

Legacy of the Mongol Empire:  
The Last Great Age of the Silk Road

By Ethan Johnson



Acts of war fuel change—changes in foreign and domestic relations, changes in politics, and most often changes in national boundaries. The conquests of Genghis Khan in the 12th and 13th centuries C.E. absorbed such boundary lines into the Mongol Empire, extending his rule from the steppes of Mongolia to the eastern shores of the Black Sea. His reign over such a vast expanse of land and large collection of people was due to his strict military leadership, paired with a powerful army to carry out his will. At the head of his army was a handful of generals who answered to him directly, and obediently followed his orders. These men played a major part in many of the Khan's conquests, but most importantly in conquering the Khwarezmian Empire.[1] The Khan's victory in Khwarezm, which one of the largest kingdoms to fall during Mongolian westward expansion, created stability that would keep the Silk Road alive throughout Mongol rule and allow the empire to become the last great patron of Silk Road trade. By exploring first the offense that led to the war, understanding the trade atmosphere before Mongol invasion, then evaluating the state of restored trade, and finally tracking the decline of Silk Road trade after Mongol rule, we are led into an ongoing debate concentrated on the long-term impact of Mongol rule on the Silk Road. On the one hand, there is the wasteland left in the path of the Mongol army. On the other hand, there is the economic stability of a unified nation that allowed locals to manage their own economies.[2] While the Mongol army undoubtedly wrought destruction to resistors, the Khan and his generals worked quickly to restore, and gradually increase, economic stability that would keep the Silk Road alive—thus making the Khan's empire the last great patron of Silk Road trade.

### Warring with the West

The Khan initially had no interest in conquering the neighbouring, strange land in the west known as the Khwarezm Empire—he was only seeking a trade agreement that would protect his people traveling between the two nations, and reopen trade routes closed for nearly three centuries. With the lure of artisans and merchants that carried prestigious goods,—most of which were from agrarian societies—the Khan also sought to foster trade that would be mutually beneficial to both empires. [3] By establishing this agreement, the Khan could restore the connection between the Central Asia and China, which was cut off after the fall of the Tang Empire. Skeptical of the newly forged power from the east

who had conquered his Kara-Khitain neighbors, Shah Mohammed II of Khwarezm accepted this trade agreement.[4] With a solid foundation of trade laid from Inner Mongolia into Central Asia, the Silk Road was traveled at a frequency not seen since the peak of the Tang Empire.

Two years after the agreement had been signed, the Shah received news from a governor of Utrar, a city that stood in modern Khiva, that there were Mongolian spies among the Mohammedan merchants trading within the city.[5] The Shah ordered them to be put to death, breaking the agreement. The governor (reportedly the Shah's uncle) did so, and confiscated camels, silk, and other valuable goods in the caravan.[6] Only one member of the Mongolian party managed to escape the massacre by fleeing to the nearest Mongolian post—then being sent directly to the Khan. The Khan, finding it hard to believe that the Shah ordered the murders, sent an ambassador to Samarkand to speak with the Shah and demand he turn over the corrupt governor. The Shah then beheaded the ambassador, and refused to turn over the governor—disrespecting the authority of the Khan. This was a blatant act of war, which led to the first invasion of Central Asia under Mongol rule: an act of revenge, that would kick start the crumbling of an already uneasy relationship.[7] Ultimately, this invasion had a major effect on the traffic of the Silk Road because of a temporary halt in trade between the east and the west, which would set the stage for Mongol rule across Central Asia that would support the last era of a flourishing Silk Road.

With the trade agreement shattered, there were no goods flowing between the west and the east: only soldiers. The Khan rallied his forces in order to seek revenge, "His arrow messengers were dispatched in all directions to summon half of the continent, reaching from the Altai Mountains to the Yellow Sea, for a campaign of vengeance." [8] The Great Khan called on his nation of soldiers to confront the Shah, who had chosen war over commerce. There were six leaders of these leagues of soldiers: Genghis Khan himself, the great Subutai, the Khan's sons, Ogedei and Chagatai, and generals, Jebe and Jochi. Subutai conceived the plan of attack, dividing the army of some 200,000 men into four corps of cavalry. The first was division led by Genghis and Subutai, the second by Ogedei and Chagatai, who would both descend from the north, and the third and fourth led from the south by Jebe and Jochi.[9] Their mission was clear: kill the governor who had committed the crime, and make the Shah

pay for his transgressions with his crown and empire. The Mongol troops flooded the Silk Road, their primary point of access to the west, causing chaos that caused momentary destabilization but later opened the entirety of the Khwarezm Empire to trade with the Far East.

The skill and determination of the Mongol generals commanding the Khan's army resolved the war with a massive victory within only a few years. One by one, the Khwarezmian cities fell at the hands of the Mongols. First to fall was the city of Otrar, where the governor had massacred the Mongol caravan. After being taken alive, the governor met a painful demise; silver was poured in his eyes and ears until he perished. [10] Next to fall were the cities of Kojend and Jend, major cities in the east. Hearing of the fall of Jend, Shah Mohammed sent 50,000 troops from Samarkand to meet Jebe and his cavalry before they could reach Transoxianan ground. Jebe and his troops overtook their enemies and pressed onward toward the Shah's command post in the east: Samarkand. Transoxiana, Samarkand, the plain of Nasaf, Amu Darya, and the lands between them became subject to Mongol rule as they searched for the Shah. [11] The tireless militant power of the Mongol army led the Shah to be abandoned by his people, ultimately leading to the defeat of the Khwarezmian state. The Shah died on January 10, 1221 of pleurisy, spending his last days in poverty.[12] With most of the land ravaged and the natives without a resident leader, Genghis Khan placed Khwarezm in the hands of military governors and prepared to leave. The western lands were, therefore, under Mongol rule, and a newly forged peace was restored along the Silk Road. Growth from this peace was lucrative; Muslim merchants began trading so heavily that goods flowed freely from the northern reaches of the Yellow Sea to the oasis cities in the Taklamakan.

### Restored Trade and Trade in New Lands

The conquests of the Mongol Empire in the early thirteenth century left the nomadic people with a sense of wealth and a taste for luxury. The Silk Road was a major provider for both, allowing the elite to indulge and the poor to thrive. Silk under Mongol rule was a lucrative trade supported by their ability to impose. They established new silk factories to boost the production of silk in the newly acquired lands in Khwarezm, and sent Chinese silk weavers to Samarkand to work with local Muslim weavers.[13] This kind of organized

technical training allowed the Silk Road to flourish like never before, opening more routes along the road and catering to a broader array of travelers. After the western lands were laid to waste, the Mongol empire was able to build infrastructure that could make travel on the Silk Road easier. This infrastructure and desire for luxury goods, both the result of conquest, would give the Silk Road the staying-power it needed to outlast the Mongol Empire—though it fell to a more lucrative maritime trade shortly thereafter.

The most highly sought commodity on the Mongol Silk Road was cloth-of-gold. It represented power and wealth, as it was used as draperies in palace tents of the elite and worn as clothing during grand festivals.[14] It served as a symbol of wealth, which the Mongol elite had grown accustomed to after fifty years of cross-continental reign. They would hold massive festivities, celebrating at every opportunity, but this luxury good had to be produced and moved across the Silk Road to reach wealthy Mongols in north-western Asia. This lust for precious foreign products was a driving force for Mongol expansion. As these precious goods were traded across Eurasia, so were localized goods that came with religious and ethnic minorities. Tracking this trade signifies the reach of the Mongol empire; as the Silk Road flourished and expanded, so did their reach.

Under the leadership of Ogedei, the Mongol Empire had expanded as far east as Hungary by 1257 C.E., with the trade network reaching as far as Italy. The poor and the elite were able to benefit from Mongol expansion, as most of those subjugated by the Mongol Empire enjoyed exotic luxury goods, gold, and the finest silk. The merchants on the Silk Road provided a crucial service for the Mongols, allowing gold, silver, and their spoils of war to be exchanged for goods the Mongols really wanted, such as silk and cloth-of-gold.[15] Were it not for the merchants—most of which were Muslims engaged in small scale commerce—these goods could not have made it so far. To ensure the safety of its merchant partners, the Mongol Empire had to maintain, and often restore, oasis cities they had recently destroyed. In the arid western reaches of the Mongol Empire, agrarian societies depended heavily on irrigation systems, previously destroyed by Subutai's troops.[16] The only way to support these systems and reestablish trade was to rebuild the war-torn cities. After these cities were rebuilt, silk factories were erected while Chinese and Muslim weavers began learning one another's technique for cloth making. These cloth mak-

ers brought in more merchants, and nurtured the growth of the Silk Road as new routes opened to sell goods throughout the end of the thirteenth century. Without these merchants seeking wares for their Mongol counterparts, trade on the Silk Road would have slowed dramatically.

The Mongols had to rebuild Samarkand in the same way they had to rebuild cities closer to the central empire, but more was at stake with this city of commerce because of its link with European trade. The importance of Samarkand as a trade city is paramount, considering it served as a gateway to the western trade routes on the Silk Road. When the rebuilding process began, the Mongol empire relied heavily on preexisting systems of economic support. The complex irrigation systems in Samarkand, established during the early Middle Ages, took a major hit during Genghis Khan's conquest of the Khwarezm Empire, but were slowly rebuilt throughout the reign of his Mongol predecessors. These rebuilt irrigation systems boosted the small agrarian economy, reduced disease, and made the city more appealing to Silk Road travelers.[17] Samarkand's merchants, the Sogdians, were another column of economic support during the rebuilding period. Their commercial interests in trade and their well-established connections with merchants in the west made them an indispensable resource for rebuilding the oasis city, and boosted trade even after Mongol ruin. With trade beginning to regenerate in Samarkand and other oasis cities under Mongol reconstruction, the Silk Road entered its last great age.

#### Decline of the Silk Road

The decline of a nation most often comes with a great defeat, whether it be economic, political, or in warfare. After the death of Ogedei, a new Khan was chosen. Khubilai Khan, nephew of Ogedei and grandson of Genghis, reigned much like his predecessors: conquering multiple foreign lands. His most notable conquest was that of the Southern Song Dynasty, which reigned south of the Yellow River Valley. His synthesized politics, which were meant to appeal to the Chinese as well, opened the floor for leadership of a new government based on Mongol rule. The Yuan Dynasty and a stable, prosperous state was the product of Khubilai's reign. After nearly seventy years of Yuan Rule, Tamerlane came to the throne in 1360 C.E. He was one of the most ferocious conquerors the world had seen at the time, reducing the Genghisid to nothing more than figureheads. He led "kill-and-de-

stroy" campaigns against other oasis cities and worsened, in many cases, the damage done by Genghis Khan, only partly repaired thereafter. "Cities were depopulated, fields and orchards dried up, and the Silk Road trade never recovered." [18] He reduced any opposing city to rubble, and crippled foreign relations with his neighbors. Even when the Ming Dynasty took control of East Asia in the latter half of the fourteenth century, the Silk Road was unable to rise from the destruction left by Tamerlane. The Ming, still very aware of the pain caused by the tyrant ruler, turned its politics inward and shut out the rest of the world.

Tamerlane's conquests were incredibly destructive, burning cities and leaving economies crippled, but he did leave a glimmer of hope seated in the west. Trade in the city of Samarkand reached its height during his reign, proving Mongol influence on Silk Road trade routes. A slow rebuilding from the ruin by his predecessors had left Tamerlane with the right to rebuild Samarkand at his own discretion. He:

Gave orders...that a street should be built to pass right through Samarkand, which should have shops opened on either side of it in which every kind of merchandise should be sold, and this new street was to go from one side of the city through to the other side, traversing the heart of the township.[19]

Tamerlane rebuilt much like Khubilai and Ogedei had, boosting the local economy by erecting shops and drawing merchants to the oasis cities that had been destroyed. Samarkand was the final outpost of trade on the Silk Road for the Mongols, but its trade could not support the weight of a crumbling empire.

#### Conclusions

The rise, prosperity, and decline of the Mongol Empire was interlocked with that of the Silk Road. Under mostly Mongol control, the Silk Road saw moments of chaos during wars with western nations. Although conquest was not Genghis Khan's initial intent, he had a responsibility as a leader to take the crown of Shah Mohammed, and punish the corrupt members of the Shah's government. Great generals, under the order of the Khan, stormed the foreign land seeking vengeance. After discovering the vast benefits of conquest in the west, the Khan grew to believe all the land under the sky should be unified under one sword—his own. Peace

grew from destruction and ruin that was left in the lands in the west, and with that peace locals regained the right to trade freely. The Mongols encouraged this trade by restoring the infrastructure of destroyed cities, training people in new technical skills acquired in the west, and financing merchants. The Mongol Empire revitalized trade on the Silk Road, stretching Chinese silk as far as the shores of Italy.

The global impact of the trade and conquest led by the Mongols was the last wide-spread, land-based global exchange known to mankind. It fostered in a new maritime trade that revolutionized global relations, just as the Silk Road once had done. The Mongol Empire fell in sync with trade on Silk Road, as a new dynasty came to power. The legacy of the Mongol Empire is undoubtedly riddled with complications, but it gave rise to the last great age of the Silk Road. As academics are still puzzled over the rapid development of the Mongols from a divided people to a conqueror of nations, their first step into Central Asia is a major point of disagreement. Though there were clearly moments that left central Asia in ruin, we can see that development, trade, and a stable Mongol government led the Silk Road into its last great age.

## NOTES

- [1] This empire occupied current-day Iran. It was crucial largely because of its proximity to the Aurel Sea. There are several variations on the spelling of this empire's name, but I have elected to use the most common.
- [2] Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (The New Oxford World History, 2010), 109.
- [3] Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (The New Oxford World History, 2010), 114.
- [4] Timothy May, "Central Asia: The Mongols," *The Great Empires of Asia* (University of California Press Berkley, Los Angeles, 2010), 24-25.
- [5] Michael Prawdin, *The History of the Mongol Empire* (London George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1953), 155.
- [6] Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (The New Oxford World History, 2010), 112.
- [7] Morris Rossabi, "The Mongols in World History: Asian Topics in World History,"
- [8] Michael Prawdin, *The History of the Mongol Empire* (London George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1953), 155.
- [9] James Chambers, *The Devils's Horseman: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (Antheneum New York, 1979), 9.
- [10] James Chambers, *The Devils's Horseman: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (Antheneum New York, 1979), 13.
- [11] Bertold Spuler, *History of the Mongols, Based on Eastern and Western Accounts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (University of California Press, 1972), 29-39.
- [12] Chambers, *The Devils's Horseman: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 16.

- [13] John Masson Smith Jr., "The Mongols and the Silk Road"
- [14] Smith Jr., "The Mongols and the Silk Road"
- [15] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 231.
- [16] Monks and Merchants: "The Silk Road, a Larger View."
- [17] Daniel C. Waugh, "Silk Road Seattle – Samarkand"
- [18] "Monks and Merchants "The Silk Road, a Larger View."
- [19] Daniel C. Waugh. "Silk Road Seattle – Samarkand"

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