Book Reviews

*The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410*

Peter Jackson


This is a marvellous book. It is also a vindication of the Leverhulme research awards, and shows what can be achieved by a thorough and assiduous scholar when given the precious opportunity of three years away from University commitments for ‘reading, thinking and writing’ (p. xi) – activities that are unfortunately almost unimaginable when one is actually ‘at work’. But that is another story; maybe if the Mongols had conquered Europe, things would have turned out differently.

One of the many merits of Peter Jackson’s long and detailed study is that it explains very clearly why this did not happen; why indeed the tangible results of this colossal confrontation were perhaps curiously limited. A great deal of extra devastation and violence, of course, in an age that was already pretty brutal, but after that, a string of failed diplomatic initiatives, failed attempts to win souls, relatively short-lived commercial ventures. The impact of the Mongols across Asia was, naturally, much greater and more permanent.

In the early thirteenth century, the peoples of Europe and the eastern Mediterranean were neither ready (nor much more willing than they are now) to embrace the globalisation that the Mongol venture implied – not just from the standpoint of political submission, but because they had their own dreams of world dominion, largely couched in terms of confessional and salvationist objectives. In the Middle East, the demise of the Caliphate (one of the first casualties of Möngke Khan’s assault against the West in the 1250s) did not in any way reflect a declining vigour in Islam, though no-one emerged to harness this vigour before the new military regime of the Mamluk (slave) Sultans in Egypt in the thirteenth century. Theirs was a defensive war, fought generally successfully over the next century or more. In the west, by contrast, the Papacy was increasingly the main source of political decision and military action and the struggle with the Mongols was conceived in terms of the threats to and opportunities for the advance of Latin Christendom.

Professor Jackson’s first two chapters set the scene on the eve of the Mongol invasions both in the West and on the Inner Asian steppes. In both cases, we are given a rich and nuanced survey of the situation, based on an...
enormous array of documentation, setting the tone for the whole book. The author discusses not only the strength of the Papacy, but the political divisions in Europe, the attitudes of the church to the schismatic Christians especially in the east, and the Europeans’ very rudimentary knowledge of the world beyond the pale – based partly on a shadow of the lost literature of the ancient world and mainly on fantasy and preoccupation with the monstrous and marvellous to be encountered in the East. All these ingredients go a long way to determining the West’s reaction to the Mongols and to the shape of subsequent relations. By contrast, the Mongols seem to have been rather well-informed about the enemies they were dealing with, and pragmatic in the application of this knowledge. Particularly important is their attitude to religion, discussed briefly here and again later (esp. pp. 268–79), highlighting the opportunities for mutual misunderstanding. As the author points out, Chinggis Khan was interested in acquiring life eternal only in a strictly biological sense (p. 45).

With their empire in place by the death of Chinggis Khan, the Mongols sought consolidation and further expansion. Jackson gives a clear and thorough account of the invasions of Hungary and Poland (chap. 3), followed by the despatch of papal missions (chap. 4) with the fruitless twin aims of establishing contacts with the Mongols (hopes rising that they might be susceptible to conversion to Christianity) and with the Muslims, who might conceivably turn to Rome for support against the common foe.

In the end, the Mongol threat was reduced by their own internal divisions and the great expeditions of the late 1250s despatched by Möngke Khan proved to be the last coordinated efforts to pursue the dream of Mongol world conquest. This is the subject of chapter 5, one to which Jackson has already made a significant contribution in an influential article published in 1978. Following the stalling of their military machine, the Mongols in the Middle East themselves turned to diplomacy in their efforts to defeat the Mamluks of Egypt with help from the West (chap. 7). The failure of any such goal was partly due to the extraordinary political and logistical difficulties in achieving any concerted action, but, as Jackson is at pains to stress both in this chapter and the preceding, Christian alliance with the Mongols in the Holy Land was scarcely an attractive option, while the West alternated between hope of converting the Mongols and the view that they represented one of the signs of the apocalypse – despite the somewhat more sober and rational reports of the friars who had actually seen the Mongol courts for themselves.

Chapter 8 covers the complicated relations between the Golden Horde and the kingdoms of eastern Europe. One can perhaps sympathise with Boniface IX’s apparent unawareness that the conflict in Poland and Lithuania was partly between two Mongol factions, one supported by the Poles, when he authorized funding to resist Mongol aggression in the region