 were killed. Juwaini's Merv figure of 1,300,000 came from a count of 100,000 corpses a day for thirteen days. So political motives and unreliable counting also played a part.

Q5 Keeping the nomadic element of the Mongol and Bedouin societies in mind, how, in your opinion, did their respective historical experiences differ? What explanations would you suggest account for these differences?

Both the Mongols of Central Asia and the Bedouin of the Arabian peninsula were nomadic peoples who built large state formations. This chapter says the central Islamic states studied in Theme 4 had their origins in Bedouin nomadic traditions, whereas the Mongols created a transcontinental empire under Genghis Khan, straddling Europe and Asia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Mongols were a numerical minority ruling complex agrarian and urban societies far from their steppe habitat. They adapted by recruiting administrators from conquered peoples, and their rulers drifted towards sedentary ways, as when Ghazan Khan urged protecting the peasantry. They held on to identity through the yasa and descent from Genghis Khan. Their rulers followed Shaman, Buddhist, Christian and eventually Muslim faiths, yet never let belief dictate public policy, so the regime stayed multi-ethnic and multi-religious. In my opinion, differences arose from the setting (steppe versus Arabia), the scale of conquest, and the religious context. The chapter itself says little on the Bedouin side, so that comparison draws on Theme 4.

Q6 How does the following account enlarge upon the character of the Pax Mongolica created by the Mongols by the middle of the thirteenth century? (The Franciscan monk William of Rubruck, sent by Louis IX of France to the court of the great Khan Mongke, reached Karakorum in 1254 and met Paquette, a woman from Lorraine brought from Hungary and serving a Nestorian Christian wife of a prince; Guillaume Boucher, a Parisian goldsmith employed by Queen Sorghaqtani and then by Mongke's younger brother; and saw Nestorian priests admitted first at court festivals to bless the Grand Khan's cup, followed by Muslim clergy and Buddhist and Taoist monks.)

The account shows that Mongol conquest linked Europe and China, and that Karakorum had become a meeting point of distant cultures. A monk could travel from France to the Mongol court, and the trade routes, which earlier ended in China, now continued north to Karakorum. People moved or were carried across the continent. Paquette was brought from Hungary, which the Mongols had overrun, and a Parisian goldsmith found employment with the royal family. This agrees with the Mongol practice of recruiting skilled people from many backgrounds. It also shows religious pluralism: Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Taoist clergy took part in court festivals, with Nestorian priests blessing the cup first. The Mongols' multi-religious regime did not feel threatened by diversity. However, the peace rested on conquest and Mongol authority. Travellers carried passes (paiza) and traders paid the baj tax, acknowledging the Khan's power.