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The Conquest of Qara Khitai and Western Siberia

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During the lifetime of Chinggis Khan, Mongol expansion was largely targeted at stabilizing Mongolia as well as tying up loose ends. This included hunting down those who might pose a challenge to Chinggis Khan’s new order on the Mongolian plateau, such as competing aristocratic lineages. Additionally, there was a need to prevent those external foes who had meddled in steppe affairs from regaining influence in Mongolia. This included, of course, major players such as the Jin Empire, but also other powers both large and small. In dealing with these two issues, Chinggis Khan acquired control over much of western Siberia as well as pushing farther into the steppes of modern Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan and southwest into Xinjiang.

In addition to smaller polities, the Mongols would also encounter the Qara Khitai Empire, located largely in modern Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan and Xinjiang, which had regular ties to Mongolia. Its founder, Yelü Dashi (r. 1124–1143), passed through Mongolia after fleeing the destruction of the Liao Empire by the Jurchen, who established the Jin Empire. For much of the empire’s history, the Qara Khitai considered the Naiman of western Mongolia as tributaries. Both the Naiman and Kereit leaders also took refuge in Qara Khitai territory when necessary. As such, it was known to the denizens of the Mongolian plateau as a powerful entity. While it once exerted considerable influence in Mongolia, over the decades this ability diminished. Still, the legacy and memory of the Liao Empire provided the Qara Khitai respect among the nomads in the eastern steppes, which they could wield for their benefit. In the late twelfth century and early thirteenth century, however, the Qara Khitai’s power waned and some of their clients began to test the limits of the ruler Zhilugu Gur Khan’s authority. While the star of Zhilugu Gur Khan’s fortune slipped to its nadir, Chinggis Khan’s steadily ascended towards its zenith. Yet, the destiny of either empire was not obvious or initially intertwined.
THE BATTLE OF THE IRTYSH RIVER

The Mongol conquest of the Qara Khitai Empire occurred in 1218, although the events that led to the event as well as the conquest of western Siberia were set in motion by the Mongol victory over the Naiman tribe at the Battle of Chakirma’ut in 1204. With the defeat, a Naiman prince named Güchülüg fled west to join those Naiman who nomadized on the other side of the Altai Mountains. Although a single confederation, the Naiman tended towards a north-south bifurcation, with the Altai Mountains serving as the dividing line between pastures in Mongolia and what is now Xinjiang, PRC, Kazakhstan and Russia. He was joined by the Merkit led by Toqto’a Beki after their defeat by Chinggis Khan at the source of the Qaradal Huja’ur (source, spring) near the Selenge River. While some of the Merkit under Toqto’a fled to the Irtysch, another faction, the Qo’as Merkit led by Dayir Usun, submitted, demonstrating their new loyalty by marrying Dayir Usun’s daughter, Qulan, to Chinggis Khan. Despite the marriage, the Merkit remained dangerous, and indeed some of the newly pacified Merkit rebelled.

Chinggis Khan dispatched Chimbai, the son of Sorqan Shira, along with Boroqul to quell the Merkit rebellion while he crossed the Altai in pursuit of Toqto’a Beki and the other Merkit. It is not clear if the rebellion occurred before or after Chinggis Khan pursued Toqto’a Beki; nonetheless, it demonstrated that an often-overlooked threat to Chinggis Khan and his newly won empire came not from sedentary powers but rather from refugees located either in those states or in the steppes to the west. Several leaders fled Mongolia after their forces met defeat, including Senggüm of the Kereit, Toqto’a Beki of the Merkit and Güchülüg of the Naiman. All three, while defeated, still represented a charismatic older order on the steppe that could attract dissatisfied elements in Chinggis Khan’s new state, as well as their former followers, who had only recently been incorporated into the new social structure. Mongol westward expansion began as an effort to eliminate these threats, particularly as Toqto’a Beki and Güchülüg had joined Buyiruq Khan, the Naiman ruler on the southwestern side of the Altai, thus forming a new and potentially dangerous confederation on the frontier of Chinggis Khan’s domains. Furthermore, any of the refugee princes could serve as a proxy which a sedentary neighbor might use to exert influence in Mongolia. Indeed, much of Chinggis Khan’s rise to prominence came from his own role as a proxy for the Jin Empire. Thus, as Thomas Allsen observed, “As a matter of policy, the Mongols always made a great effort to run to ground any leader or chieftain who opposed them”. As many other leaders discovered, the Mongols extended this policy to those who sheltered these refugees. Indeed, Chinggis Khan’s pursuit of the Merkit led him to attack Buyiruq Khan in 1206. The Mongols not only killed Buyiruq Khan but also took possession of his family, flocks and herds, as well as other possessions. Güchülüg and Toqto’a Beki, however, once more eluded capture.

After being enthroned in 1206 and stabilizing his new state, Chinggis Khan dispatched his son Jochi to bring the Hoyin Irgen into his orbit in 1207. The Hoyin Irgen was a designation literally meaning “the Forest People” and referred to the various Turko-Mongolian people inhabiting the regions between the Irtysch and Angara Rivers, including the Yenisei Valley. Jochi proceeded to the Yenisei Valley in the modern Russian oblasts of Tuva and Krasnoyarsk and secured the submission of the Kirgiz as well as other tribes between the Yenisei and Lake Baikal in 1207–1208.
The Oirat ruler, Quduqa Beki, submitted and secured a marriage alliance between his son and Chinggis Khan’s daughter, Chechiyegen. Quduqa Beki had fought Chinggis Khan at the Battle of Köyiten as part of Jamuqa’s confederation, and he also joined the Naiman at Chakirma’ut, thus his decision to submit included a modicum of self-preservation. He even acted as a guide to lead Jochi to the Kirgiz and other Hoyin Irgen tribes and later showed Chinggis Khan where Toqto’a Beki and Güchüülüg had taken refuge. His actions brought the submission of all of the tribes that surrounded the Merkit’s native pastures south of Lake Baikal and by the Selenge River. As the exact chronology is unclear, part of the Merkit move west may have been not only to avoid Mongol domination, but also to avoid entrapment, as with the conquest of the Naiman territory, their own pastures would have been hemmed in by the Mongols. Finally, Jochi’s campaign would also prevent the Merkit from returning to their nuntuq (territory/pastures) via a northerly route. Indeed, although the battle of the Irtysh River took place in 1208 and Jochi departed for the Hoyin Irgen in 1207, it appears that the campaign against the Hoyin Irgen was part of a larger operation to destroy the Naiman-Merkit alliance.

HUNTING THE MERKIT

While the Naiman and the Merkit fled Mongolia to avoid incorporation into the Yeke Monggol Ulus, their presence in western Siberia created a potential threat. However, Chinggis Khan did not permit them sufficient time to effectively establish a power base from which to threaten Mongolia. In 1208, Chinggis Khan led his army to deal with the Naiman and Merkit where the two groups had joined forces at the Irtysh River. The Mongols engaged the alliance in battle and decisively defeated them where the Bukhtamra River branches from the Irtysh River, killing the Merkit leader Toqto’a Beki in the process. The surviving Naiman and Merkit dispersed and fled. While Chinggis Khan returned to Mongolia, he left Mongol forces in the region led by Sübedei (and perhaps Jebe) to pursue their enemies. After the Battle of the Irtysh, the chronology becomes confused in the sources. There have been attempts to reconstruct the events beginning with Barthold, but more recently by Paul D. Buell and Christopher P. Atwood. What follows is another interpretation, which by necessity is brief, albeit a longer study is forthcoming.

The Merkit, led by Qudu and Chila’un, fled southwards and eventually entered Uyghuristan (consisting of much of Xinjiang) but were defeated at the Jam River by either the Mongols or by a Mongol-Uyghur force, driving them away. The Merkit then fled through the lands of the Qara Khitai, with some fleeing to the lands of the Qangli nomads while others joined Güchüülüg, who escaped from the Irtysh debacle by a different route. Along their flight from the Jam, the Merkit encountered a pursuing Mongol force near the Chu River (a tributary of the Syr Darya flowing through Kazakhstan and Kirgizstan) commanded by Sübedei, who defeated them once again. After the defeat, Qudu, now the leader after Toqto’a’s death, and the remaining Merkit fled west to the Ölberli. The Ölberli arrived in the region in the early twelfth century, perhaps as a ramification of the demise of the Liao Empire and the rise of the Jin. As their original homeland was in modern Jehol (in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, PRC), they may have been originally affiliated with the early Qara Khitai. No matter their origins, the Ölberli were now a part of the Qangli or Eastern Qipchaq confederation.
Even this safety proved temporary as the Mongols tracked the Merkit down in 1209 and sought their extradition through diplomacy. The Mongol envoys demanded their return; however, the Ölberli refused as they had already granted Qudu sanctuary. To rectify the matter, Sübedei continued the pursuit of Qudu and the Merkit, but by this point, if not earlier, he had been reinforced by Jochi, who, after gaining the submission of the Hoyin Irgen, moved southwest into the steppes. This resulted in a battle between the Mongols and the Ölberli. The Mongols won, slaying Qudu. However, rather than attempting to incorporate the Ölberli into their empire, the Mongols returned to Mongolia after encountering the Khwarazmian forces also operating in the region. The dates for these battles are quite confused as the sources conflated many events, thus some events that took place hundreds of miles and many years apart are described together, but 1209 seems the most logical, in my opinion.

A key factor for this date is that in 1209, Muhammad entered the steppes from Jand to deal with Qangli or Qipchaq raiders. His timing corresponded with the season when Qara Khitai officials would arrive at his court to collect his tribute for the Gur Khan Zhilugu. Muhammad had his mother deal with the officials, thus allowing him to maintain plausible deniability in submission to the infidel. While in the steppes near the Irghiz River, he encountered the battlefield where the Mongols destroyed the Merkit and Ölberli and decided to pursue them, undoubtedly hoping to gather plunder. He successfully caught up with the Mongols and sought to engage them in battle. The Mongols attempted to negotiate a peace, stating that they had orders not to engage the Khwarazmian Sultan in battle. This is fairly logical, and they probably had the same orders to avoid the Qara Khitai since Chinggis Khan undoubtedly had little desire to engage in wars with either state, particularly when he was occupied in Xi Xia for much of 1209, as discussed in chapter 4 of this volume by David Curtis Wright. Nonetheless, Muhammad attacked the Mongol army. The battle was a draw, with the Mongols withdrawing under the cover of night, but the ferocity of the Mongols (who were outnumbered), according to Nasawi, “filled Muhammad’s heart with terror”.

QARA KHITAI

Meanwhile Güchülüg continued his flight and evaded the Mongols by fleeing into the Empire of Qara Khitai. He had good reasons for doing so. Although Chinggis Khan had returned to Mongolia and Sübedei continued to hunt the Merkit, Chinggis Khan positioned an army under the command of the guregen (son-in-law) Toquchar in the vicinity of the Irtysh River. He was well-positioned to guard the approach to Mongolia, but also to strike the Naiman should they stay in the steppes immediately west of Mongolia.

In 1209, Chinggis Khan also appointed Qorchi, an individual who prophesied Temüjin’s ascendency, as his governor over the Hoyin Irgen. At the quriltai of 1206, Qorchi was appointed the noyan of three minggans of Ba’arin, his people. He was later appointed as a tümen-ü noyan or commander of ten thousand, probably in 1209. In addition to his own Ba’arin, other Mongol troops from the Chinos and Adarkin comprised part of his army, and men from the Tö’ölös and Telengüt augmented them. The latter two minggans came from the Hoyin Irgen. He was to make his headquarters along the Irtysh River, probably further north and away from
the pastures that Toquchar occupied. He was then assigned with the task of “reducing the People of the Forest to submission.” Qorchi’s authority was so great that per his instructions from Chinggis Khan, “Those who act without his agreement, he should not hesitate to kill them”. While this phrase may have been rhetorical, it certainly implies that Qorchi had complete authority and was answerable only to Chinggis Khan himself, which may also indicate that Qorchi was not a daruqachi or jarquchi, but rather a tammachi. Qorchi’s assignment also informs us that Jochi did not complete the reduction of the Hoyin Irgen, thus indicating that his forces were deployed elsewhere after his initial successes. Qorchi’s deployment thus allowed Jochi to shift his forces into the steppes to reinforce Sühedi, demonstrating that Chinggis Khan placed hunting down the Merkit as a priority. Furthermore, it indicates that the Mongols increased their permanent military presence outside of Mongolia in Siberia, something that did not happen with Xi Xia. Finally, we see the rudiments of the expansion and organization of Mongol rule. Indeed, the deployment of Toquchar and Qorchi to these positions must raise the question of whether these forces were tamma or proto-tamma units.

With the increasing Mongol presence along the Irtysh, the Naiman and Merkit had no choice but to flee farther away from Mongolia. With the southern territories of Siberia coming under Mongol control, the Merkit fled into Uyghuristan while Güchülüg headed towards the core domains of the Qara Khitai in modern Kirgizstan. It also appears that after the Battle of the Irtysh River, the Naiman forces fractured into smaller bands, with some entering the vicinity of Beshbaliq and Kocha and plundering there before later joining Güchülüg in the core territories of Qara Khitai. Despite the pillaging of the domains of his vassals, the Gur Khan Zhilugu welcomed Güchülüg. He also eventually married the Naiman prince to his daughter, Qonqu. For this, the Nestorian Christian Güchülüg converted to the Buddhism of the Qara Khitai.

This warm embrace of the Naiman caught the Uyghurs and the Qarluqs near Almaliq off guard. Despite Güchülüg’s misdeeds, Zhilugu Gur Khan saw opportunities in the Naiman prince. The fortunes of the Empire of Qara Khitai had waned since its formation in 1125. While it was no longer at its zenith, it still boasted enough might and prestige to keep most of its vassals in line as well as to garner the respect of the nomads beyond its borders. Yet it was clear that Qara Khitai’s influence had declined. With Güchülüg’s arrival, the Gur Khan hoped to revive the fortunes of the empire with a dynamic leader, who also brought additional veteran troops.

Zhilugu’s decision had consequences. In 1209 and 1211, the Uyghur and Qarluqs submitted to Chinggis Khan. The Idiqut (Uyghur royal title; lit. “Sacred Majesty”) of the Uyghurs married Chinggis Khan’s daughter Al-Altan, and the Mongol ruler recognized him as his fifth son – an indication of the Idiqut’s high status in the social hierarchy of the Yeke Monggol Ulus. Additionally, Toquchar moved his army closer to Almaliq so it was well-positioned to come to the aid of the Qarluqs or the Uyghurs if need be. Despite the depredations of Güchülüg in the region, one cannot dismiss the possibility that Toquchar’s appearance in the steppe may have been a factor in the submission of the Uyghurs and Qarluqs, as his army represented another group of dangerous nomads just lurking beyond the horizon. Toquchar’s very presence may have induced at least Ozar of Almaliq to consider submitting to Chinggis Khan, not only for protection from Güchülüg but also to reduce the threat of a Mongol attack. Indeed, according to The Secret History, shortly after the Battle of the Irtysh River,
Chinggis Khan dispatched Qubilai Noyan to subdue the Qarluqs. However, Arslan Khan, the Qarluq leader, submitted in 1211 before battle was joined. In return, he became a güregen or son-in-law of Chinggis Khan by marrying a Chinggisid princess, although this did not happen immediately. The Uyghurs had other reasons for deserting the Gur Khan. Their taxes had increased, reflecting the dire straits of the empire. Also, the tax collectors became increasingly disrespectful and haughty. Their actions alone did little to persuade the Uyghurs to remain loyal to the Qara Khitai. Furthermore, the Idiqut of the Uyghurs was well aware of Chinggis Khan’s success in Xi Xia. With Mongol forces posted to the east as well as to the north after the Irtysh and Jam river battles, surely the possibility of Mongol invasion must have lurked in the shadows of the Idiqut’s mind. The fact that the Gur Khan’s rule became more oppressive nudged the Idiqut to seek a new overlord.

Yet the Uyghurs, Qarluqs and Almaliq were not the only recalcitrant vassals. A larger threat to the Qara Khitai was Khwarazm, which had submitted to Qara Khitai not long after Yelü Dashi, the founder of the empire, defeated the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar at the battle of Qatwan Steppe in 1144. With the protection of the Qara Khitai, the nascent Khwarazmian sultanate expanded at the expense of Seljuk princelings and other potentates in Iran. They also called upon Qara Khitai support against the Ghurid Empire, based in Ghur in modern Afghanistan, as the two rival Muslim powers vied for dominance in Khurasan and influence in Mawarannahr.

Taking advantage of the assassination of the Ghurid leader Shihab al-Din, the Khwarazmshah Sultan Muhammad II moved into Ghurid territories. The Khitans did not oppose his actions, perhaps because he handed them the city of Tirmidh, the entry into Afghanistan from Mawarannahr. Viewing their reluctance to expand deeper into Afghanistan as a sign of weakness, Muhammad began to plot against his overlords. He conspired with local potentates in Mawarannahr to liberate them from their infidel rulers. War began in 1209–1210. Qara Khitai forces then attacked, and indecisive warfare began until the rulers of Bukhara and Samarqand switched sides after securing their positions from the Gur Khan. Despite the betrayal, Muhammad escaped defeat. He quelled a rebellion in his own territories and somehow retained Bukhara. Thus, the two sides came to an uneasy peace in 1210.

Zhilugu’s warm welcome allowed Güchülüg to gather his dispersed people. With his position secure, Güchülüg began to conspire against his father-in-law. He found a willing accomplice in Muhammad Khwarazmshah, who also sought to secure Mawarannahr and become fully independent of the Qara Khitans.

GÜCHÜLÜG’S USURPATION

Perhaps the true cause of peace between the Gur Khan and the Khwarazmshah was that Güchülüg raided the imperial treasury while Zhilugu marched on Samarqand to quell a rebellion there in 1210. Zhilugu withdrew from Mawarannahr upon learning of Güchülg’s treachery, and his retreat allowed Muhammad to enter Samarqand as a liberator from Qara Khitai (and Buddhist) tyranny.

Meanwhile, war erupted between Zhilugu and Güchülüg. Both sought support from Muhammad and offered him the same form of compensation – control of Mawarannahr. Muhammad courted both without making too grand gestures and bided his time to see how he could take advantage of the situation. Yet he waited
too long. In 1211, Güchülg ambassadors Zhilugu and captured him. Güchülg then assumed the throne with Zhilugu reluctantly abdicating. He died in 1213. Despite Güchülg’s usurpation of the throne as Zhilugu’s son-in-law, there do not seem to have been any objections by the Qara Khitai elite or Zhilugu’s daughter, as the sources provide no evidence of any opposition to Güchülg’s machinations. Furthermore, as Muhammad did little to achieve the overthrow of Zhilugu Gur Khan, Güchülg, now on the throne, had no inclination to cede Mawarannahr to Muhammad or to honor the Sultan’s request for a portion of the Qara Khitai treasury. As a result, the Syr Darya River became a frontier of simmering hostility as both rulers consolidated their rule and acquisitions, knowing that war would erupt. At one point, Güchülg even challenged Muhammad to single combat. Muhammad did not take the bait but evacuated the frontier to create a buffer zone with his unpredictable neighbor, although his efforts were not completely successful.

Meanwhile, the Mongols, although keen to hunt down former enemy leaders, did not invade Qara Khitai until after 1216. This was a deliberate decision by Chinggis Khan. In 1209, his armies had just concluded major operations against the Merkit as well as in Siberia and against Xi Xia. War against the Jin Empire began in 1211 and would continue with brief hiatuses until 1234. It was during one of these lulls in 1216 that Chinggis Khan dispatched Jebe with troops to end the presence of Güchülg.

THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF QARA KHITAI

Jebe’s mission occurred because Güchülg began to threaten Almaliq, the Qarluqs and the Uyghurs, even killing Buzar, the Qarluq ruler of Almaliq. Despite securing the throne, Güchülg lacked the ability or at least the vision to rule a state. He increased taxes and permitted his troops to be predatory. Responding to this threat to the vassals of the Yeke Mongol Ulus, Jebe passed through Uyghuristan, where he gathered additional troops and served as a reminder of Chinggis Khan’s power. He then did the same with the Qarluqs. With his augmented army, Jebe defeated one of Güchülg’s armies in 1218, which then led to other vassals submitting to the Mongols. Güchülg, perhaps reminded of his previous defeats by the Mongols, then abandoned open engagement and decided that rather than fighting the Mongols and his rebellious subjects, he would evade them – perhaps either hoping to escape to greener pastures or rally his forces. In any case, some of his former subjects joined the Mongols in their manhunt. Güchülg’s efforts failed and he was killed in Badakhshan (northern Afghanistan) by a former vassal.

The vassal, Isma’il, presented Güchülg’s body to Jebe, who then paraded the head across the empire. Many cities only opened their gates after this demonstration, so great was their fear of Güchülg’s rule. Thus, the Mongols were viewed as liberators, especially as Jebe issued an edict that all should practice their own religion and not interfere with those of others – one of Güchülg’s perceived offenses.

THE HOYIN IRGEN REBELLION AND THE END OF THE MERKIT

While the destruction of Güchülg took place, two other operations were in motion. The first was the quelling of a revolt among the Hoyin Irgen. In 1216, while the
Mongols were occupied against the Jin, rebellion flared up among the Hoyin Irgen against Chinggis Khan’s representative in the North, Qorchi. It is suggested that the rebellion was caused by Qorchi’s rapacious behavior, which included accumulating women. In January or February of that year, the Qori-Tümeds, led by Botoqui Tarqun, the wife of their former leader Darduqul-Soqor, seized Qorchi. Quduqa Beki of the Oyirad was sent to negotiate Qorchi’s release; however, the Qori-Tümed also made him a prisoner.43

Chinggis Khan then sent his trusted aide Boroqul to squash the rebellion in 1217–1218. En route, however, the Qori Tümeds ambushed and killed him.44 Chinggis Khan was greatly angered upon receiving the news of Boroqul’s death and almost led the campaign of retribution himself, but calmer heads prevailed. Dörbei Doqshin of the Dörbet was then given a command to pacify the Qori Tümed. In addition, Jochi also marched against the Hoyin Irgen in 1217–1218, specifically to punish the Kirgiz, who failed to contribute troops to Dörbei’s army, an open act of rebellion.45 Thus the northern frontier of the nascent Mongol empire rose in rebellion. With the majority of the Mongolian army engaged in the south against the Jin, failure to quell the Forest People’s rebellion threatened the cohesion of the empire.

In August of 1217–1218, Dörbei Doqshin followed the route of Boroqul. He feinted towards the direction of Boroqul’s death but then took a different route, requiring his troops to cut a path through the forest.46 Thus, Dörbei Doqshin surprised the Tümeds along the Oka River (Irkutsk Oblast) and freed the prisoners. In addition to crushing the Tümed rebellion, he also sent Botoqui Tarqun to Chinggis Khan and returned to the emperor in the spring of 1217–1218.47 Quduqa-Beki received the defeated Botoqui as a reward for his service. Qorchi resumed his position as the daruqachi or tammachi of the region. Additionally, Jochi quelled the Kirgiz rebellion and restored order in the region.48

The rebellion of the Hoyin Irgen is notable, not only as the first major rebellion against the rule of Chinggis Khan but also as a campaign the Mongols fought in unfamiliar terrain outside the steppe. However, it is unclear if they altered their tactics. Other than the brief mention that the Mongols had to cut paths through the forests and surprise the enemy, there is no information on how they fought in the forests. Nonetheless, the fact that they quelled the rebellion does indeed demonstrate that they performed well outside of the steppe.

In addition to this, Sübedei was once again active in the steppes to the west of the Altai. He did not join Jebe but resumed his hunt of the Merkit. A final group, led by Qal-Toqan, who had splintered from the main body after the battle of the Jam River, fled in a different direction from those who found refuge among the Ölberli. They fled into the steppes and took refuge among the Qipchaqs farther west. Sübedei may have been joined by Toquchar in this campaign. It also seems likely that Jochi, having finished with the Kirgiz and with the restoration of order among the Hoyin Irgen, including the reinstatement of Qorchi’s authority, was once again on the move towards the southwest.

In any case, the Mongols forced a final battle against the Merkit and destroyed the last group at the Üyük River, which is a small river found between the Itil (Volga) and the Yaik (Ural) Rivers. These Merkit joined the Qipchaq there. In this battle, Jochi and Sübedei destroyed the Merkit as well as soundly defeating the Qipchaq in the region.49
CONCLUSIONS

With the defeat of Güchülüg, the Mongols acquired the former domains of the Qara Khitai, with their frontier pushed to roughly the Syr Darya River, thus making the Khwarazmian Empire the Mongols’ neighbor. Furthermore, with the push by Jochi and Sübedei to the Yaik River, the whole region north of the Syr Darya was dominated by the Mongols, at least militarily. There is, however, nothing to suggest that the Mongols attempted to assert their control of the region between the Itil and Yaik Rivers. With the war against the Jin Empire still ongoing and rebellions among the Hoyin Irgen combined with the destruction of the “rebel” Naiman and Merkit, Chinggis Khan was not interested in antagonizing any new neighbors. He did, however, seek commercial relationships.

Indeed, trade began between the Mongol Empire and the Khwarazmian Empire in 1215, when a Khwarazmian caravan encountered Chinggis Khan besieging Zhongdu. The Mongols attempted to establish trade relations with the Khwarazmians by sending their own caravan, which largely consisted of Central Asian merchants but was financed by Chinggis Khan as well as members of his family. Unfortunately, the governor of Otrar, a border city north of the Syr Darya, massacred the caravan in what has become known as the Otrar Incident in 1218. Allegedly, the massacre took place because of suspicions of espionage. Undoubtedly, the Mongols had spies in the caravan and extracted intelligence from the merchants about Khwarazm simply by casual questioning. Indeed, Muhammad Khwarazmshah had done the same when the Zhongdu caravan returned. Diplomatic efforts failed, and a livid Chinggis Khan notified the Khwarazmshah that his only recourse was war.

While Beatrice Forbes Manz discusses the conflict in Chapter 11 of this volume, it is an open question as to why Muhammad Khwarazmshah initiated a war. Undoubtedly, he felt threatened by the presence of Jebe in the Ferghana Valley and other Mongol forces commanded by Sübedei and Jochi lurking to the north. Yet we have evidence that the previous battle (whether 1209 or a later date) made him well aware that the Mongols were not to be trifled with – and indeed their relatively quick defeat of Güchülüg and acquisition of Qara Khitai amply proved that. So why would he consent to a massacre, which would surely demand retribution? There are numerous reasons that include avarice and familial ties between the Sultan and the governor of Otrar that precluded an easy solution, but also evidence that suggests that the 1209 date is the correct first encounter between the Mongols and the Khwarazmians. In the years after 1209, Muhammad enjoyed considerable success. Not only did he secure Mawarannahr and fend off some efforts by Güchülüg, but Muhammad finally toppled the Ghurid Empire in Afghanistan in 1215–1216, pushing his borders to the Hindu Kush and perhaps even to the Indus River (the extent of Khwarazmian control in the region is nebulous). Finally, his armies dominated most of Iran and even threatened Baghdad. Indeed, he was called a “Second Alexander”. With his military reputation restored, the Qara Khitai and Ghurids (previously the two biggest obstacles to his power) defeated and now the establishment of the most powerful Islamic polity (indeed one of the most powerful polities in the world regardless of faith or culture), one can see his confidence had grown. Thus, it appears that he sought to redeem himself against the Mongols and deal with them on his terms rather than during a random encounter in the steppes.
Unfortunately for him, Muhammad’s confidence and pride did not grow into wisdom but hubris, leading to a war that would eradicate his nascent empire from the face of the earth.

NOTES

1 Biran 2005, 46 & 64–65.
2 De Rachewiltz 2004, 721.
3 SHM, §196, 197; De Rachewiltz 2004, 723–725; RDT2, 144; RDRM, 419.
4 SHM, §197; RDT2, 143; RDRM, 418–419.
5 SHM, §198; RDT2, 144; RDRM, 419.
6 SHM, §198; RDT2, 144; RDRM, 419.
7 RDT2, 144; RDRM, 421.
8 May 2021, 973, Kindle.
9 Allsen 1983, 10.
10 RDT2, 144; RDRM, 421.
11 SHM, §239; SWQZL, 39–40; RDRM, 422–423; RDT2, 144–145.
12 RDT2, 143; RDRM, 416.
13 RDT2, 145; RDRM, 422–423.
14 SHM, §198; RDRM, 422–424; RDT2, 145; RDK, 427; RDT, 289.
15 See Barthold 2012; Buell 1992; Atwood 2017.
16 Barthold 2012, 361–362. Also see p. 362, fn 2 on the location of the battle site; Atwood 2017, 38–40. Atwood identifies the river as the modern Zhen or Emba River. According to Atwood, the Uyghurs did not participate in this battle.
17 SWQZL, 38–39; Allsen 1983, 8.
19 SHM, §199; SWQZL, 40 & 49–50. According to the SHM, in 1205, Chinggis Khan sent Sübedei with the iron cart after Qudu and Chila’un. Chinggis Khan ordered him to pursue them relentlessly. Buell 1992, 9–11 provides a detailed full discussion of Sübedei’s legendary Iron Cart Campaign and the problem with its dates.
20 SHM, §236; 43; SWQZL, 40; Juvayni 1912, 51–52; HWC, 69.
21 See the corresponding arguments in Buell 1992; Atwood 2017.
22 TN, II, 149; TNR, II, 1096–1097.
23 HWC, 357–358; Juvayni 1916, 89–90.
26 RDRM, 441; RDK, 320; RDT, 213; RDT2, 151; SWQZL, 49–50.
27 SHM, §207.
28 SHM, §207.
29 SHM, §207; De Rachewiltz 1997, 118. The verb in section 207, which discusses Qorchi’s initial assignment, indicates that he was probably a daruqachi, but the actual position title is never mentioned.
30 See Buell 1980; May 2016, and May 2015 for more on the tamma.
32 RDT, 162; RDK, 461; RDT2, 161–162; RDRM, 460–461.
33 SWQZL, 40–41; RDRM, 440–441; RDK, 320; RDT, 213; RDT2, 150–151. For the title Idiqut see Brose 2007, 68–70.
34 SHM, §235; RDT, 213; RDK, 320; RDT2, 150–151; RDRM, 440–441; SWQZL, 40–41.
36 Biran 2005, 70–74.
39 SWQZL, 50; SHM, §237.
40 Juvayni 1912, 56–58; HWC, 74–76.
41 HWC, 68; Juvayni 1912, 50.
42 HWC, 66–67; Juvayni 1912, 50; Biran 2005, 194–196.
43 SHM, §241. At the 1206 quriltai, Qorchi received the northern regions of Chinggis Khan’s realm to govern for his past loyalty and actions. As part of this, he was promised that he could gather thirty wives from amongst his subjects. Quduqa Beki went, as he knew their customs and would be a better negotiator than a Mongol from the steppes.
44 SHM, §240.
45 RDRM, 575; RDK, 429–430; RDT, 290–291; RDT2, 198.
46 SHM, §240. He ordered his men to take axes, adzes, saws and chisels in addition to their weapons. The Secret History of the Mongols mentions that Dörbei followed the path of the Red Bull or hula’an buqa, thus indicating that Dörbei traveled through the forests as only the animals traveled, not as would an army.
47 SHM, §240.
48 RDRM, 575; RDT2, 198.
49 Atwood 2017, 43.
50 TNR, II, 966; TN, II, 103.
52 TN, II, 650; TNR, II, 963–965.

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