
The abortive Mongol invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281 have achieved renown partly due to their association with the term ‘Kamikaze’ or ‘Divine Wind’. The Japanese developed a myth that the reputedly Heaven-sent typhoon, or Divine Wind, which partly undermined the Mongol expedition, or other natural catastrophes would always protect Japan from foreign invaders. This myth may have contributed to use of the term ‘kamikaze’ to identify suicide pilots of World War Two.

Beyond their links with later Japanese history, the invasions reveal a great deal about the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China. The Yuan dynastic history writes that 140,000 troops took part in the 1281 campaign, a figure that some scholars have questioned. Even if that figure was inflated, the preparations for the expedition and the ensuing costs strained China’s resources and led to serious economic problems. The expeditionary force surely consisted of tens of thousands of troops because all the contemporary sources concur that the government expenditures on the missions were enormous.

A number of explanations have been offered for these campaigns against Japan. One is that the Japanese rejected Khubilai Khan’s orders of submission, challenging the world’s greatest empire. The Shogunate’s executions of several of Khubilai’s envoys were even more provocative because the Mongolians believed in the absolute inviolability of ambassadors. A possible second motive for the expeditions was extraction of tribute from the Japanese. The Mongols traditionally sought to extract as much wealth as possible from states which had submitted. Still another motivation was to disrupt Japanese trade with the Southern Song dynasty. Khubilai was determined to crush the Song, the last remaining Chinese opposition to Mongolian rule, and sought to prevent commercial relations that propped up the Song. Thus, he attempted to bring Japan under Mongolian control in order to block its trade with the Song.
Written sources have been consulted to devise these explanations, but until the 1980s few discoveries of the expeditions’ material remains had been made. In 1980, Tūrō Mozai, a retired engineer who had been interested in the Mongols since boyhood, turned his attention to recovering as many of the sunken Mongol ships and as much of their treasures as possible. The pace of recovery has accelerated over the past twenty years, leading to significant finds, which are beginning to yield a clearer portrait of the Mongolian expeditions.

James Delgado, a nautical archaeologist, provides the first book-length, laymen’s description of these efforts. Had he just reported on the archaeological efforts, his book would have been a valuable contribution. Indeed, chapters ten through twelve, which offer detective-like reports on the underwater explorations and the increasing number of artifacts they have found, are interesting. However, in the first two-thirds of the book, he attempts to provide a historical account of Yuan China and its expeditions against Japan. The author is not well versed in Chinese and Mongol history. Although he makes a considerable effort to compensate for his lack of training, these chapters are not entirely reliable either on facts or interpretations. Because he does not know that Chinese can be transcribed in several systems, he mixes up the Wade-Giles and pinyin systems of transcription. Adopting the erroneous views of popularizers, he portrays Chinggis Khan as having ‘brought in a rule of law, abolished kidnapping and torture…[and] noted that no one was above the law’ (40). Unlike the distorted opinions of the popularizers, who know none of the languages of the primary sources, he does not go as far in his hagiography as to present Chinggis as a forerunner of democracy and as a believer in a United Nations. However, when he depends on popularizers, he is led astray. He cannot distinguish between solid and well-researched studies of the Mongolians and the often sensationalist popularizers whom he consulted to vet his manuscript. It is unfortunate, for example, that he did not read Paul Ratchnevsky’s excellent biography of Chinggis (1991) instead of recent popularizations.

However, I do not wish to dwell on Delgado’s errors and misinterpretations. His last three chapters provide a fine description of the remarkable discoveries over the past thirty years. He notes that a commander’s seal written in the ‘Phags-pa script, the written language developed by order of

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