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THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY THE GRAND CANAL AND THE GREAT WALL

The biggest foreign problem of the Ming was certainly the Mongols. Although the Mongols were forced to retreat back to Mongolia at the beginning of the dynasty, Ming armies were constantly raiding Mongolia in order to prevent the reunification of the steppe tribes. The transfer of the capital to Beijing was also motivated by conflicts with the Mongols. Meanwhile Nanjing was still regarded as an auxiliary capital and maintained their own parallel bureaucracy, including the six ministries.

The new capital, Beijing, located slightly to the south of where the Mongol capital had been, was conceived as a series of concentric rectangles. In the middle of it the great ceremonial centre of the new dynasty, which we know as the Forbidden City, was built. The work was done quickly between 1407 and 1420, a remarkably brief period given the huge amount of materials required. Thousands of families were relocated around Beijing to produce the food needed by the capital, and hundreds of thousands of convicts were assigned to the transportation of materials and the building of the new capital. The rebuilding and extension of the Grand Canal have a lot to do with the shipping of all those materials to Beijing.

The Ming were able to build the Grand Canal on the basis of the accumulated investment in infrastructures from the time of the Song and the Yuan. Even so, connecting up the existing small canals that linked the courses of a series of rivers was a true feat of Chinese hydraulic engineering. The most complicated stretch was the one that skirted Shandong, and the great contribution of the Ming was the repair and extension of that northern stretch, diverting rivers and building dams that would regulate the flow of the waters. The Ming Grand Canal was 1,800 kilometres long and linked the courses of rivers as powerful as the Yangzi, the Huai and the Yellow Rivers, running through four large provinces as well as densely **populated cities. To get an idea of its size let's consider that a work on that scale in Europe would run from Paris to Budapest, via Brussels, Amsterdam, Berlin, Prague and Vienna, and would join the courses of the Seine, the Rhine, the Elba and the Danube.**

The Grand Canal was an extremely expensive undertaking and it was done to cope both with successive campaigns against the Mongols and with the growing demand from builders of the new capital. Once the Shandong stretch had been remade, the Grand Canal became the aorta of the Chinese empire. In the mid-15th century the traffic that ran through it employed 125,000 people indeed, the number of people who lived off the Grand Canal was one of the reasons for maintaining it in the following centuries, despite the enormous costs involved in the constant repairs and the fact that the Grand Canal ran parallel to the sea . But neither the transfer of the capital nor the rebuilding of the Grand Canal could put an end to the Mongol problem. The severe restrictions and virtual elimination of trade with the steppes, enforced since the beginning of the Ming, gave rise to nomadic raiding by the Mongols, just as the coastal equivalent - maritime restrictions - gave rise to piracy.

At the beginning of 15th century the Yongle emperor had launched five great expeditions against the Mongols, in two of them mobilizing up to half a million soldiers, and he had died in the last of them. In 1449, an expedition headed by another emperor was ambushed at Tumu, just a hundred miles north of Beijing, and the emperor was taken prisoner.

After that disaster, the Ming decided to build up defences along the northern line, but they still did it in tamped earth as had been the usual way to erect walls for millennia. Then, in the mid-16th century, Altan Khan, the most effective Mongol leader since the Yuan, besieged Beijing and burned its suburbs. At that moment, the Chinese party that had been advocating for decades that the only way to exclude the nomad was by building walls, won its case. It was then, in the second half of the 16th century that the enormous structure that we refer to now as the Great Wall was constructed. This time it was built in brick and stone, which required a hundred times more man power than if it had been built using tamped earth. This new wall, which at some stretches ran double, extended for 2,500 kilometres from the sea in Shanhaiguan to the entry of the Taklamakan desert, in Jiayuguan, and was dotted with signal towers to counter the high mobility of the nomads.

Together with the wall, nine garrison towns were positioned along the frontier to guard the whole defensive system. This is what would later become known as the Great Wall, although **the Ming never called it that, but referred to it as the "nine frontier garrisons". Even so, the wall didn't deter the Mongol raids, and then in the mid-17th century while the Ming were still erecting the Great Wall, the Manchus jumped over it and conquered China.**

The new Manchu dynasty maintained the Great Wall, especially the eastern part of it, even though they held the territory on both sides. But this time its use was inverted. The Manchus used the eastern part of the wall to prevent the Chinese entering their own homeland, Manchuria. Maybe due to that, the Chinese started to look at the wall with growing indifference or even contempt, viewing it as the embodiment of a pompous failure.

For centuries to come, as we'll see in future lectures, it will be the Europeans who show most admiration for the Great Wall.