Part I
Origins
1. Before the long sixteenth century
Qubilai and the Indian Ocean

A new era?

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The Mongols, creators of the greatest empire in history, are best known for their advances over land, through the deserts of Central Asia, into Iran, Syria, and Palestine, into Russia and even Europe. To be sure, thanks to Marco Polo, many are aware that Qubilai-qan (r. 1260–94) conquered and ruled China but knowledge of Mongol expansion almost always stops there. In this paper, I will argue that the advance into China was the beginning of a much larger enterprise, which coupled with the great maritime expansion of Ming times, ushered in our age. It was Westerners such as the Portuguese and later, the Dutch and British, who gained the most from what took place. The Mongol advance changed history by altering fundamental relationships between East and West, West and East. I will also argue that conventional wisdom claiming that Qubilai-qan’s military defeats in Vietnam and in Sumatra ended his plans for a takeover in the Indian Ocean is incorrect. These defeats simply forced the Mongols to realize their goals in new ways.

In the history of the Mongol Empire, the critical event leading to its collapse was the 1251 election of Möngke-qan (r. 1251–59) from the house of Tolui-noyan, the youngest son of Cinggis-qan (r. 1206–27). The problem was that his election involved putting aside the house of Ögödei (r. 1229–41; Güyük, r. 1246–48), third son of Cinggis-qan, by force via a coup, which resulted in fissures in the Mongolian world that never closed again. Qubilai tried to gain recognition as Great Khan of the old Empire but was never able to reunite it under his banner. He even had to face a pretender to the old throne of Ögödei, Qaydu (1236–1301), who fought him unsuccessfully for decades, and eventually outlasted him.

In reality, Qubilai and his house were confined to Mongol China and adjacent parts of Central Asia. His enemies controlled the rest of Central Asia, Turkistan (the Ca’adai qanate, held by descendants of the second son of Cinggis-qan), and Russia, ruled by the house of Joci and descended from the eldest son of Cinggis-qan. Only in Iran did there exist a regime friendly to Qubilai and ruled by descendants of his younger brother Hüle’ü (died 1265), but how to establish contact? In fact, Qubilai did establish contact and formed a close relationship with Mongol Iran, the Ilqanate. The desire to establish this contact was a major driver in his push south into Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and beyond. In so doing, Qubilai sought to establish a southern axis—China on the one side, the Ilqanate on the other—to parallel the north-south (and east-west, via the Mediterranean) economic alliance of the Golden Horde of Russia with Mamluk Egypt.

The Mongol advance into China began before Qubilai. The north was conquered in 1235. Möngke-qan died trying to continue the march south. Qubilai, once secure in China, resumed this advance in 1267. He finally conquered all of Song China in 1279, defeating the last Song
forces in a great naval battle at Yaishan, near modern Macau. At the time of its collapse, Song had a flourishing trade with the South Seas, with Song ships going as far as Africa. Qubilai inherited its networks and its sailors, its ships and shipyards and began to build on these foundations, initially through military action, even before the final stages of conflict in China. These were the well-known attacks on Japan (1274, 1281), on northern Vietnam (1285–88), and Champa (1281–85), located near modern Hue, and, farthest of all, against Java (1292). All were mounted with relatively large fleets and armies, particularly the campaigns into Indochina. All were unsuccessful militarily. If this had been the final outcome the net result would have been failure for Qubilai’s policies, but this was clearly not the case. The great expeditions were visible and expensive and ultimate failure manifest, but side-by-side with military actions was a diplomatic offensive of even greater scope. It took Mongol representatives all over the Indian Ocean. Qubilai-qan’s successor, Temür-öljeitü (r. 1294–1307) was able to discontinue the war in Vietnam and abandon another attempt on Japan, because there was no longer any need for such operations. Chinese ships were freely sailing the Indian Ocean and the link with Iran was by then secure. In addition, Mongol Iran itself had by then veered away from being purely a land power. As its coinage shows, it had also become an activist in ocean trade.

This trade was of massive proportions. From the one side came high value commodities such as blue and white porcelain, which was in high demand in much of the Old World. Tea was likely to have been another commodity. Porcelain was moved in bulk; this was no luxury trade. From the other side came other bulk goods, including cobalt to make the coveted glaze of China’s blue and white porcelain, and—a truly large commodity—horses. In addition, and also moving in large numbers were people, ambassadors from China to Iran and from Iran to China. They included Marco Polo, who came to Iran with a princess. Alongside bulk goods came spices and medicinals (Mongol China was flooded with Indian Ocean medicines). Essentially, all that no longer moved via the old Silk Route, in the hands of the enemies of Mongol China and Iran, together with new products were put on ships and became part of the trade.

And it did not stop there. The Mongol dynasty in China collapsed but its Ming successor began a new age of maritime expansion and the voyages of Zheng. He followed the Mongol lead. A new age had dawned. Ming was the world’s greatest economy, providing what the Portuguese and the rest went looking for. What followed was a change in scale, not essence, of a trading system that persists.