SOME REMARKS ON THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHINGIS KHAN’S EMPIRE

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The political and military aspects of the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century have attracted the attention of Western scholars since the first half of the eighteenth century and much work has been done since. As a result we have today several good studies on the Mongol campaigns in Asia, the Near East and Europe.

The first serious investigation of Mongol medieval society based on original sources is B.Ya. Vladimirtsov’s masterly work *The Social Structure of the Mongols,* published posthumously in 1934, which is still the fundamental text on the subject. Its appearance gave rise to lively controversies among scholars, especially in the Soviet Union and Japan, where it was first translated in 1937 and where numerous investigations of Mongol society have appeared in the last thirty years.

As for the economic aspect of the Mongol conquest, several penetrating studies on the effect of Mongol rule in China, Mongolia, Iran and Russia have been contributed by scholars of various countries in the last two decades. In the field of Mongolian institutional history there are, moreover, a number of important monographs dealing especially with the legal and administrative system of the Yüan period.

Although much remains to be done in all these fields, a good deal of pioneer research has been carried out already. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, of the ideological aspect of the Mongol invasion. I refer in particular to the ideology behind the empire-building policy of Chingis Khan which determined the later political doctrine of the Mongol emperors.

It is a well known fact that, whatever the real social and economic causes of the Mongol conquest, Chingis Khan himself motivated his military ventures in terms of an order received from Heaven (*tengri; tenggeri* in the *Secret History of the Mongols*). His successors followed his example and further elaborated on this politico-religious theme. From a number of imperial edicts and from official letters to the Pope and the monarchs of Europe issued by their chancelleries in Qaraqorum, China and Iran, as well as from numerous epigraphic and literary sources, it is possible to reconstruct the political doctrine of the first Mongol rulers. Efforts in this direction were made as early as the 1820s by the French scholar Abel-Rémusat. However, the only two really important contributions to the subject are the article by W. Kotwicz *Formules initiales des documents mongols aux XIIIe et XIVe ss* published in *Rocznik orientalistyczny* in 1934, and E. Voegelin’s article ‘The Mongol Orders of Submission to European Powers, 1245–1255’, which appeared in *Byzantion* in 1941. The latter study represents
a considerable advance on its predecessor. From a perceptive analysis of eight official
documents dating from the reign of Güyük to that of the Möngke, Voegelin has been
able to reconstruct the rather sophisticated empire-building conception of these
emperors.

According to this conception, the right to rule over the whole world had been con-
ferred by Eternal Heaven (mönge tengri) on Chingis Khan and his successors, who were
considered in this system as the counterpart of Heaven on earth. The khans of the
imperial line ruled as universal sovereigns on the strength of their ‘good fortune’ and
by the very power of Heaven. The universality of their rule is aptly described by the
expression dalai-yin qayan found in the legend of the seal of Güyük. Although many
nations at the time were still de facto outside Mongol control, they were already de jure
potential members of the Mongol empire-in-the-making. It followed that those peoples
and nations that had not yet submitted to the Mongol court and who, by this very fact,
had failed to accept the doctrine of the Mongol oikoumenê were regarded also as rebels
(bulya irgen) against a divinely inspired social order. War against these nations was,
therefore, morally and ideologically right and necessary, in exactly the same way as the
thirteenth-century crusades against the heretics were right and necessary in the eyes of
most contemporary Christians.

This explains why the Mongols until the time of Qubilai, i.e. two generations after
Chingis Khan, could not conceive of international relations on the basis of parity with
foreign countries, and why the tone of their letters to foreign leaders was that of an
arrogant feudal lord to an insubordinate vassal.

Since the crime of turning a deaf ear to the Mongol court’s order of submission was
not, in the conception just described, merely an offence against the emperor, but an
overt rebellion against Heaven’s Decree, punishment for the offender had, of course, to
be proportionate. Hence the frightful massacres and destructions, and the complete lack
of pity towards the civilian population, which was often annihilated. Here again we
find an exact parallel in the practice of the crusading armies.

The terse terminology of the Mongol orders contained in the imperial edicts and in
diplomatic correspondence (later crystallized into stereotyped formulas through
chancellery practice) rested on a set of equally terse injunctions governing all aspects of
Mongol life which, according to tradition, were issued by Chingis Khan himself. These
formed a code of laws known as Jasay, which in essence was a systematization
and adaptation of tribal customary laws to the needs of the ‘modern’ military state
founded by Chingis Khan in 1206.

The code as such is now lost, but quotations from and references to it are preserved in
the works of Persian, Arabic, Syriac, Armenian and Chinese historians of the thirteenth
and fourteenth centuries. These extracts confirm that the supreme authority proceeded
from Eternal Heaven, whose power guided and protected the emperor. The
basic concept of Heaven’s protection of the Mongol ruler needs, I think, a closer
scrutiny. Neither Kotwicz, nor Voegelin, nor any of the other authors who have dis-
cussed Chingis’ attitude towards the Supreme Power, have dealt with it satisfactorily.
The documents examined by Voegelin are, we must not forget, a production of the post-
Chingiside period: they were issued between twenty and thirty years after his death. The
surviving fragments of the Jasay are also found in works written well after the death of
the conqueror in 1227. The only major contemporary source on Chingis Khan is the
Secret History of the Mongols, the first redaction of which dates, in the present writer’s
opinion, from 1228. The portion of this text dealing with the life of Chingis Khan