COMMAND PERFORMANCES: ENTERTAINERS IN THE MONGOLIAN EMPIRE

Among the nomads of Inner Asia public entertainments were a common feature of life. Some, such as the recitation of epic tales, were homegrown. So, too, were the performances of shamans whose spiritual quests and magical cures were accompanied by music and dance that induced ecstasy and symbolized or dramatized their journeys to other realms. In the steppe, as elsewhere, religion and entertainment were not sharply distinguished from one another.

The nature of the entertainments available in the nomadic world was conditioned as well by their patrimonial notions of government and society, which required rulers to provide regularly food and drink to their immediate followers. These feasts, called qurim in Mongolian and toy in Turkic, were often accompanied by various entertainments, many performed by foreign professionals. There was in fact a wide and impressive array of performers attracted to nomadic camps and courts: acrobats, jugglers, tightrope walkers, fire-eaters, magicians, fortune-tellers, contortionists, trainers of wild and exotic animals, and jesters. Naturally, entertainers of this type become increasingly visible after the Mongols formed a state at the beginning of the thirteenth century, a state that in the following decades rapidly extended its sway over a multitude of peoples and lands, and thus over extensive pools of talented performers.

The Mongols of the imperial era exhibited an early and unmistakable interest in the entertainments of other cultures. The biography of Muqali,

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Chinggis Qan's viceroy in North China, reports that in 1216 at Tung-p'ing in Shantung there was a general massacre of the population, "with the exception of artisans and actors." It is entirely possible that some of those spared at Tung-p'ing were among the troupe of Chinese actors who, according to a Persian account, some twenty years later performed a play for Chinggis Qan's son and successor, Ögödei (r. 1229–41), at Qara Qorum, the imperial capital in central Mongolia. The treatment accorded the actors of China was, moreover, hardly an isolated event; rather it became a standard operating procedure, one which the Mongolian armies took with them on their campaigns in the West. For instance, once Bukhara was occupied in 1220 the assaulting forces, led in person by Chinggis Qan, demanded wine and sent for the local singing girls (mughanniyah), who sang and danced for the victors. Indeed, the Mongols' intense interest in performers of various sorts became so well established that capitulating foes, such as the prince of Mosul in 1262, made their initial approaches to the imperial armies in the company of musicians and acrobats. Obviously, this was a carefully calculated diplomatic move to placate and please a powerful enemy but it was also a means by which the Mongols gained immediate knowledge of the local talent.

It should be recognized, however, that the acquisition of worthy entertainers was not simply a matter of coercion and cooptation. The very wealth and fame of the Mongolian court soon began to attract talented individuals from across Eurasia. This is nicely illustrated in an anecdote, recounted by Juvaynî, concerning a jester (maskharah) from Asia Minor who, drawn by the reputation of the Mongols for largesse, traveled to the court of Ögödei, where he found employment and rewards beyond his wildest expectations. The position of jester, which the Mongols called nadanchi, is certainly one that can be associated with developed court cultures, and this performer's long and voluntary trek across a continent testifies to the attractive powers of the Mongols.

Over time the Mongols enjoyed a great variety of entertainments but in this brief study we will concentrate on only two classes of performers — athletes