2.1 The Silk Road as a Channel for Expansion

Chinggis Khan himself (d. 1227) began the conquest of the commercial axis linking Northern China and Central Asia. Not only did he impose Mongol rule on the Easternmost segments of the Silk Road, but his political and military initiatives also set clear paths of expansion along the route for his successors to follow.

2.1.1 Chinggis Khan and the Silk Road

The surprising shrewdness with which this probably illiterate nomad ruler approached questions of long-distance trade, and the great importance which he placed on it, are neatly caught in what has become known as the Otrar incident.1

The conquest of Northern China, culminating in the capture of Beijing in 1215, was incomparably more useful to Chinggis Khan’s foreign reputation than the proclamation of the empire in 1206. This success also roused the envy of the Shah of Khwarezm, Muḥammad II, who ruled Transoxiana and Eastern Iran, especially since it was well known that he planned to annex those same territories which the Mongols had recently taken.2 He sent an embassy to Chinggis Khan to learn more concrete details of developments in the Far East. The envoys probably arrived at their destination in 1216.3 They were initially warmly received, but this changed for the worse once the envoys, most of them merchants, asked exorbitant prices for the goods which they had brought with them. Their overpricing was based on the assumption that Chinggis Khan, being a barbarian, did

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1 The whole episode can be found, in an outline drawn from Eastern sources, in Boyle, “History,” pp. 303 ff., a work which focuses on the political history of the Mongols in Persia; cf. also Petrushevsky, “Condition,” which looks at the socio-economic situation in the Ilkhanate.
2 Barthold, Turkestan, p. 395.
not understand trade and commerce. This infuriated him, and to show that he was familiar with such concepts, he ordered that the merchants submit their goods to his treasury for evaluation, thereby proving that he understood the ideas of price and value. The chronicle account goes on to say that the merchants were ashamed and had to admit that they had been wrong about the khan, and subsequently lowered their prices.4

The Great Khan’s behaviour once the guests were due to leave is also relevant in understanding how he viewed long-distance commerce. He ordered his sons and other Mongolian magnates to detail two or three trustworthy men to join each merchant, equipped with bars of gold and silver bullion so that they could travel in the Khwarezmshah’s lands and buy valuable goods with which they were then to return home.5

The breadth of the Great Khan’s horizons, and the extent of his knowledge of Asian commerce, may be guessed from the names of his visitors, which reveal their places of origin: ‘Umar Khoja from Otrar on the Syr Darya river, Fakhr al-Dīn of Bukhara, Amin al-Dīn of Herat, and Ḥammāl from Meragha in distant Azerbaijan would all have been able to tell the khan of the glories of their cities.6 Such stories would certainly have allowed Chinggis Khan to form a clear picture of the Silk Road.

Merchants also provided the Mongol state with other information, going beyond such a general overview. Because of their detailed knowledge of Asia’s physical and economic geography, they proved to be indispensable advisers at the planning stages of military campaigns, and afterwards when they accompanied the armies into hostile territory.7

The truly decisive significance which Chinggis Khan accorded to long-distance trade as a guiding factor in the political expansion of his empire is very clearly shown in the further course of events.

In response to Muḥammad II’s embassy, messengers were sent to Transoxiana in the spring of 1217 to present the Shah with the following proposal from the Khan: “I know very well how exalted is your rank, and the extent of your power; I know the size of your empire, nor am I unaware

4 Juwayni/Boyle, p. 78; Barthold, Turkestan, p. 396.
5 Juwayni/Boyle, pp. 78–79; on Chinggis Khan’s attitude to trade, investment and credit in general, cf. Vernadsky, Mongols, p. 107.
6 Nasawi/Houdas, p. 59, Nasawi/Bunyatov, p. 79.
7 Barthold, Turkestan, p. 407: “Chinggis-Khan himself, as well as his sons, were accompanied by Muslim merchants, who acted as intermediaries between the Mongols and the population and undoubtedly acquainted the Mongols with the local conditions. […] The strategic plans of Chinggis-Khan and their brilliant execution prove that the geographical conditions were well known to him.”