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Conquest of the Dasht-i Qipchaq

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Although the Mongols entered the Qipchaq Steppe, or Dasht-i Qipchaq, as it was known in the Persian sources, in pursuit of the Merkit after the Battle of the Irtysh River (1208), their conquest of the region did not truly begin until 1218–1219 in connection with the Khwarazmian campaign. The Qipchaq Steppes included not only the steppes between the Irtysh River and the Yaik (Ural River), but the entirety of the Caspian and Pontic Steppes, thus encompassing a region that stretched from the Altai Mountains to the Carpathian Mountains. It gained its name from the predominant nomadic group, the Qipchaqs. Qipchaq is a Turkic ethnonym that applied to several confederations in the region that shared language and culture but not political unity, as they failed to coalesce into an empire. The Qipchaqs were also known as the Cumans/Qumans (Latin) or Polovtsy (Church Slavonic), as well as other derivatives. The variety of names reflects the various terminologies used by the societies that interacted with them, such as the Rus’ principalities, Hungary, Georgia, and the Khwarazmshahs, but also the fact that steppe nomadic confederations tended to include a variety of ethno-lingual groups as well as subgroups. Due to this diversity, the leadership of a particular group could change, with the primary identity stemming from the dominant clan at the time.

Their dominance began in the late eleventh century as the Qipchaqs began to exit southern Siberia as part of the Kimek confederation. Their emergence from southern Siberia pushed the Pechenegs and Oghuz west and also contributed to the latter’s move into the Middle East (most notably as the Seljuk Turks). Despite being one identity (group), the Qipchaqs never unified into a coherent state. Instead, the Qipchaqs existed as three to five independent confederations spread across the Dasht-i Qipchaq. At the most basic division, there was the Quman confederation in the Pontic Steppes (the western portion of the Dasht-i Qipchaq), the Qipchaq-Qangli in the region between the Yaik (Ural) and Syr Darya Rivers, and the Qipchaqs of Western Siberia (closer to the Irtysh). This grouping does not appear to have been permanent, and by the thirteenth century, scholars believe that the Qipchaqs developed into five separate confederations located in the steppes of Kazakhstan,
the Volga-Ural region, the North Caucasian Steppes, and then the Don, Donets, Dnieper, and Danube River region (where one or two different confederations may have existed).³

INITIAL ENCOUNTERS

It is clear that the Mongols’ first forays into the steppes were not intended as conquests but rather to suppress and capture rebels – namely, those Naiman and Merkit who fled after the Mongol victory at Chakirma’ut and had yet to submit to Chinggis Khan. This failure to yield to Chinggis Khan was not the key issue. Nomads had for centuries fled west from the steppes of Mongolia due to power fluctuations. Rather, for Chinggis Khan, the continued existence of viable aristocratic lineages that could challenge his own legitimacy or, rather, offer alternatives to his rule could only be viewed as a threat. In some ways, the situation was reminiscent of the Gök Turks’ attitude to the Avars, the remnants of the Rouran, whom the Turks defeated to assume power in Mongolia in 552–555.⁴

While the Naiman prince, Güchülüg, fled to the territories of Qara Khitai, a logical destination for the Naiman considering their long ties with the empire, and rallied his people there, the Merkit had fewer options. With no other recourse but to flee west, the Merkit finally reached the steppes north of the Aral Sea and the Caspian region. Here they sought and received refuge from the Qangli.⁵

In 1209, Sübedei’s army tracked down the Merkit. Reinforced by Jochi, who had been subduing various members of the Hoyin Irgen in Siberia, Sübedei requested that the Ölberli, the leading lineage among the Qangli, remit the Merkit to them, as the latter had escaped. The Ölberli refused and thus a battle began, resulting with the destruction of the Ölberli and the Merkit refugees.⁶ The fact that Sübedei and Jochi sought the extradition of the Merkit and not the submission of the Qangli demonstrates that this foray was not one of conquest. This interpretation is confirmed when withdrawing Mongols later encountered Muhammad Khwarazmshah and his army.

The Khwarazmians had entered the steppes to punish Qipchaq or Qangli raiders. Despite the Qangli nomads comprising a significant portion of the Khwarazmian military due to Sultan Muhammad’s mother being a Qangli princess, Sultan Muhammad II Khwarazmshah still had his share of problems with nomadic raiders on his frontiers.⁷ These may have been Ölberli, other Qipchaqs, or perhaps even the Merkit, who may have pillaged the Khwarazmian frontier in their flight from the Mongols. Muhammad entered the steppes to punish the Ölberli for their raids. When his scouts found the carnage of the battlefield from the Mongol victory, Muhammad set off in pursuit to discover who perpetrated such a deed.

Slowed by their prisoners and booty, which undoubtedly included significant numbers of livestock such as slow-moving sheep, the Mongols left an easy trail to follow. Before long, the Khwarazmians caught up with them. Rather than engaging in battle, Sübedei and Jochi sent envoys to the Sultan informing him that they did not want to fight with him. Indeed, they had received orders form Chinggis Khan to perform their mission and not engage with other powers, specifically the Khwarazmian Empire.⁸ Their sole mission was to deal with the Merkit, and the envoys explained that they merely sought to return to Mongolia unimpeded.
Muhammad Khwarazmshah, however, had other plans. Perhaps enticed by the loot that the Mongols gained, Muhammad sought to engage them in battle. The Mongols obliged and fulfilled Muhammad’s wish, yet it did not play out as he anticipated. Despite having a numerical advantage, the Khwarazmians found themselves hard pressed by the Mongols. As night fell, the two weary armies retired to their respective camps with the unspoken promise of battle the following day. As dawn broke, the Khwarazmian forces awoke to find that their mysterious opponents had disappeared. The Mongols had withdrawn under the cover of night. The Khwarazmshah, shaken by the ferocity of the Mongols, chose not to pursue.9

As they had indicated, the Mongols had no desire to fight Muhammad. Sübedei and Jochi had completed their mission and simply wished to return to Mongolia. As this was not an operation to conquer the region, the Mongols did not seek battle with opponents other than the Merkit. They could engage those who sheltered their enemies as well as defend themselves, but as they had nothing further to gain by staying in the region, the Mongols pragmatically exited when the opportunity arose.

**ACQUISITION OF THE EASTERN DASHT-I QIPCHAQ**

Bolstering the view that the Mongols did not seek conquest in their hunt for the Merkit is the fact that, although they entered the Dasht-i Qipchaq in 1208–1209, Chinggis Khan demonstrated little interest in the region afterwards. The Mongols did, however, accept the submission of the Qarluqs who occupied the cities of Almaliq and Beshbaliq, as well as the region of the Ili River basin.10 After Güchülgü一致性 usurped the throne of Qara Khitai and consolidated his power, he sought to bring the Qarluqs and perhaps the Uighurs back into the orbit of the empire. His attacks on the Qarluqs attracted the attention of Chinggis Khan, who dispatched the general Jebe in 1216 to deal with the situation. Additionally, intelligence regarding other Merkit survivors reached the Mongols, which led to Sübedei leading another army into the Dasht-i Qipchaq. Once again, Jochi joined Sübedei after dealing with rebellious Kirgiz in the Yenisei basin in Siberia.11 In this offensive, Jochi and Sübedei engaged the Merkit and the Qipchaq confederation at the Üyük River, located between the Volga and Ural Rivers. Again, Sübedei did not linger to seize control of the region, but with the conquest of Qara Khitai, the Mongols pushed their frontier to the Syr Darya and largely dominated the steppe between Lake Balkhash and the Yaik (Ural River) by *de facto*.

Their control of the eastern portion of the Dasht-i Qipchaq became *de jure* during the Khwarazmian War (1219–1224). With the conquest of Qara Khitai in 1216, the Mongols now bordered the Khwarazmian Empire. Despite lingering ideas that Chinggis Khan sought to conquer the world, he actually sought to avoid unnecessary hostilities with Khwarazm and to develop a commercial relationship with the Central Asian empire. Nonetheless, in 1218 Muhammad Khwarazmshah sanctioned the massacre of a Mongol-sponsored caravan.12

While also at war with the Jin Empire, Chinggis Khan prioritized the punishment of the Khwarazmian Empire. While Mawarannahr suffered the wrath of Chinggis Khan, the Qangli also attracted the Mongols’ gaze. As mentioned earlier, the Qangli often served in the Khwarazmian military due to the dynasty’s marriage ties with them.13 With the looming war, the Mongols sought to prevent the Khwarazmians
from procuring additional troops from the Qangli, which would be necessary not only for the defense of the Khwarazmian realm but also for a Khwarazmian counter-offensive.

The effort to prevent steppe elements from aiding the Khwarazmians was carried out by Jochi. While Chaghadai and Ögödei attacked Otrar, Jochi led armies along the Syr Darya. Jochi marched west, capturing towns on both sides of the river, including Sighnaq, Özkend, Barjligh-Kent, Ashnas, and Jand.14 These frontier towns served as not only trading centers but also staging points from whence the Khwarazmshah made forays against the nomads.15 Furthermore, Sighnaq had been the urban center of the Qangli in the twelfth century and probably still served as their major point of commercial contact with the sedentary world, and, consequently, as a communications conduit between the Sultan and the steppe.16

While Jochi led his army northwest along the Syr Darya, another army commanded by several noyans (Alaq Noyan, Sögëdii, and Taqai) marched southeast up the Syr Darya. At Fanakat, they found a Qangli army that offered stiff resistance for three days.17 While they successfully captured Fanakat, the performance of the Qangli troops stationed in the area demonstrated that they were a formidable enemy, hence why the Mongols sought to eliminate them from Khwarazmian service. The determined resistance of the Qangli at the Mongol siege of Samarqand (1221) only reinforced this perception.18

From Sighnaq, Jochi led his forces to Urgench (Gurganch) in Khwarazm, where he was joined by Chaghadai and Ögödei. The three successfully captured the city, but whereas Chaghadai and Ögödei then proceeded to join their father in present-day Afghanistan, Jochi marched north to the Aral Steppes (1221–1222). Allsen indicates Jochi sought to subdue not only the Qangli, but also the Saqsins, Sualav, and Bulghars.19 While he undoubtedly instigated operations against the Qanglis and others (perhaps any other group in the region), there is little evidence to support the claim that he threatened Bulghar on the Volga River. It is certain, however, that he did assume control of the region north of the Aral Sea, as when the Mongols withdrew the majority of their army from Mawarannahr. With the completion of the Khwarazmian campaign, Chinggis Khan ordered Jochi to set out from the Dasht-i-Qipchaq “driving the game in front of him (which for the most part was wild asses)”. The game that Jochi drove was used to provision the army.20 The fact that he could perform a nerge or circle hunt also demonstrates that the area was no longer hostile, as, in order to perform this hunt, the Mongol forces would have been extended over miles of territory and quite vulnerable to a sudden attack. His presence also prevented additional Qangli and Qipchaqs from aiding the Khwarazmians or coalescing into a unified resistance. According to Baybars al-Mansuri, Jochi proved adept at manipulating clan and tribal rivalries among the tribes of the Dasht-i Qipchaq.21 It is likely that his father then tasked Jochi with bringing all of the steppes east of the Yaik (Ural) under Mongol authority, as he was still in the region in 1224 when the reconnaissance in force commanded by Sübedei and Jebe returned. Jochi also appears to have died there (1225).22

While some sources criticize Jochi’s actions in the region, saying that he remained in the steppes and spent most of his time on the hunt, these sources miss or distort Jochi’s purpose. He did indeed hunt, but his prey included the Qangli as well as other tribes. By using the nerge, a hunting circle that extended for miles, Jochi not only
drove game but also flushed out any resistance. Furthermore, his hunting expeditions served as cover for scouting and intelligence-gathering, particularly as the Mongols reached the Yaik River and entered the Caspian Steppes. Finally, hunting kept Jochi in the region so that his forces could assist another operation if need be.

**RECONNAISSANCE IN THE PONTIC STEPPES**

While Jochi left Urgench for the Aral Steppes, Sübedei and Jebe hunted Muhammad Khwarazmshah as he abandoned Mawarannahr to the Mongols. Although the Khwarazmshah eventually died on an island in the Caspian in a desperate gambit to elude the Mongols, Sübedei and Jebe continued west rather than rejoining Chinggis Khan. With the Mongol ruler’s permission, they performed a reconnaissance to learn more about the western world that they had so recently entered.²³ They battled their way through Georgia, another state that frequently employed Qipchaq mercenaries (1222). Then, on the northern side of the Caucasus Mountains, they found their path impeded by an alliance of As (Alans) and Qipchaq nomads. The Mongols successfully split the alliance by appealing to the shared culture and customs of the Mongols and Qipchaqs (Turks) while pointing out the alien qualities of the As (Iranian) nomads. The Mongols provided the Qipchaqs with money and other goods as incentive to not aid the As, whom the Mongols then destroyed.²⁴

Having divided the two, the Mongols defeated the As and then turned on the Qipchaqs. The Qipchaqs broke and fled, some seeking shelter and assistance from their allies among the Southern Rus’ and some moving into Transcaucasia and even the Sultanate of Rum.²⁵ The Mongols stayed in the region, presumably on the steppes, to rest, finding the pasturage ideal. They also sent forays out, sacking the port of Sudaq in Crimea, which was a city the Qipchaqs ruled or received tribute from, causing further flight by Qipchaqs and others.²⁶ The sack of this city had far-reaching consequences that will be discussed later. Those who fled to the Rus’ sought their aid, which eventually led to the battle of the Kalka River in 1223, from which the Mongols emerged victorious, albeit with the possible loss of Jebe.²⁷ A few reports, however, viewed the Mongols as being defeated by the Rus’ and repelled by Qipchaqs.²⁸ Despite having a battle-hardened army of veterans, Sübedei found no respite as his passage across the Caspian Steppes was contested by other Qipchaqs as well as the Bulghars and other groups at the Volga River.²⁹ Indeed, Sübedei’s crossing of the steppes and then the Volga and Yaik was as fraught with peril as the journey of Xenophon’s Ten Thousand. It should be noted, however, that unlike Xenophon’s Greeks, the Mongols did not simply seek safe passage, but they also attempted to acquire the submission of some groups in the region, such as the Saqsin and the Bortas.³⁰ Indeed, the Bulghars’ hostile actions may have been triggered by Mongol efforts to strip away tributary polities as well as the disruption of the trade route to Sudaq.³¹ Regardless of the cause, the last stage of their journey was hard-pressed as the Bulghars and others, having learned the folly of fighting the Mongols directly, engaged in guerilla warfare. Indeed, Ibn al-Athir records that the Mongols even fell for feigned retreats, perhaps a sign of over-confidence from their numerous victories on this campaign.³² The Bulghars were undoubtedly aided by others including Qipchaqs, as it appears that the Mongols’ route was near the city of Saqsin on the lower Volga, forty days’ march south of Bulghar.³³ Fortunately, Jochi’s
Map 8.1 The Mongol Empire at the time of Chinggis Khan's death (1227)

Source: Created by Mapping Specialists, Ltd.
presence on the eastern bank of the Yaik River ensured that Sübedei’s army reached a safe haven in 1224. Shortly after his rendezvous with Jochi, Sübedei requested permission to form an army of the recently conquered (including Qipchaqs, Qanglis, Naiman, and Merkit) as a tamma to conquer the Dasht-i Qipchaq. Chinggis Khan agreed to the proposal. Although Sübedei began to form the army, a rebellion in Xi Xia delayed the execution of his scheme.

EARLY OPERATIONS IN THE VOLGA-YAIK

Although Sübedei continued east to report to Chinggis Khan, Jochi remained in the Aral Steppes until his death in 1225. His death undoubtedly stalled further expansion across the Yaik River. Even so, the Mongol presence east of the Yaik placed those on the western bank on notice, and there was considerable defensive activity by the Bulghars, Bashkirs, Mordvins, and the Qipchaq confederation of the Volga region. Indeed, there formed a coalition of groups to resist further Mongol expansion. Favereau posits that Bachman, the Qipchaq Khan in the Volga region, was the leader. While there is insufficient evidence to confirm this, it is credible, as the Mongol threat was real and imminent, and Bachman Khan’s later actions demonstrate his ability to lead such a movement. Regardless, Bachman did actively resist the Mongols in this period, but it is uncertain if he initiated the resistance or simply became a leader due to his success. Between Sübedei’s western ventures and the Jochid presence across the Yaik, the nomads of the Dasht-i Qipchaq were under pressure. Furthermore, the Mongol expansion hurt the Bulghars economically, which also affected the Qipchaqs. Not only did the Mongols’ domination of Siberian tribes east of the Yaik impinge upon the Bulghars’ control of the fur trade, but the reduction of Urgench, at least temporarily, removed a key market for the fur trade that fueled Bulghar commerce, from which the Qipchaqs also benefited via the caravan routes.

Indeed, the Mongol invasion curtailed the Bulghars’ economic capability, not only through the destruction of the Khwarazmian Empire, but also through their acquisition of territory and people east of the Yaik River. While the Mongols were always willing to engage in trade, the Bulghars could no longer gather tribute in pelts from these Siberian groups. Thus, the trade routes to the west, to the Pontic port of Sudaq, became more important, as well as their ties to the Qipchaqs in the west, whose acquiescence was necessary for any caravan traversing the steppes from the Volga to the Black Sea. The Bulghars had established trade connections in Sudaq in the twelfth century in response to the decline of routes and markets following the fall of the Saljuqs as well as the establishment of Qara Khitai. Thus, Sübedei and Jebe’s sack of Sudaq only a few years after the destruction of Urgench and other Khwarazmian cities undoubtedly dealt a heavy blow to the Bulghars’ economy and influence. Indeed, Janet Martin stated that, “With the arrival of the Mongols even this much reduced fur trade network [Sudaq] disappeared”.

Despite the lull in Mongol operations in the west between 1225 (Jochi’s death) and 1229 (Ögödei’s ascension to the throne), Sübedei had not forgotten the Yaik frontier. After the reduction of Xi Xia, he received permission to form an army on the western frontier. The death of Chinggis Khan in 1227 delayed this campaign, but after Ögödei came to the throne, Sübedei’s plans took shape.
He returned to the Yaik and engaged in some skirmishes. Yet before he could begin major operations, he was recalled to Mongolia to take part in the final reduction of the Jin Empire. Still, the tampa that Sübedei stationed along the Yaik remained there, either commanded or reinforced by Köketei and Sönitei, who were dispatched there shortly after Ögödei’s ascension to the throne. Their offensives against the Qipchaqs and Saqsin caused the latter to flee to the Bulghars. Additionally, the Mongols forced the Bulghars to abandon their forts on the western banks of the Yaik by 1229.

With these advances, the Bulghars then attempted to forge an alliance with the Rus’ of Vladimir-Suzdal, their western neighbor and often rival. The northern Rus’ appeared oblivious to the Mongol threat, despite the massive defeat of the southern princes at the Kalka River. Regardless, the Bulghars continued their coalition with the Qipchaqs and others in the Volga Region. Soon, however, Jochi’s son, Berke, crossed the Yaik with reinforcements and occupied the region between the Yaik and the Volga, shattering the Volga coalition. Some of the defeated joined the Mongols, both willingly and unwillingly. Furthermore, the defeat and loss of pasture also made continued resistance unsustainable for some nomads, forcing them to relocate farther west.

**THE WESTERN CAMPAIGN**

Despite the Mongols’ hold over the steppes east of the Volga River, the Qipchaqs and Bulghars received some respite as Berke consolidated his control over the territory between the Yaik and Volga Rivers rather than continuing his push westward. This period of calm was short-lived. With the defeat of the Jin in 1234, a quriltai led to the planning of another western campaign with the specific intent of bringing the Dasht-i Qipchaq under Mongol dominion. While the conquest of the Rus’ and the subsequent invasion of Central Europe has received the lion’s share of attention, the reduction of the Dasht-i Qipchaq was the primary focus of the Mongols. The Mongols certainly directed their armies against the Rus, but the Qipchaqs and other steppe groups were of considerably more importance. Not only were the Qipchaqs a formidable opponent, accustomed to fighting in much the same manner as the Mongols, but also, being nomads, they had a better understanding of steppe warfare tactics and strategies. Furthermore, they often served as mercenaries or allies for many of the sedentary states bordering the Dasht-i Qipchaq. By neutralizing them, the Mongols also eroded the military capabilities of these sedentary states as well. Of particular importance was the destruction of Bachman, leader of the Qipchaq confederation in the lower Volga region. Indeed, despite the Mongol successes west of the Yaik, they had failed to dislodge Bachman Khan and indeed, he appears to have successfully fended off Mongol probes. Continued success could have led to the resurgence of another anti-Mongol coalition. To this end, after the quriltai that authorized the Western Campaign, Sübedei led an army west comprised of numerous princes and their troops. As the war would also expand the ulus of the Jochids, the heirs of Jochi figured prominently in the campaign.

In February 1236, a grand army drawn from the forces of the Chinggisid family assembled between the Itil and Yaik Rivers, joining the forces of the Jochid princes Batu, Orda, and Shiban. Although the campaign was touted as one to expand the
Jochid domains with Batu holding command, Sübedei wielded true operational command, and one can sense he viewed it as an effort to bring the whole of the Dasht-i Qipchaq under Mongol control. Indeed, the conquest not only fit the idea of Heaven’s Will (for the Mongols to rule the world), but also secured valuable nomadic troops for their armies as well as securing pastures, always necessary for the expansion of the flocks and herds of the nomads who formed the core of the Mongol military.

Sübedei sent the main body of the army with Batu, Shiban, and Boroldai against the city of Bulghar as well as the Bashkirs on the Volga River. The city of Bulghar continued to prove resilient in the face of Mongol invasion but ultimately succumbed after Batu stormed it in 1236 with great slaughter. Bulghar, as well as its sister cities of Suvar and Bilar, suffered severe damage. Both the Bulghars and Bashkirs succumbed to the Mongols. With these victories, contingents then split off from the main force to mop up resistance from any neighboring tribes or other polities. Meanwhile Orda marched with one such force and attacked the Mordvin tribes known as the Bartas and Baqshi.

With one Mongol force attacking Bulghar and the northern tribes, Sübedei led another force against the tribes of the southern Volga. His primary target was Bachman Khan, the leader of the Qipchaq confederation of the Caspian Steppes. As indicated earlier, Bachman had led resistance to the Mongols’ expansion across the Yaik River but also attacked Sübedei’s army when it returned from his reconnaissance in force in 1224.

The attack on Bulghar also assisted in isolating Bachman. Using a nerge, the Mongols pushed the Qipchaqs before them as they drove south and constricted their movements, preventing them fleeing west. Isolated, Bachman fled to an island near the mouth of the Volga River. The Mongols were able to access the island and captured him. They resorted to using boats and waiting for low water to reach the island, probably due to their inexperience with crossing deep and wide rivers. Möngke, the son of Tolui and the future Qa’an, led the operation against Bachman Khan, who was executed by Möngke’s half-brother Böchek. By 1237, all resistance to the Mongols on either side of the Volga River had been eliminated. The Mongols then paused their campaign to rest as well as to divide the region into zones of administration.

Batu, the leader of the Jochids, assigned the front from the Aral Sea to the Irtysh to his elder brother Orda, with the western border being the Sari Su River and the southern border formed by the Talas and Qari Su Rivers. Shiban meanwhile received the pastures around the Yaik River and Ural Mountains. The northern borders remained ill-defined. There is evidence that the Jochids stretched their authority to the Arctic Sea, although they did not commit significant resources to that end at the time. The sparsely inhabited taiga and tundra of Siberia could wait until other more potent threats had been eliminated.

With the Qipchaqs of the Caspian Steppes crushed, the Mongols now pushed west. Most of the Mongol forces marched against the Rus’, but Mongol groups did remain in the steppes organizing the recently subdued Qipchaqs into functioning military units. These then reinforced the Mongols in 1238 when the conquest of the Pontic Steppes began, including the region between the Caspian and Black Seas. In this region, Möngke, Qadan, and Güyük all marched along with other princes.
against the Alans and Circassians. Meanwhile, Berke operated in the steppes north of the Crimean peninsula. Shiban, Büri, and Böchek subdued Crimea. As with Sübedei’s western reconnaissance, this invasion set off another round of mass migrations to escape the Mongol onslaught. Although many of the Qipchaqs fled to Hungary under Köten Khan, the same Qipchaq khan who fought the Mongols at the Kalka River, Berke was successful in subduing those who remained. Indeed, the defeat and conquest of the Qipchaqs created a glut of slaves in the Genoese slave markets in Kaffa and other cities in the Crimean peninsula.

While Qadan b. Ögödei marched against the Cherkes or Circassians, Möngke led the operations against the Alans, although Rashid al-Din indicates he also captured the Circassian leader Tuqfas while assisting Qadan. In the early phases, Möngke focused on isolating the Alan communities and subduing them one by one. These were then enlisted into the Mongol army to assist with the conquest. The Alans included both nomadic and sedentary elements. The Alan capital of Magas proved quite formidable, and armies under Güyük, Büri, and Qadan converged on the city. Another commander named Baqadai was sent to raze the fortifications of Derbend. It should be kept in mind that these operations were coordinated with Chormaqan’s conquests of Armenia and Georgia, thus preventing military aid or escape routes for anyone.

As with other conquests, those who submitted voluntarily remained in their positions, while those who resisted were crushed. Despite their successes, the Mongols never fully conquered the mountainous region. Even in 1242, some resistance continued in the steppes between the Caspian and Black Seas. Shinqor b. Jochi and Köten had to suppress this rebellion. It is unclear if this Köten was the son of Ögödei Qa’an. These Qipchaqs apparently chose to rebel while the main Mongol forces were still in Central Europe. While the Mongols defeated them, they dispatched another army under Ila’udar to pursue those who escaped the battle as they fled towards Derbend and the Caucasus Mountains. Undoubtedly, these Qipchaqs, Alans, and Circassians, as well as others, are those whom William of Rubruck references as causing trouble in this region in the 1250s. This rebellion, which is only mentioned in passing, nonetheless shows that resistance against Mongol authority continued in the steppes, and also that the Mongols left forces to deal with such situations and did not simply send all of their forces into Central Europe. The region gradually came under increased Mongol control, particularly in the 1260s, when the Caucasus became a contested zone due to the conflict between the Toluid Ilkhans and the Jochids.

The Mongols were not quite finished with the Qipchaqs yet. Those who nomadized between the Don and the Danube took flight west. The first wave arrived in 1237 and crossed the Danube into the kingdom of Bulgaria. While King Ivan Asen II (r. 1218–1241) had controlled previous Qipchaq incursions, the fear of the Mongols served as a powerful motivator for the Qipchaqs. Not only did they overwhelm the Bulgarians, but they then continued their flight until reaching Thrace.

A large wave of refugees arrived in Hungary in 1241. These (allegedly 40,000 Qipchaqs) were led by Köten Khan, the very same Qipchaq leader who lost to the Mongols at the Kalka River. While the Hungarian King Bela IV (r. 1235–1270) had plans for the Qipchaqs to augment his forces against the Mongols, many of his vassals did not trust them. Indeed, many of them viewed the Qipchaqs as a Mongol
vanguard. The Qipchaqs’ behavior, which was often destructive, did not help matters. As the Mongols began their invasion, distrust increased. Hungarian barons executed Köten, believing him to be in league with the Mongols. In retaliation and undoubtedly fearful of the Mongols, the Qipchaqs then pillaged and plundered their way through Hungary. They fought through the frontier defenses and then entered Bulgaria. While some settled, others continued their flight through the Balkans to escape the Mongols.

As a veteran of battles against the Mongols, Köten was unlikely to be their confederate. Still, the suspicion of the Qipchaqs made the fears of the Hungarian nobility a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead of providing additional soldiers, the Qipchaqs became a destructive force across Hungary. Thus, they ultimately weakened the kingdom. Additionally, the two waves of Qipchaqs entering Bulgaria did similar destruction, leaving it vulnerable to eventual Mongol attack.

CONCLUSION

The Mongol conquest of the Dasht-i Qipchaq had great ramifications. It considerably expanded their empire not only in terms of territory, but also in resources. This included not only material resources, but perhaps most importantly humans and animals. By conquering the Qipchaqs, the Mongols acquired their pastures and livestock, including the horse – the most important and crucial aspect of Mongol warfare. Additionally, the Qipchaq were incorporated into the Mongol military. While travelers such as Plano Carpini’s party and William of Rubruck often described areas where the Qipchaqs formerly dwelt, in truth they still dwelled there, but now as Mongols. Still, other observers more familiar with the pre-Mongol Dasht-i Qipchaq well understood that the Mongols capitalized on the Qipchaq manpower to reinforce their troops. Indeed, Thomas of Split insinuated that they conquered the Qipchaqs for that very purpose.

Accounts of the conquest of the Dasht-i Qipchaq seem muddled and out of order in virtually all of the sources. Yet, while muddled, they may not be as confused as they seem. Several sources state that Güyük attacked various parties on his return to Ögödei after being recalled. While it is tempting to believe that the Mongols subdued the region, one must also consider the possibility that after the Mongol army moved farther west, some groups continued to resist or at least felt that the threat was over, much like after the Battle of the Kalka River. Thus, as Mongol troops returned east, they also engaged in suppression operations.

Despite the conquest and destruction of the region, the Mongols never eradicated the Qipchaqs, Alans, or any other group. Indeed, the Qipchaqs continued to be a large presence in what became the Jochid Ulus. The Qipchaq dialect became the lingua franca of the region even as other dialects like Bulghar died out. While the Mongols conquered the Dasht-i Qipchaq and Mongolian was used in the Jochid court due to its prestige, the wide use of Qipchaq served as the basis from which many modern Turkic languages in the region of the Dasht-i Qipchaq stem.

NOTES

1 Lindner 1982, 701.
2 Golden 1992, 278.
3 Golden 1992, 278.
5 SWQZL, 38–39; Allsen 1983, 8.
6 SHM §236; 43; SWQZL, 40; Juvayni 1912, 51–52; HWC, 69.
10 SWQZL, 40–41; RDK, 320; RDT, 213; RDRM, 423–425; RDT2, 145–146; Golden 1992, 199.
11 RDRM, 575; RDT2, 198.
14 HWC, 83–90; Juvayni 1912, 65–70.
16 Golden 1992, 278.
17 HWC, 91; Juvayni 1912, 70.
18 HWC, 119–121; Juvayni 1912, 93–95.
20 HWC, 139–140; Juvayni 1912, 110–111.
22 HWC, 149; Juvayni 1912, 116; TNR, 1101; TN, 71; TR, 62–63.
23 TN, 369, 653; TNR, 277, 987–989; Nasawi, 101–102; RDK, 365; RDT, 249; RDRM, 505, 531, 534; RDT2, 176, 184–185.
26 KFT, 386; KFTR, 223; Rubruck, 70; TMM, 93.
28 Thomae achipidoni Spalatensis 2006, 252; Thomas of Split 2006, 253, EMC, 136–137.
29 KFT, 388.
30 KFT, 388; Allsen 1983, 11, 13; al-Nuwayri 1975, 323.
31 KFT, 388–389; KFTR, 224.
32 KFT, 388–389; KFTR, 224.
33 KFT, 388–389; KFTR, 224.
34 Allsen 1983, 11; HWC, 149; Juvayni 1912, 116.
36 Favereau 2021, 77.
40 Martin 1986, 27.
41 HWC: 190; Juvayni 1912, 150.
42 HWC, 190; Juvayni 1912, 150; RDRM, 638; RDK, 455; RDT2, 223; RDT, 313; Allsen 1983, 14–15. Although Juvayni and Rashid al-Din place Sübedei here in 1229–1230, Sübedei’s participation in the Jin campaign until 1234 makes this impossible.
— Timothy May —

44 TN: 717–718.
46 Allsen 1983, 18.
48 HWC, 269; Juvayni 1912, 224; Michell and Forbes 1914, 81; RDRM, 666; RDT2, 231; RDK, 474; RDT, 325; Martin 1986, 27; TMM, 30. Here, Juvayni and Rashid al-Din (who most likely simply copied Juvayni) muddle the campaigns against Bulghar and the Bashkirs with the invasion of Hungary and Bulgaria.
49 RDT, 327; RDK, 476; Rubruck, 138; TMM, 30, 131.
51 Allsen 1987; Allsen 1983; TMM, 30; TR, 72–75.
52 RDRM, 669; RDK, 476; RDT2, 232; RDT, 327.
53 RDRM, 669, 826; RDT, 476; RDT2, 232, 285; RDT, 327.
54 May 2012, 129–151.
55 RDRM, 678–679; RDT2, 236.
57 Vasary 2005, 64.
58 EMC, 136–137.
59 EMC, 138–140.
61 EMC, 176–177; Vasary 2005, 65.
62 Rubruck, 70, 111–113, 128–129; TMM, 93, 116, 125.
63 HBSS, 254–255, TR, 80–81.
64 Schamiloglu 2017, 335–336.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

EMC, See List of Abbreviations.
HBSS, See List of Abbreviations.
HWC, See List of Abbreviations.
KFT, See List of Abbreviations.

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Nasawi, See List of Abbreviations.

Nesawi, See List of Abbreviations.


RDK, See List of Abbreviations.

RDRM, See List of Abbreviations.

RDT, See List of Abbreviations.

RDT2, See List of Abbreviations.

Rubruck, See List of Abbreviations.


SHM, See List of Abbreviations.

SWQZL, See List of Abbreviations.

TMM, See List of Abbreviations.

TN, See List of Abbreviations.

TNR, See List of Abbreviations.

TR, See List of Abbreviations.


