THE MONGOL TRANSFORMATION: 
FROM THE STEPPE TO EURASIAN EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the rise of the Mongol Empire in its Inner Asian context, looking for evolutionary versus revolutionary features of the Mongol imperial enterprise. It then assesses the Mongol impact on Eurasia from three angles: the Mongol contributions to Eurasian integration; their impact on the Eurasian geo-political balance; and the long-term impact of their statecraft on the different regions over which they ruled.

What event or occurrence has been more notable than the beginning of the government of Chinggis Khan, that it should be considered a new era? (Rashid al-Din)

The Mongol conquests have been defined as the last chapter of the Eurasian transformations of the tenth-thirteenth centuries. Yet with the same, or even better, justification they can also be regarded as the first chapter of a new era, perhaps the early-modern one. Certainly the impact of the Mongol period was strongly felt in the post-thirteenth century world as well. Before addressing the issue of Mongol legacy on Eurasia, however, I will analyze the Inner Asian background of the

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Mongol Empire during the tenth to twelfth centuries, looking for evolutionary versus revolutionary features of the Mongol imperial enterprise. Then, the Mongol impact on Eurasia will be reassessed from three angles: the Mongol contribution to Eurasian integration, their impact on the Eurasian geo-political balance, and the future impact of their statecraft on the different regions under their realm.

_The Mongols and the Inner Asian Tradition: Evolution versus Revolution_

The Mongols did not arise from nothing, nor did they lack a cultural legacy of their own. In terms of political culture, religion, and military organization they continued a long tradition of steppe empires, while in terms of their relations with the sedentary civilizations they were influenced by the legacy of inter-regional nomadic states that arose in Manchuria and Central Asia in the tenth to twelfth centuries. Combining these two traditions, the unprecedented success of the Mongols resulted in a situation which, despite many continuities, was more revolutionary than evolutionary.

In terms of political-religious ideology, the Mongols followed the precedents established by earlier steppe empires that originated in Mongolia, notably the Xiongnu (third century BCE to fourth century CE), the Turks (sixth to eighth centuries CE), and their successors, the Uighurs (744-840), among which the Turkic Empire was by far the most influential. Those empires developed an ideology that legitimized the appearance and endurance of a super-tribal unit, and employed a military organization as an important structural element in the consolidation of such units.

The primary source of super-tribal unity in the steppe world was the belief in Tengri (Heaven), the supreme sky god of the steppe, who was able to confer the right to rule on earth to a single clan.¹ The heavenly charisma resided in the royal clan, individual members of which could be elevated to the Khaqanate, the supreme office of the ruler, or toppled; but non-members could not aspire to the throne. The Khaqan was the political and military leader of the empire, whose possession of

¹ Whether this notion originated in the Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven, in a similar Iranian concept or in an Indo-Aryan concept brought first to the steppe and then into China is unimportant. For a recent discussion see Samping Chen, “Son of Heaven and Son of God: Interactions among Ancient Asiatic Cultures regarding Sacral Kingship and Theophoric Names,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd series, 12 (2002), 289-325.