MONGOL MANPOWER
AND PERSIAN POPULATION

BY

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During the space of twenty eight years, as I have mentioned, the Scythians continued lords of the whole of Upper Asia. They entered Asia in pursuit of the Cimmerians, and overthrew the empire of the Medes, who till they came possessed the sovereignty. On their return to their homes after the long absence of twenty-eight years, a task awaited them little less troublesome than their struggle with the Medes. They found an army of no small size prepared to oppose their entrance. For the Scythian women, when they saw that time went on, and their husbands did not come back, had intermarried with their slaves.

Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, IV: 1

What army in the whole world can equal the Mongol army? In time of action, when attacking and assaulting, they are like trained wild beasts out after game, and in the days of peace and security they are like sheep, yielding milk, and wool, and many other useful things. In misfortune and adversity they are free from dissent and opposition. It is an army after the fashion of a peasantry, being liable to all manner of contributions . . . . It is also a peasantry in the guise of an army, all of them, great and small, noble and base, in time of battle becoming swordsmen, archers and lancers and advancing in whatever manner the occasion requires.

Juwaini (Boyle trans.), I, p. 30

Modern scholars consider the Mongol conquests as triumphs of quality rather than quantity. They attribute the Mongols' extraordinary military achievements, the winning of an unequalled empire almost without the loss of a battle, much less a war, to their remarkable strategic and tactical skills, and to their good organization, great discipline and matchless leadership. These interpretations are correct, as far as they go; the Mongols had these qualities, but some further qualification is needed. Most of the methods employed by the Mongols in war were not new. The mounted archer, able to loose the "Parthian shot" (and a variety of others), had been riding all across the Inner
Asian steppe and in parts of the Middle East for almost two millenia (since before the Parthians, in fact) and the styles of fighting and campaigning appropriate to him had long been worked out. The essential methods of evasion and encirclement had been used strategically by the Scythians against Darius, and tactically by the Parthians at Carrhae and the Turks at Manzikert, to cite only a few examples. And nomads before the Mongols had enjoyed the advantage over sedentary peoples of cheaper horses and socially common cavalrymen. Mongol warfare was distinguished not so much by its skill and aptitudes as by its scale and persistence.

The size of the Mongol armies has not been appreciated. The sources of Mongol history know the quality of Mongol troops, but they remark as well the great size of their forces. Marco Polo claimed that the Mongol army numbered between six hundred and six hundred and fifty thousand men in Russia and the Middle East together\(^1\) and Rashiduddin\(^2\) and Haython\(^3\) reported six hundred thousands in Russia alone. Modern scholars have disregarded these figures. Some make perfunctory efforts, without reaching agreement or attempting precision, to estimate the numbers of Mongol and non-Mongol troops in the imperial army, but most agree implicitly with Barthold that the sources give "fantastic figures" that "deserve no credence whatsoever"\(^4\). They are too skeptical. The sources give us manpower data that the Mongols themselves compiled and relied upon in conducting their masterful warfare, and these data show that the Mongol armies were very large indeed. The Mongol conquests were the product of the irresistible combination of skill and numbers.

The story of the Mongol conquests may seem, and is often made, one of Davids facing Goliaths, a handful of nomads taking on China

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