

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST
THE BIRTH OF GLOBAL TRADE

After Mongke's death, Kubilai was enthroned as Great Khan in 1260, but by then the united Mongol empire was dissolving into four great rival khanates. In the east, Kubilai ruled over China, Mongolia, Tibet and Korea. In Central Asia lay the Chagatai khanate. Farther west, in Persia, Hulegu had established the Il-khanate, on what had been the Abbasid Empire. Russian territories became the lands of the Golden Horde.

With the four Khanates in place, and the whole Mongol power decentralized, major conflicts erupted due to competition for the control of the trade routes. These divisions slowed the Mongol expansion and directed their military energies inward to their relentless infighting. There were also some long-lasting alliances, like the one between the Il-Khans and the Yuan, which Marco Polo witnessed. Historians sometimes label this period that followed the great Mongol conquest, as Pax Mongolica.

From the 1260s merchants from the Italian commercial cities, Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Florence, began to travel to the Persian Il-Khanate and the Russian Golden Horde, and some missionaries crossed Eurasia. At the beginning of the 14th century so many people were traveling to the East that the Florentine merchant Pegolotti wrote a book, *la Pratica della Mercatura*, in which he detailed the routes to get to Cathay and the things that were needed to make the journey. However, the Pax Mongolica was not so peaceful.

Pegolotti also described how it was dangerous when the lord of the country died and the new lord had not yet been proclaimed. Towards the end of the century conflicts among the four khanates were common and the Pax Mongolica was continually tarnished by wars. Even so the postal system, the yam, was always effective, and alternative routes were always available. Once again, the travels of the Polo family who had to change their itineraries to avoid wars, are a good illustration of this.

Since the early years of Chinggis Khan, the Mongols had followed similar lines with the peoples they conquered. They co-opted the professional bureaucrats, the merchant networks and the religious hierarchies. These groups were most useful because they could read and count and because they controlled communication networks that would be very useful for the consolidation of the Mongol conquests. The Mongols had also systematically spared the lives of artisans and deported them to the Mongolian lands: three thousands of them were deported to Mongolia from Samarkand alone. This is, for instance, how Ogodei got the skilled manpower to build Karakorum. But monumental architecture was not in the nomadic tradition and the Khans displayed their power in dazzling ceremonial robes and in the sumptuous lining of their tents. All the medieval travelers that crossed the Mongol lands of Eurasia commented on the lavish attire of the Mongol chiefs and on the tents' interior lined with silk cloth worked with gold thread.

The Mongols were avid consumers of sumptuous textiles and all their hierarchies were expressed through clothing: it was in their nomadic tradition to wear their wealth. The forced resettlement of artisans affected tens of thousands of individual lives and brought Chinese to Persia, Central Asians to China, Russians to Central Asia, and so on. Long camel caravans loaded with silks, ceramics, cotton, perfumes and medicinal products catered for the urban centers of all Eurasia. Mongols were even found in Europe: Tatar slaves, that could be either Mongolian or Chinese, are often advertised in Middle-East and Italian slave markets, and some Mongols were even portrayed in Italian Renaissance paintings, as those two ones appearing in one **of Lorenzetti's frescos**. This persistence of communication and trade and the flow of travellers that crisscrossed Eurasia in the thirteenth century mark out the Mongol period as the beginning of global history, even if this inter-cultural exchange was a by-product of conquest. They also left as their legacy a unified China: from then till now China has not had any other period of disunity. The whirlwind caused by the Mongols also unleashed other shifts: rats and flies followed in their wake. Plague erupted several times in the besieged cities of Eurasia, and by the middle of the fourteenth century had swept through the whole continent, killing one third of the European population.

By the end of the fourteenth century the Mongols had vanished, and the plague with them. But by then the west had got used to having easy access to eastern luxuries and as there was no longer a secure land route to get them, they took to the seas. The global world that the Mongols had brought into being was here to stay.