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YVO OF NARBONA

The Mongols, 1243

Within a couple of generations after 1206, a nomadic tribe of herders from the grasslands of Central Asia created a mounted army that conquered an expanse from the Pacific coast of Asia to Eastern Europe. With the conquest of the Islamic caliphate at Baghdad in 1258 and Song dynasty China by 1276, Mongols ruled about a hundred million people, having killed about thirty million others. They ruled almost a third of the human population and the largest land empire the world had ever known. Who were they? How did they manage such a feat? What were its costs?

To help answer some of those questions, we have a selection from a letter written in 1243 from one Yvo of Narbona¹ (we know nothing else about him) to the archbishop of Bordeaux, France. Yvo has just witnessed the conquest of Hungary by a Mongol army. He describes what he saw and also relates the account of an Englishman (also unknown, even by name) who worked for the Mongols as an interpreter before he escaped amidst the Mongol withdrawal from Hungary. What does this document tell us about the Mongols? What does it suggest about the reasons for their rapid expansion? What does it suggest about their impact?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

No people before modern times received greater condemnation than the Mongols. Their negative reputation originated in the writings of their victims almost immediately after Genghis Khan expanded

¹Narbona, or Narbonne, was a Mediterranean port city in what is today southern France.

Source: Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes: Contayning a History of the World, in Sea voyages & lande-Travells, by Englishmen & others [with Purchas his Pilgrimage or Relations of the world]* (London: William Stanley for Henrie Featherstone 1625–26) 5 vols., 183–87. Spelling modernized and Americanized.

Mongol power into China and Central Asia in the 1210s and 1220s. The second-generation Mongol onslaught on Russia and Europe had a similar impact. Here we get an eyewitness account of the Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241. Actually, we have two accounts: The tale of an Englishman who served as interpreter for the Mongols is contained within the letter of Yvo, who was also a witness. Which of these two witnesses is more objective, or less moralistic? What examples do you see of either witness judging rather than describing? What descriptions do not seem factually based? What examples do you see of either witness interpreting Mongol behavior in a favorable light?

Part of an Epistle written by one Yvo of Narbona unto the Archbishop of Bordeaux, containing the confession of an Englishman as touching the barbarous demeanor of the Tartars,² which had lived long among them, and was drawn along perforce with them in their expedition against Hungary: Recorded by Mathew Paris in the year of our Lord 1243.

The Lord therefore being provoked to indignation, by reason of this and other sins committed among us Christians, is become, as it were, a destroying enemy, and a dreadful avenger.³ This I may justly affirm to be true, because a huge nation, and a barbarous and inhumane people, whose law is lawless, whose wrath is furious, even the rod of God's anger, overruns and utterly wastes infinite countries, cruelly abolishing all things where they come, with fire and sword. And this present summer, the foresaid nation, being called Tartars, departing out of Hungary,⁴ which they had surprised by treason, laid siege unto the very same town, wherein I myself abode, with many thousands of soldiers: neither were there in the said town on our part above 50 men of war, whom, together with 20 crossbows, the captain had left in garrison. All these, out of certain high places, beholding the enemies vast army, and abhorring the beastly cruelty of Anti-Christ his accomplices, signified forthwith unto their governor, the hideous lamentations of his Christian subjects, who suddenly being surprised in all the province adjoining, without any difference or respect of condition, fortune, sex, or age, were

²The Mongols were misidentified as "Tatars" (another central Asian people), which then became "Tartars," probably to suggest people of "Tartarus," the underground place of punishment in Greek mythology, that is, devils. [Ed.]

³Like the prophets of ancient Israel, Christians interpreted invasions as God's punishment for their sins. [Ed.]

⁴The Mongols invaded Hungary in 1241 under Batu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan. They withdrew in the spring of 1242 because of the death of Ogodei, the successor to Genghis, to return to Mongolia to choose the next Great Khan. [Ed.]

by manifold cruelties, all of them destroyed:⁵ with whose carcasses, the Tartarian chieftains, and their brutish and savage followers, glutting themselves, as with delicious cakes, left nothing for vultures but the bare bones. And a strange thing it is to consider, that the greedy and ravenous vultures disdained to prey upon any of the relics, which remained. Old and deformed women they gave, as it were for daily sustenance, unto their Cannibals:⁶ the beautiful devoured they not, but smothered them lamenting and scratching, with forced and unnatural ravishments. Like barbarous miscreants, they quelled virgins unto death, and cutting off their tender paps⁷ to present for dainties unto their magistrates, they engorged themselves with their bodies.⁸

... In the meantime crying from the top of a high mountain, the Duke of Austria, the King of Bohemia, the Patriarch of Aquileia, the Duke of Carinthia, and (as some report) the Earl of Baden, with a mighty power, and in battle array, approaching towards them, that accursed crew immediately vanished,⁹ and all those Tartarian vagabonds retired themselves into the distressed and vanquished land of Hungary; who as they came suddenly, so they departed also on the sudden: which their celerity¹⁰ caused all men to stand in horror and astonishment of them. But of the said fugitives, the prince of Dalmatia took eight: one of which number the Duke of Austria knew to be an English man, who was perpetually banished out of the Realm of England, in regard of certain notorious crimes by him committed. This fellow, on the behalf of the most tyrannical king of the Tartars, had been twice, as a messenger and interpreter, with the king of Hungary, menacing and plainly foretelling the mischief which afterward happened, unless he would submit himself and his kingdom unto the Tartars yoke. Well, being allured by our Princes to confess the truth, he made such oaths and protestations, as (I think) the devil himself would have been trusted for. First therefore he reported of himself, that presently after the time of his banishment, namely about the 30th year of his age, having lost all that he had in the city of Acon¹¹ at dice, even in the midst of Winter, being compelled by ignominious hunger, wearing nothing about

⁵ The Mongols normally spared women and children. In this case they killed all the captives before returning to Mongolia. [Ed.]

⁶ The charge of cannibalism is contested by modern historians. The Mongols would sometimes eat horse meat, mice, lice, and the afterbirth of foals, but the eating of human flesh was a rare occurrence, confined to threats of starvation. [Ed.]

⁷ Breasts. [Ed.]

⁸ Rape was common among all medieval armies, as was the selection of young women for slaves or harems, but the charges of cutting off their breasts are almost certainly fictional since that would make captured women less valuable. [Ed.]

⁹ A classic Mongol tactic was a pretended retreat followed by an ambush, but this may refer to the return to Mongolia. [Ed.]

¹⁰ Speed. [Ed.]

¹¹ Acre, in modern north-coastal Israel. Captured by the Crusaders in 1104 and again in 1191. Stronghold of Crusader state until 1291 fall to Mamluks. [Ed.]

him but a shirt of sack, a pair of shoes, and a hair cap only, being shaven like a fool, and uttering an uncouth noise as if he had been dumb, he took his journey, and so travelling many countries, and finding in divers places friendly entertainment, he prolonged his life in this manner for a season, albeit every day by rashness of speech, and inconstancy of heart, he endangered himself to the devil. At length, by reason of extreme travail, and continual change of air and of meats in Chaldea,¹² he fell into a grievous sickness insomuch that he was weary of his life. Not being able therefore to go forward or backward, and staying there a while to refresh himself, he began (being somewhat learned) to commend to writing those words which he heard spoken, and within a short space, so aptly to pronounce, and to utter them himself, that he was reputed for a native member of that country: and by the same dexterity he attained to many languages. This man the Tartars having intelligence of by their spies, drew him perforce into their society: and being admonished by an oracle or vision, to challenge dominion over the whole earth, they allured him by many rewards to their faithful service, by reason that they wanted Interpreters. But concerning their manners and superstitions, of the disposition and stature of their bodies, of their country and manner of fighting etc., he protested the particulars following to be true: namely, that they were above all men, covetous, hasty, deceitful, and merciless: notwithstanding, by reason of the rigor and extremity of punishments to be inflicted upon them by their superiors, they are restrained from brawling, and from mutual strife and contention. The ancient founders and fathers of their tribes, they call by the name of gods,¹³ and at certain set times they do celebrate solemn feasts unto them, many of them being particular, and but four only general. They think that all things are created for themselves alone. They esteem it no offense to exercise cruelty against rebels. They are hardy and strong in the breast, lean and pale-faced, rough and hug-shouldered, having flat and short noses, long and sharp chins, their upper jaws are low and declining, their teeth long and thin, their eye-brows extending from their foreheads down to their noses, their eyes inconstant and black, their countenances writhen and terrible, their extreme joints strong with bones and sinews, having thick and great thighs, and short legs, and yet being equal unto us in stature: for that length which is wanting in their legs, is supplied in the upper parts of their bodies. Their country in old time was a land utterly desert and waste,¹⁴ situated far beyond Chaldea, from whence they have expelled lions, bears, and such like untamed beasts, with their bows, and

¹² Mesopotamia; modern Iraq. [Ed.]

¹³ Might refer to elements of ancestor worship in traditional Mongol belief system of Tengriism, which also included elements of shamanism, animism, and totemism, but Genghis Khan recognized the numerous religions of Central Asia (including Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam) and so maintained religious tolerance. [Ed.]

¹⁴ Bordered by desert in the south and forests in the north, the steppe is relatively treeless and dry but with ample grass for grazing. [Ed.]

other engines. Of the hides of beasts being tanned, they use to shape for themselves light but yet impenetrable armor. They ride fast bound unto their horses, which are not very great in stature, but exceedingly strong and maintained with little provender.¹⁵ They used to fight constantly and valiantly with javelins, maces, battle-axes, and swords. But especially they are excellent archers, and cunning warriors with their bows. Their backs are slightly armed, that they may not flee. They withdraw not themselves from the combat till they see the chief standard of their general give back. Vanquished, they ask no favor, and vanquishing, they show no compassion. They all persist in their purpose of subduing the whole world under their own subjection, as if they were but one man, and yet they are more than millions in number.¹⁶ They have 60,000 couriers, who being sent before upon light horses to prepare a place for the army to encamp in, will in the space of one night gallop three days journey. And suddenly diffusing themselves over a whole province, and surprising all the people thereof unarmed, unprovided, dispersed, they make such horrible slaughters, that the king or prince of the land invaded, cannot find people sufficient to wage battle against them, and to withstand them. They delude all people and princes of regions in time of peace, pretending that for a cause, which indeed is no cause. Sometimes they say that they will make a voyage to Cologne to fetch home the three wise kings into their own country;¹⁷ sometimes to punish the avarice and pride of the Romans,¹⁸ who oppressed them in times past;¹⁹ sometimes to conquer barbarous and Northern nations; sometimes to moderate the fury of the Germans²⁰ with their own meek mildness; sometimes to learn warlike feats and stratagems of the French; sometimes for the finding out of fertile ground to suffice their huge multitudes; sometimes again in derision they say that they intend to go on pilgrimage to St. James of Galicia.²¹ In regard of which slights and collusions certain indiscreet governors concluding a league with them, have granted them free passage through their territories, which leagues notwithstanding being violated, were an occasion of ruin and destruction unto the governors, etc.

¹⁵ Food. [Ed.]

¹⁶ A likely exaggeration. Probably more like a million. Individual armies like Batu's probably numbered something like 30,000. Total forces of 500,000 might have been possible. All Mongol men rode in battle. All enemies were killed or enslaved. At its height the Mongol Empire might have ruled 100 million people. On the other hand, Mongol rule depleted the population of that empire by tens of millions. [Ed.]

¹⁷ Cologne, in modern Germany. A medieval legend told of how the three kings who visited Jesus were reburied together in St. Peter's church in Cologne. [Ed.]

¹⁸ "Romans" is a general term for Christians of Western Europe. [Ed.]

¹⁹ May refer to the Roman Empire or to Christian Crusades, or it may conflate both. [Ed.]

²⁰ The German Teutonic Knights fought Crusades to Christianize the Baltic, Poland, and Hungary in the thirteenth century. [Ed.]

²¹ Santiago De Compostela, in northwest Spain; a pilgrimage site, said to be the burial place of St. James. [Ed.]