SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

CONQUEST AND STATE
FORMATION

Michael Hope and Timothy May

Such was the transformative impact of Chinggis Khan and his successors upon the history of Eastern Inner Asia that it is often easy to forget that the Mongol Empire did not appear in a vacuum but was rather one in a succession of empires that rose to dominate the Eurasian steppes between the seventh century before the common era and the eighteenth century of the common era. The discussion of why these empires formed and how they differed from contemporary agricultural empires to the south has coloured contemporary interpretations of the Mongols. In most cases, we are forced to explore these empires from the perspectives of outsiders, due to the relative sparsity of written sources surviving from the steppe. This has traditionally led historians to exaggerate the separation between the steppe and the sown, the nomads and the farmers, muddying the role of border markets and cultural interlocutors in the formation of new political paradigms. Yet the Mongols fly in the face of such juxtapositions, as they built their empire in part through the integration and exploitation of the technologies, resources, and manpower of the people whom they encountered and conquered. Any effective appraisal of the Mongol Empire must, therefore, have an appreciation of the debt Chinggis Khan and his successors owed to earlier dynasties and neighbours, whilst still acknowledging the many novel aspects of their imperial enterprise.

Following the shift from hunting-gathering to pastoralism in Mongolia some 5,000 years ago, the first empire was formed towards the end of the third century before the common era. The Hunnu (Xiongnu) Empire (240 BCE–118 CE) first entered the pages of history in the Chinese sources of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), whose northern border they threatened. Their successors, the Sarbi (Xianbei) (third-fourth century CE), the Rouran (330–552), the Türk (552–744), the Uyghurs (745–840), and the Khitan (907–1125), maintained the same connection with China and Chinese history. It is, therefore, only natural that historians have sought the origins of the steppe empires in the ebb and flow of relations between these two great civilizations. This relationship was primarily one of commerce and exchange. The nomadic pastoralists, who largely depended upon their animals for
their livelihoods, were seen to have a fundamentally different mode of subsistence to the sedentary agriculturalists of the south, which in turn fostered trade between the two groups. It has even been suggested that this was a dependent relationship on the part of the nomads, who would otherwise be unable to sustain themselves solely on the produce of their animals. This view, though still widely held, has become increasingly nuanced of late as historians begin to appreciate that the Mongolian plateau integrated a variety of different lifeways.1

Nevertheless, their proximity to China allowed the largely pastoral people of Mongolia to acquire grains and crafted goods, such as metal tools, weapons, and fabric, in return for skins and furs from the taiga region to the north, in addition to felt, slaves, animals, and animal products. The most important of these animals was the horse, which flourished in large numbers in Mongolia and became a necessary component of most pre-modern armies by the Middle Ages. As luxury items, horses could command hefty prices, in some instances as much as 1 million bolts of silk, which the nomads could then use to trade with other regional powers.2 Indeed, there is strong evidence that the Hunnu and their predecessors were a central node in a trade corridor linking East Asia to the Mediterranean, with early innovations, such as wheat, barley, and possibly even the wheel entering China via trade routes that connected East Asia to the Middle East and Central Asia via the steppe.3 The prosperity that these trade routes brought to the nomads made their preservation of paramount importance and may have provided the impetus to the formation of the first states in Mongolia. Doubtless, the wealth created through trade exaggerated both social and economic stratification among the nomads, but the desire to control the terms of trade would have also stimulated some rudimentary organization. When such control and even the trade itself was jeopardised, the nomads often resorted to armed raiding to take what they required by force.4 The rise of nomadic states and then empires has, therefore, been tied intimately to the goal of expanding and exploiting trade routes, especially those with China.

Trade was, of course, only one aspect of the rise and fall of steppe empires, which were often outside of human control. The ability to sustain transhumant communities across the steppe was also dependent upon good weather. A precipitous drop in temperatures could have a devastating impact upon not only trade but also upon the pastures and water sources that the herders needed to survive. Regulating access to summer and winter pastures, typically found along the river systems of central and northern Mongolia, was one of the primary functions of a successful steppe ruler and could often be quite challenging. Recent analysis of pasturelands in Mongolruled Iran and Anatolia suggests that seasonal camps often changed on a yearly basis, depending upon the number of animals and the amount of precipitation. A leader had to know the size of his flocks and manage the stages of his migration, never overstaying too long in any one location.5 The larger the population of people and animals, the greater the challenge. Yet even a well-managed society could be undone by natural disasters, such as zhuds (arctic storms that last for days on end). Shortage of grazing land or water could then precipitate conflict and the configuration of military and political factions. Gareth Jenkins famously analysed paleoclimate data alongside chronicle accounts to demonstrate that just such a period of trouble pervaded most of the twelfth century when Chinggis Khan was beginning his career.6 Improved conditions in the thirteenth century increased the amount of
available pastureland to the south, thereby allowing the Mongols to embark upon their campaigns of expansion. We should of course be cautious about ascribing cause and effect to the natural environment, and climatic shifts on their own are never sufficient to explain the trajectory of history. Desiccation and periods of extreme heat or cold are prone to produce a number of possible outcomes depending upon other factors. Nevertheless, climate clearly played a significant role in shaping the political history of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire.

Whether through periods of climatic or economic strain, the early nomads were susceptible to displacement and disruption, causing an increased militarization of the steppe. Poverty or the threat of poverty caused the nomads to compete for what was available, despoiling the camps of their rivals for anything that they could live off. These raids would in turn impoverish their victims, pushing them towards a similarly predatory existence, which resulted in the rise of larger unions of people, led by individuals who demonstrated the military prowess and charisma necessary to sustain an armed following. These circumstances appear to have prevailed during the rise of the Hunnu, who were sandwiched between the much larger Han and Yuezhi configurations to the south and north respectively. A similar situation emerged in the third century of the common era when economic pressure from China, combined with the weakening of Hunnu and Han power, saw the emergence of a number of military and political groupings, many of which were led by the Sarbi. Though most of these warring states passed into historical obscurity without making much of an impression upon the written records, at least one group, the Tabghach, would go on to establish control over much of northern China and Inner Mongolia and form the Northern Wei dynasty.

Many of these unions were led by elite families that often claimed descent from mythical anthropomorphic ancestors who passed on their charisma to their descendants, legitimising their right to rule. There typically was not, however, a fixed protocol for determining succession, which could pass to any male relative who won the acclaim of his people. In some instances, women could also claim leadership of a nomadic union, typically on behalf of a deceased husband and his heirs. The primary function of a leader was, however, to maintain the livelihood and security of those who followed him, and leadership was, therefore, fundamentally a military position. Demonstrated martial ability was a key criterion for aspiring leaders, and it was not uncommon for princes to be expected to prove themselves through raids and adventures, described by the Turkic term ‘qazaqliq,’ before coming to the throne. Adventurous young princes (qazaqs) could build a following and a reputation for themselves by leading raids against ancestral enemies or against wealthy settlements, which would sometimes result in the formation of new political unions.

The idea that the steppe went through periods of greater and lesser militarization, centralization, and consolidation leads us to the conclusion that nomadic political associations were highly versatile and adaptable. Indeed, some historians have even seen the utility of treating nomadic empire-building as a cyclical process, one in which empire is less an end point than the closest period to the beginning of a new cycle. Whether or not nomadic state formation can be considered cyclical, it does seem that new empires tended to form with many of the components of their predecessors. In some cases, this debt to earlier imperialism was not hard to locate, as was the case with the revival of the Great Türk Empire (552–630) under the
leadership of Elterish Qaghan (r. 682–692) or its successor, the Uyghur Khaganate, in 745. Despite being incorporated into both the first and second iterations of the Türk Empire, the Uyghurs nevertheless retained a sense of their own autonomy and asserted their control over Mongolia following the final collapse of the Second Türk Empire in 744. Yet they continued to express their authority over this territory and its people using the same titles, institutions, and ceremonies as their predecessors. Basing themselves in the Orkhon River Valley, the former centre of the Türk Empire, the Uyghurs were one of a number of successor dynasties to claim some connection to the earlier empire, the others being the Khazars, Qarluq, and Oghuz. The same process can perhaps be seen earlier among the states claiming succession from the Hunnu, most notably the Hephthalites and Western Huns.¹¹

The immediate predecessors and potential models for the Mongols were the Khitan, who laid claim to both northern China and the eastern Eurasian steppe from 907 until 1125. The Khitan were themselves a proto-Mongolic people, who are noted as early as the eighth-century Turkic Orkhon Inscription and in the Chinese sources nomadising to the east of the Mongolian plateau. Under the leadership of their founder, Abaoji, the Khitan unified their homeland to the south of Manchuria before conquering the adjacent Bohai (Manchuria and northern Korea) and Mongolia. In 938, they captured 16 northern prefectures of the Chinese Song Dynasty, thereby situating themselves at the crossroads of Chinese and steppe culture.¹² The expansion of the Khitan-Liao Empire appears to have stimulated the formation of new groupings in Mongolia itself, either to defend against possible Khitan aggression, as was probably the case in the north, or to reap the benefits of dealing with the Khitan, as appears to have predominated in the south. Several of the nomadic statelets that were present during the childhood of Chinggis Khan, such as the Naiman and Kereit, were already present on the steppe by the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, testifying to this process.¹³ Shortly after the Jurchen Jin toppled the Khitan in northern China, the rump of the Khitan Empire passed west to establish a new state, known as Qara Khitai (1124–1218). This territory, along with the earlier Khitan domains, was conquered and integrated into the Mongol Empire, where many Khitan officials found employment. These officials brought with them their former expertise of ruling an empire that spanned both nomadic and sedentary civilizations; thus, they played a critical role in developing the institutions to govern the latent Mongol Empire, not least the office of daruqachi (governor/overseer), who was charged with ensuring the loyalty of conquered territories, and possibly even the tradition of having women rule as regents after the death of their husbands until a council of notables (quriltai – also a Khitan institution) could determine a successor.¹⁴

It was through their connection with the Khitan and also their ongoing rivalry with the Jin Empire to the south that the Mongols incorporated imperial traditions from the Chinese. Abaoji himself was said to have done away with his traditional Khitan titles and adopted the more grandiose Confucian term ‘Son of Heaven.’ The Mongols likewise appropriated Chinese titles as a means to assert their primacy on the steppe, often in partnership with the Jin, who played the various nomadic principalities off against one another to prevent the emergence of a stronger unified opponent to the north. Both Chinggis Khan and his ally, Toghril Khan, assumed Chinese titles in recognition of their alliance with the Jin against the Tatars in 1202.
More Chinese innovations were to follow with the Mongol expansion south to conquer the Jin, which began in 1211 and culminated in the conquest of the northern capital of Zhongdu (modern Beijing) in 1215, before the capitulation of the regime during the rule of Chinggis’s son and heir Öügedi in 1234. These campaigns saw the integration of not only Chinese, Khitan, and Jin officials into the Mongol Empire but also their soldiers as well. Easily the most celebrated of these officials was Yelu Chucai, a Khitan official in the service of the Jin, who transferred his allegiance to Chinggis Khan and his successors. Under his stewardship, the Mongols in northern China shifted from conquerors to rulers, imposing a fixed tax upon the agrarian and herding populations based upon a census. His role in shaping the administrative foundations of Mongol-ruled China clearly marks Yelu Chucai apart, but he was simply one of many tens of thousands of scribes, soldiers, merchants, and craftsmen whom the Mongols adopted into their government from Europe, the Near East, Central Eurasia, and East Asia, along with their earlier imperial traditions.

Probably the greatest borrowing on the part of the Mongols was their adaptation of the earlier Turkic ideology of divine mandate, centred around the heavenly deity, Köke Möngke Tengri (Blue Eternal Heaven/Sky). It has been suggested that even this may have been a borrowing from China, though the veneration of Heaven is so old that it is hard to distinguish which aspects may have been indigenous to the Turko-Mongolians and which belonged to the Chinese. 15 Most likely the two traditions cross-pollinated over a period of time before crystallising into two separate traditions. Köke Tengri (Heaven) was, in any case, a prominent part of both Hunnu and Türkic imperial ideology and was invoked in the Orkhon Inscriptions as a foil for the power of the khan and the benefits that his rule brought to the Türkic people. 16 Violations of the order of the khaghan were interpreted by the same source as implying ‘chaos’ in the state of Heaven and Earth. The same deity was invoked in the titulature of both the Uyghurs and their eventual conquerors, the Kirgiz. 17

Tengri was, however, only the most pre-eminent of a whole series of regional and elemental deities, to which we might also add ancestral spirits. Veneration of the ancestors and regional deities both featured prominently in the early life of Chinggis Khan, who claimed special favour from Mount Burqan Qaldun. He believed that the mountain had afforded him protection from his enemies, and he enjoined his successors to sacrifice and show similar reverence to it after he was gone. Indeed, the mountain is still viewed by many experts as the most likely location for Chinggis Khan’s as-yet-undiscovered tomb. Yet following the coronation of Chinggis Khan as ruler of the Yeke Monggol Ulus, the cult of Burqan Qaldun receded in importance in relation to Tenggerism. Chinggis is said to have prayed to Tengri before embarking upon his campaigns against the Jin and the Khwarazmshah, and the “will of Tengri” became a common formula to express Mongol authority in correspondence with foreign powers. Imperial edicts, letters, and the court histories, written for the most part in Chinese and Persian, show that the “will of Tengri” was to grant the Mongols universal dominion over the entire world, or in the words of Güyük Khan’s letter to Pope Innocent IV, “From the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject to me.” The appropriate response to this announcement was to “come at once and serve.” 18 Though this message became more nuanced in later generations as the Mongols sought foreign allies in their civil wars, the impression is that the Mongols believed that the entire world had been given over to their rule
and that those who refused to recognise this fact were not simply adversaries but rebels against heaven’s will.

Even during Chinggis Khan’s lifetime, the Mongol expansion took place in a highly systematic way. Campaigns were coordinated centrally by the qa’an, though typically leadership on the ground was delegated to junior princes and commanders. This allowed the Mongols to fight a number of wars on multiple fronts. During the reign of Ögödei, for example, campaigns were launched concurrently against northern China, the Near East, and Central Asia (the Qipchaqs), whilst during the reign of Möngke, new waves of expansion were initiated into southern China, Korea, South Asia, and the Middle East. To what extent these campaigns were meant to overlap or even serve a unitary purpose has come under serious question recently. Several of these campaigns operated in close proximity, such as the Middle East and Western campaigns of 1231 to 1241, which may have overlapped in the Transcaucasia; and the campaigns against South Asia and the Middle East (1251–1259), which intersected in Afghanistan. The later division of the empire into autonomous khanates has led historians to analyse these campaigns separately, yet this would have been far from clear between 1231 and 1259 when they were taking place. Soldiers, tax officials, and even conquered people saw themselves as answerable to the qa’an alone, and he presumably had the final say on the objectives and targets of these campaigns. There are even several clear examples of the Mongols pursuing strategic priorities over several generations. The Mongols’ Middle Eastern frontier is a prime instance. The *Secret History of the Mongols* claims that Chinggis Khan himself charged Chormaqan Noyan with conquering Baghdad following the campaign against the Khwarazmshah (1219–1224), but it was not until the reign of Ögödei that he was actually dispatched with an army to mop up the remaining Khwarazmshah forces and impose permanent control over Iran. Ögödei’s heir, Güyük, likewise inaugurated his rule by dispatching a new commander, Eljigidei Noyan, with a plan to subjugate Iraq, a plan that was delayed by his untimely death until the reign of his cousin Möngke (1251–9). The Mongol campaigns were, therefore, at least to some extent, concerted and coordinated.

The qa’an’s nomadic troops were supplemented by a large contingent of non-Mongol auxiliaries, who were incorporated into the Mongolian decimal system and made up a sizeable portion of the Mongol army. As early as 1206, Chinggis Khan had already welcomed Muslims, Khitans, Hoyin Irgen (Forest People), and Turks into his army. Indeed, these non-Mongolian troops were almost a necessary ingredient to his success. His victory over the rebellious Qori Tümed in 1209 was achieved through an alliance with their neighbours, the Oirat. Likewise, Chinggis Khan’s campaigns against the Jin saw the formation of new Khitan and Han divisions numbering in the tens of thousands. There was even a short-lived Khitan state established in the Liaodong Peninsula, after the completion of Chinggis’s first campaign against the Jin in 1213. Moreover, the conquest of the Koryo state was only achieved after senior northern families had submitted to the Mongols and attended their quriltai. Even in the Islamic world, the vassal rulers of Fars, Kirman, Sistan, Herat, Mazandaran, and Luristan sent contingents to help in the eventual overthrow of the ‘Abbasid caliphate in 1258. Though the Mongols retained control of the most senior offices and institutions, they very quickly became a minority within their own empire. How they managed to balance their power against the interests and beliefs of their
conquered population will be covered in Part III of this book. For now, however, it is simply enough to note the important role that such units played in the initial expansion of the Mongol Empire.

This somewhat loose and decentralised governance structure allowed the Mongols and other steppe empires to expand very rapidly, but it also made them very brittle and susceptible to equally speedy collapse. It was, therefore, not an external but rather an internal challenge that saw the empire disintegrate in 1260 into several regional factions, each governed by an independent khan. These khanates retained a strong sense of shared identity and maintained a Chinggisid prince on the throne, whilst ruling in accordance with the *jasaq* and *yosun* (laws and traditions) of Chinggis Khan. They even flirted with the possibility of returning to a more cooperative style of government, albeit they had become *de jure* independent states. The root of this separation lay with the politics of succession, which, as noted earlier, was never satisfactorily resolved throughout the history of the Mongol Empire. The only smooth transition of power occurred after the death of Chinggis Khan himself in 1227, shortly after having confirmed the designation of his third son Ögödei as his successor. Matters were slightly simplified by the fact that his eldest son, Jochi, had predeceased him and his other two sons, Chaghadai and Tolui, were not willing to challenge the will of the great imperial founder.

Chinggis Khan’s choice of Ögödei was far from haphazard and may reveal a great deal about how he conceived the empire would be run. Having already granted his two eldest sons *ulus* (domains) to the west of the Mongolian homeland along with sizeable armies, it was apparent that any ruler would need to govern in a collaborative, collegial style. Ögödei’s claim to rule was therefore based upon his status as a deal-maker, someone to bring consensus to the rapidly growing empire and its ruling family. Even during Chinggis Khan’s lifetime, Ögödei had distinguished himself as a peacemaker, in sharp contrast to his more belligerent brothers. Known for his love of drinking, Ögödei could be both affable and charming and was loved by his relatives, albeit he also demonstrated a capacity for cruelty and single-mindedness when appropriate. The tragedy for the Mongol Empire was that the third generation of Mongol rulers failed to heed Ögödei’s example. Following his death in 1241, a number of possible successors presented themselves. The machinations of Ögödei’s widow, Töregene Khatun, ultimately ensured that the throne would pass to his son Güyük, but the new qa’an was not universally loved. He had an ongoing feud with his cousin, Batu, the son of Jochi, who failed to attend his coronation, and when Güyük died whilst marching westward in 1248, there was some speculation that he had been murdered. In any case, Güyük’s death saw the question of the succession reassert itself, and this time Batu and his allies successfully campaigned to have the throne pass from the line of Ögödei to the line of his younger brother Tolui. This transition, which was no doubt intended by Batu to outmanoeuvre his rivals amongst the descendants of Ögödei and Chaghadai, was presented in later histories as a natural decision, one that might have even been forecast by Chinggis Khan himself. The violence it occasioned suggests otherwise. Batu had refused to come to Mongolia to attend the *quriltai* to decide upon the new khan, pleading illness and infirmity. Instead, he held a smaller gathering in his own territory, Ala Qamaq, where he designated his cousin Möngke as qa’an. He then sped Möngke back to Mongolia in the presence of his brother Orda and a large army. Those who refused to
attend the coronation of Möngke or acquiesce to this coup were swiftly purged after he was enthroned in 1251. The Chaghadaid and Ögödeid lines of Chinggis Khan’s descendants were the most heavily hit, with most of the adult men suffering execution and the junior princes placed under house arrest at the qa’an’s court. The upshot was an empire dominated by Möngke in the east and Batu in the west, “two eyes in one head,” as the new qa’an explained to the Franciscan friar William of Rubruck.²⁵ Yet the blood-letting was far from over, and a final dramatic schism was to take place not long after the death of Möngke in 1259. His passing once again caused the question of the succession to raise its head, though this time the list of candidates had been severely diminished. By this point, Batu was long dead and his family were occupied with their dominions in the west, leaving Möngke’s brothers as the sole contenders for his realm. Möngke had, however, already dispatched his younger siblings, Hülegü and Qubilai, to expand the empire’s frontiers in the Middle East and China respectively, which for practical reasons removed the possibility of Hülegü launching a successful claim. He received news of his brother’s death whilst in Syria and wisely calculated that he would be better served consolidating his control of the Islamic core territories than forcing his unlikely candidacy to his brother’s throne. This left Qubilai, who had been engaged in war with the Southern Song dynasty alongside Möngke, and the youngest of Tolui’s sons, Ariq Böke, at that time serving as custodian of Mongolia. This posting appears to have given Ariq Böke an advantage, and the list of his supporters in many cases overlaps with the names of Möngke’s former household staff, suggesting his popularity with the existing order. He also parachuted his own candidates to take control of the former Ögödeid and Chaghadaid dominions in Central Eurasia, providing him with a lifeline to further military reinforcements and revenues. Yet his brother Qubilai controlled northern China and the armies assembled there. Mongolia had become dependent upon tribute and supplies from China to sustain the new imperial capital, Qaraqorum, and its hangers-on in the years since Chinggis Khan’s death. The concentration of power on the steppe must have created huge new pressures on the pastureland of Mongolia, making it reliant on merchants transferring food and other necessities from neighbouring territories.²⁶ Qubilai therefore utilised his position to cordon off Mongolia and prevent further supplies from passing through. This forced Ariq Böke to look for aid from his Chaghadaid ally, Alghu, but when his exactions became too heavy, even this option was closed to him, and he eventually surrendered to his brother late in 1263.

The civil war between Ariq Böke and Qubilai lasted for nearly four years, but its consequences proved to be permanent. Though Ariq Böke had been captured in 1263, his allies in the Jochid Ulus and even in the Ögödeid realm failed to immediately recognise Qubilai’s claims. Moreover, the conflict for the throne gave rise to other regional struggles between the Toluids and the Jochids and eventually between the Toluids and the Chaghadaids, who felt that they had been treated unfairly during the decade of Möngke’s supremacy and wanted to press their claims to the land and people in the Middle East and East Turkistan. These conflicts left the Mongol Empire in a state of permanent division, with Hülegü establishing his control between the Oxus and Euphrates rivers; the Jochids retained control of the land between the Danube and the Irtysh rivers, while the Chaghadaids controlled what lay between the Amu Darya River and the Tarim Basin. Qubilai inherited
a truncated empire, consisting of Mongolia, Korea, northern China, Tibet, and Yunnan, to which he would add southern China in 1279. Most successor states, even the Jochids, eventually came to view Qubilai as the great khan and senior ruler of the former Mongol Empire, but his ability to influence events in the more westerly khanates was limited at best. The next century would see the Mongolian successor states come to terms with ruling smaller, ideologically far more homogeneous territories, balancing the earlier Mongol vision of universalism with the new reality of limited sovereignty.

NOTES

2 Beckwith 2009, 22.
3 Buell et al. 2020, 79.
5 Smith 1999, 40.
7 Pederson et al. 2014, 4375–4379.
8 Di Cosmo 2002, 179.
9 Lee 2015, passim.
10 Barfield 1989, 11; Atwood 2008, 64; Sneath 2007, passim.
11 Golden 1992, 80, 83; Findley 2005, 38, 50–51, 75.
16 Ross and Thomsen 1930, 862, 865, 867, 869.
17 Aydın 2018, 36, 44; Golden 1982, 45.
18 TMM, 85–86.
19 For example see Pow 2018, 46.
21 Hope 2016, 100; Smith 2012, 130.
22 See Chapter 21, Lkhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, ‘Mongol State Formation and Imperial Transformation.’
23 Rubruck, 167.
24 Kim 2013, 109; De Rachewiltz 1965, 197.
25 Rubruck, 238.
26 Vladimirtsov 1948, 166–167.

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Rubruck, See List of Abbreviations.
SHM, See List of Abbreviations.
TMM, See List of Abbreviations.
PART I

CHINGGIS KHAN AND STATE FORMATION
CHAPTER ONE
MONGOLIA BEFORE CHINGGIS KHAN *

Isenbike Togan

INTRODUCTION
Mongolia is part of Inner Asia but also of Asia in general, and in that sense takes part in the patterns of Asian history with its periods of universalism and localism following one another in alternation up to the emergence of the Mongolian Empire in the 13th–14th centuries. In the periods of universalism empires coexisted across Asia: the first period saw the Qin-Han in China, the Xiongnu in the steppe (ca. 200BCE-200CE) and the Roman Empire in the west (until 395CE). In the second phase of universalism we see the Tang, the early Türk, the Uyghurs, (ca 550–850) Byzantium and the Islamic empires. These were all multiethnic, multicultural political entities established along trade routes, yet they had differing trade policies.

The nomadic empires in the north ruled over a vast area and favored redistribution of surplus in a power-sharing arrangement. Moreover, they promoted free trade, the profits of which were collected and redistributed locally. Sedentary states or empires in turn were interested in accumulation of surplus at a center and preferred to control trade with the outside world by making use of their bureaucracy. Another way in which the eastern and western parts of Asia differed was in terms of their outlook towards religions. During the first millennium, in the eastern parts of Asia, different religions coexisted under the umbrella of the imperial state. Western Asia was the cradle of religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, with monotheism clearly dominant.

In the periods of localism, there was not such a difference between eastern and western Asia. It was instead a world of many political actors of diverse denominations. On the whole, we see the emergence of lesser groups, both sedentary and nomadic, while leadership was mostly in the hands of more or less one ethnic group. These groups were open to trade, as well as to the cultural and spiritual influences brought by these traders. Periods of localism were politically unstable but intellectually exciting times that were also conducive to the emergence of new spiritual movements and the creation of new aesthetic patterns.

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Localist periods (220–550 and 950–1206) are marked by principalities, sultanates, khanates, chiefdoms and even smaller groups. They occur after the collapse of empires. Furthermore, while small polities emerged in the sedentary regions, clans, tribes, tribe segments and retainer groups existed in the steppe. It was within the shadow of conflicts among the steppe people that they made incursions into the sedentary regions along the trade routes, contributing to the fragmentation of the political structures. They did not venture into conquests. It was among pastoral nomadic people of the second localist period that Chinggis Khan became a leader and rose to eminence.

**METHODOLOGY**

Starting from the second half of the 18th century, western ethnographic literature described the nomadic population of Inner Asia as tribes. In these descriptions, “tribe” is a category for people who have remained “primitive, underdeveloped” since ancient times. In this view “unchangingness” was prevalent both diachronically (time) and synchronically (space). If differences were observed, they seemed to be regional and were reflected in tangible heritage, that is in the attire, utensils or customs of the people concerned. The travelers’ as well as the scholars’ interest was in the “simple, pure” and exotic.

Historians of the 19th and 20th centuries were actually not familiar with the notion of tribe in terms of their own socialization. The historical people concerned, on the other hand, often have many different terms for similar groupings. Sometimes these people do not even bother to define a term, as they are themselves familiar with it. For instance the present-day Kazakhs use the term *ru* for all categories under a *zhuz*, one of the three main divisions among the Kazakhs. A “tribe” as well as its subdivisions can be called *ru*. It is for us outsiders to figure out what they mean. What is clearly apparent for an insider needs to be neatly categorized by the outsider so that it is understandable. Our need to categorize leads to a concern with terminology. Additionally, we tend to look at categories and terminologies as static and unchanging aspects of human organization. We take notions such as tribe as unchanging entities. However, the actors in historical societies use different terms for those concepts we understand to be one static unit. Through history, Inner Asian nomads lived and experienced these notions in different forms; they did not feel the need to bring all these different forms under one neat umbrella. Apparently, it was felt that one specific term would blur differences and nuances. For us, on the other hand, such terms represent useful categories. Scholars have scrutinized whether tribes were kinship groups. Moreover, the question of what kind of terminology was used by the indigenous people such as the Mongols has been another concern.

In the present study, instead of using today’s terminology as an analytic category, the usage and the terminology of the sources themselves have been employed. This kind of approach will be seen in the case of Chinese as well as Persian sources. The analytic tool in the present study is the socio-political structure of these pastoral nomads. This structure has been defined as kin and non-kin groups and has been derived from historical texts. As a result, what historical texts tell us in their own terms represents the warp and weft of their own times. They make us aware of notions such as common descent, seniority by life cycle, stratification and hierarchy.
The kin groups emphasize common descent, while the non-kin groups appear as stratified and hierarchical. Some seem to be semi-stratified. The emerging picture is not a one-way “anarchy” as Vladimirtsov described it.³

In this paper, taking its lead from Chinese sources, terminology is used with the following translations: xing 姓 (clan), bu 部 (tribe), buluo 部落 (tribe segments or retainer groups).⁴

**What the sources say about terminology**

Historians mostly rely on Chinese sources for the earlier periods, both localist and universal. While for the universalist periods, there are indigenous sources for the steppe and the sown, for the localist periods we have only Chinese sources, as Chinese regimes were very much interested in their neighbors, irrespective of their political formations.

In both of the localist phases, relations between the different smaller actors as well as their relations with China set the tone for this time span. Records in Chinese for the first localist period come from the *Wei Dynastic History*, which was written in 554 and covers 386–550. This source stands out because it employs distinct terminology for kin and non-kin groups.⁵

This distinction is supported by the mythological references appearing in this work. According to the mythology, the Rouran, a qaghanate (3rd–6th c.) founded by ethnically and structurally mixed groups with proto-Mongol overtones, were descended from a bald person who had been ousted from his own community. According to Yahontov, the two characters making up the name *rouran* 柔然 were pronounced as *nonor* at that time.⁶ Based on this reconstruction, Klyashtorny is inclined to see a relationship between the name of the Rouran and the Mongolian word *nökör*, meaning “companion, retainer”.⁷ Members of the political entity that emerged from the followers of the bald ancestor were therefore not related to each other by kinship. The composition of the *nökör* groups, as well as the structure of the Rouran khaghanate as a polity,⁸ consisted of non-kin groups. Chinese sources related to this period use the term *buluo* 部落 – pronounced *nonor* at that time – when referring to the Rouran population. This postulation is strengthened by the Khitan pronunciation of *buluo* as *no’or*.⁹ In other words, the Chinese terms *rouran* and *buluo* were pronounced as *no’or* by the proto-Mongol Rouran and the Khitan. These historical records do not distinguish between the rulers and the ruled; both were referred to as *rouran* (pronounced *nonor*) at that time. The Mongols, however, used *nökör*¹⁰ for the non-kin individual who was a companion to or retainer of a leader.

The term *buluo* emerged after the dissolution of the Xiongnu and came to denote tribe segments or retainer groups. They did not have names but were known by their affiliation to a leader.¹¹ These segments sometimes developed into polities, as among the Rouran. In these cases, their sources of livelihood were not so much pastoral production but military activities, incursions, looting, booty and control of trade routes. The Northern Wei, on the other hand, consisted of ethnic groups which had names and harbored subdivisions. Sometimes they also gave protection to conglomerations consisting of kinship groups (*xing*) such as the “High Carts”.¹²
The composition of these groupings varied according to time and place. But it seems that these three groups, that is the *xing* (clans), *bu* (tribes with subunits) and *buluo* (tribe segments or retainer groups), which emerged during the times of the first localist period, carried on their existence even beyond the second universalist phase (ca. 550–850).

**A BRIEF SURVEY OF PRE-CHINGGISID EAST ASIA**

The interaction of these three groups in shaping polities was not uniform. One could say that while in the localist periods we have more or less autonomous units, universalist periods present two distinct models. The first of these is represented by the Early Türk, who made an alliance with a powerful clan to strengthen the center but otherwise relied heavily on the retainer groups with whose help they were able to incorporate the tribes with names such as the Bayarqu and Tatar. This model was based on control of manpower and trade routes. The second model is the Uyghur model, where a special relationship to land was developed, leading to sedentarization. This model was not so much based on manpower but on domination over land and trade, which was achieved by the use of force as well as by contact with China. The ensuing Khitan period offered a compromise with a dual administration over the nomadic north and the more settled south.

By the 6th and 7th centuries, the Türk emerged from the ashes of the Rouran. The early Türk were not distinguished by kinship groups constituting “tribes” but by retainer groups referred to as *buluo* and by certain clans. They had no specific names but were known under the name of the leader to whom they were attached. They were warriors who lived on booty. In the periphery, these *buluo* extended their domination over tribes referred to as *bu* in our sources. These were confederative clan groups with names such as Bayarqu. In addition to their own leaders, these groups were ruled by an *elteber* (tax-collecting chief) or by a member of the ruling Türk dynasty. The prince who had his own warriors was called *shad*. Independent kinship groups, such as the Toquz Oghuz (*jiu xing*), were producers raising livestock who engaged in warfare only when conditions compelled them. In general, they had temporary leaders chosen by the people. As a result, they sought protection from the larger Türk polity and became the backbone of the new political formation.

The Ashina, the ruling dynasty of the early Türk, brought these three groups under one umbrella. Their success was in their ability to merge these three groups into one in an interdependent manner. The emerging political centers – constituting sections of a partitioned administration – were predatory in their quest for the control of trade routes across Asia. The *buluo* (retainer groups), called *bodun* in Turkic, were the driving force for conquests and control points for trade. They were not tribes consisting of kinship groups as they are sometimes referred to in modern scholarship. They did not have names but were attached to leaders. Yet because the attachment of the members of a *buluo* to their leaders was in general voluntary, they could vote with their feet and leave when dissatisfaction came on the horizon. The center’s dependence on the *buluo* was both its strength as well as its weakness. Therefore, the political center saw the feeding and clothing of the *buluo* as its duty, a task which could only be fulfilled by booty acquired through invasions and conquests.
Towards the middle of the 8th century, the early Türk lost their hegemony on two counts: one, over-taxation of the “tribes” (bu), such as the Bayarqu and Uyghur, led to revolts in the periphery. Secondly, harsh treatment of the buluo by the new leadership led to their decamping and the isolation and abandonment of their leaders. Drought and famine also accompanied severe frost (jut) for three successive years. These problems led to the 50-year-long interval between the first and the second qaghanates (630–682). In the second state, they tried to overcome these difficulties by overreliance and excessive pressure on the many Oghuz (xing), in this case the Toquz Oghuz.

The pattern established by the Early Turk was later emulated by others, with some modifications. For instance, the Uyghurs emerged as a polity in which a single kinship group (xing) assumed hegemony over the other kinship groups. This was a new stratagem as they were aware that they could not solely rely on the buluo, who had proved not to be dependable as they could always vote with their feet. Acknowledging the Early Türk heritage, the Uyghurs took control of trade with their Sogdian associates in 744.

The Uyghurs (Huihe) were one of the many Oghuz, known as Toquz Oghuz in Islamic sources after their takeover in 744. Little is known of them before their rise. As far as we know, they were located to the north of the Early Türk. In the second half of the 6th century, they came under Early Türk domination. Nevertheless, there was unrest, and in 605, the Türk Qaghan achieved a striking victory over the Oghuz, the Uyghurs being among them.

The Sui Dynasty reached out to the Uyghurs as part of a Chinese policy of befriending the distant to control the nearby. The leaders of one of the clans, the Yaghlaqar, were mentioned among those contacted.

The Uyghurs were a loose confederation of ten clans. Their social organization as well as their customs differed considerably from the Early Türk. It seems they resented Türk rule and are mentioned in 627 among the tribes revolting against heavy taxation. Meanwhile, they seem to have made use of their superior horses and acquired a taste for exchange (silk for horse). After the Eastern Türk were completely defeated in 630, the road to China was blocked by the new polity, the Xue Yantuo. While earlier the Uyghurs had been living in a survival mode, by 646 they seem to have been willing to use force against their Xue Yantuo neighbors and consequently defeated them. Accepting prefecture status through their contact with China, the Uyghurs gradually organized themselves under one leader. The Chinese prefecture system that they adopted produced hierarchical relationships.

In the year 685, a famine forced a large-scale migration of the Oghuz, such as the Huihe, Qibi, Sijie (İzgil) and Hun; they settled in the Liang and Gan prefectures (Gansu and southwest Shaanxi). This event provided them with a further taste of the sedentary lifestyle, in which agriculture and trade played a more important role. Thus, when the Uyghurs took over the rule from the Early Türk in 744, some were already acquainted with aspects of sedentary life. We understand then why they headed towards Gansu and Turfan after they were ousted from Mongolia by the Kirgiz in 844.

The development of hierarchies and a leadership group brought centralization. The organization into prefectures, on the other hand, developed the concept of domination over land, which was largely foreign to the nomads. They had always
prioritized control of manpower. Land accompanied the conquest of people and was not a goal in itself. The Uyghurs moved away from earlier practices. Their partnership with the Sogdians, as well as their settlement in the Gansu region in the 680s, made them more familiar with trade routes. One would assume that to secure their access to these routes they would have used the nomadic practice of making pits for storage along the routes. This was also a way for opening new routes. These two factors (prefectural organization and their claim to trade routes) made them develop a new kind of relationship to land which entailed expansion and domination. In this new trend, they were unlike any other nomadic empire. This is why they built fortified cities and other strongholds way into the north of present-day Mongolia. These fortifications provided protection for trade goods and agricultural production from the Kirgiz and other rival groups. Alliance (Sogdians) and diplomacy also changed trade patterns. Domination of trade routes and profits became their practice rather than their direct control, as in the Early Türk model, which first brought danger and then offered protection.

These changes were apparently not cherished by other nomads, such as the Kirgiz, who conquered them in 844. Consequently, the remaining Uyghurs migrated towards the southwest and settled in the Gansu and Turfan regions. Their earlier association with the Sogdian traders brought them into contact with sedentary life, which allowed them to settle into trading, agriculture and animal husbandry in their new home. While in Mongolia proper, they had adopted Manichaeism. In their new habitat, they came under the influence of Buddhism. As devout Buddhists, they also left a legacy of written literature and many documents. Today, scholars in Germany, Russia and Japan have spent a lifetime deciphering the fragments found in the Turfan Basin, which illuminate the social, cultural and religious life of the Uyghurs in the 9th–12th centuries.

The Kirgiz, who came to occupy the earlier Türk and later Uyghur territory, did not settle in these lands, as assumed by later historians. Michael Drompp sees the Kirgiz “breaking the Orkhon tradition”. They remained aloof of “imperial” ideals. Earlier they were subjects of First and Second Türk qaghanates. They had not been happy under Türk rule. Drompp mentions a decree by the Sui emperor that indicates the tremendous resentment felt by the Kirgiz against Türk domination: the emperor claimed that the Kirgiz were “gnashing and grinding their teeth, waiting for their opportunity”. It seems that their opportunity to break the domination of the Türk and Uyghur empires came in 844, after which we do not see any new polities ruling over Eurasia until the second half of the 12th century. After 844, smaller nomadic groups (xing, bu, buluo) dominated the scene. In areas close to sedentary centers, the Khitan (Liao) and the Jürched (Jin) emerged.

The Khitan established the Liao dynasty, which ruled through a dual administrative structure, consisting of nomadic and settled halves. The Liao shi (Liao Dynastic History), which was written during the subsequent Mongol Yuan dynasty, provides an elaborate description of how the Khitan governed the nomads. The fine distinction between kinship and non-kinship groups apparent in early Tang historiography is not to be found in the Liao shi.

After the Kirgiz intervention (840) in Inner Asian affairs, tribal groups such as the Qai (Xi), Tatar and Khitan, who had earlier been willing to seek protection from the Early Türk, the Uyghurs and also sometimes from China, were left

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— Isenbike Togan —
without a strong Inner Asian political formation to extend protection. This protection against would-be enemies also functioned as an umbrella at the macro level, allowing traditions on the micro level to continue to exist. In order to regulate their interaction with the outside world (i.e. trade), they needed to band together. At this point we know of eight tribes designated as *bu*. They had subdivisions designated as *shilie* 石烈, usually translated as “clan”. In fact they were kinship groups. They were not united under one ruler, but they would unify when necessity arose. In other words, their leaders were temporary, having been elected for a short period. These eight groups preferred to send emissaries to the Chinese court one by one. By the Tang era (618–907), they had come under the leadership of one clan. It was a system benefitting each one of them. It is in this light that we see the Khitan emerge under Abaoji’s rule. The transformation from tribe to state has been taken up in detail by Cai Meibiao, who states that Abaoji, like those before him, made use of alliances as well as of a base consisting of non-tribal elements. The alliance was with the Xiao clan/tribe, who were related to the Uyghurs and Abaoji’s own Yelü clan. The base was comprised of captives and slaves, in other words, foreigners. In the south, the captives seized from the Chinese were settled in walled towns. In the north (Mongolia), captives from the tribal people like Xi, Khitan and others comprised most of the enslaved population. This was a political compromise to reconcile the different social and political structures. By 924, Liao authority had extended in the north as far as the Orkhon area in Mongolia. This is how in 1124 Yelu Dashi was able to assemble tribal populations of that region. In both cases, there was corvée labor. Thus, Abaoji’s state rested on a division between the dependent populations of agriculturalists and herders, with an overarching ruling strata created by the alliance of the Ila/Yelü and Xiao clans/tribes. The alliance entailed reciprocal marriage patterns similar to the earlier alliance between Ashina and Ashide (Early Türk) or the later Borjigid and the Qonggirat.

More than 300 years passed from the Kirgiz takeover in 844 to the emergence of Chinggis Khan as undisputed leader in 1206. During this time, there was no unifying authority, and different groups were roaming around in the Eurasian steppe. In the absence of a unifying and central authority groups split further and, as the 14th-century Persian historian Rashid al-Din says, “over a period of nearly four hundred years numerous branches of them appeared and they outnumbered all other nations”. When we read his work with today’s understanding of concepts such as nations, ethnicities and nation-states, some of his wording seems difficult to understand. For instance, according to Rashid al-Din’s view, the Mongols were a branch of the

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READING RASHID AL-DIN’S *COMpendium of CHRONICLES* ON ITS OWN TERMS

When we read his work with today’s understanding of concepts such as nations, ethnicities and nation-states, some of his wording seems difficult to understand. For instance, according to Rashid al-Din’s view, the Mongols were a branch of the
Turks. He says, “for at that time the Mongol branch was one of the Turkic peoples, whereas now, because of their great fortune, might and magnificence, all the other people have been subsumed under the name Mongol”.

We can understand this statement in the context of, say, a political group such as Americans, for example, who are composed of people that come from different backgrounds. He then speaks of Turkic peoples who were ancient Mongols. Following his logic, these original Mongols must have become Turkic during Early Türk rule, when they were strong. Rashid al-Din wrote about “people who are called Mongols at this time [like the Jalayir I.T.] but whose name was not originally Mongol, since this word was coined after their time”.

This statement gives us a time perspective. It seems that Rashid al-Din identifies these shifts in terms of hegemony and says:

Because of their might, others in the area became known by their name, since most Turks are called Mongols, as it was before when the Tatars were dominant and all were called Tatar. Among the Arabs, Indians, and Cathaians they are still known as Tatars.

Rashid al-Din seems to state that the nomads of that time had shifting ethnic and linguistic identities. But, taking the example of the Tatars, we can say that linguistic distinctions were not important. We know that the Tatars were composed of both Turkic- and Mongolian-speaking groups. There is also the possibility that we should read Rashid al-Din’s statements, which are problematic from today’s perspective, as representing structural differences. One could, therefore, say “Turk” would denote stratified structures and “Mongol” would stand for non-stratified groupings. Such an assumption would make room for transformations from one form to the other.

PERCEPTION OF RASHID AL-DIN’S CATEGORIES FROM A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Rashid al-Din speaks of four different structural groups in four chapters. The main features of each group are presented below according to Rashid al-Din’s order.

- Ch.2 “Turkic peoples that are now called Mongols but in times past had separate names, epithets, languages and their own leaders and commanders”. Their “name was not originally Mongol since this word was coined after their time”.
- Ch.3 “Turkic peoples which had separate monarchs and leaders but which do not have a close relationship to the tribes mentioned in the previous division or to the Mongols yet are close to them in physiognomy and language . . . and each has branched off into various subdivisions”.

These two groups, which existed before the Mongols, had more than one ruler. From a structural perspective, they were both stratified as they had subdivisions with specific names. The difference between them was that the former were living in scattered groups while the latter were more compact chiefdoms. We hear the names of some of these groups when the first Qara-Khitai ruler moved towards the west in
1124. Reaching the Orkhon River, he met the ancestors of some of the people whom we know from the 13th century, such as the Merkit, Qonggirat and the Jajirat. The Qara-Khitai ruler assembled the chiefs of 18 such groups who were not under a united leadership.42

These two groups, consisting of stratified and hierarchically organized societies, had come to recognize hierarchies other than age as they had transformed into, or were in the process of becoming, chiefdoms.

- Ch.4 Turkic peoples that were anciently Mongol. This chapter contains two sections. The original Mongols gradually divided into two groups:
  - i. The Törolkin (“natives”). They43 originated from two persons who went to Ergene-Qun. They multiplied there; each of the branches took a particular name and epithet and “are known generically by the word Mongol, as are others who resemble them. In short, the beginning of the usage of this term was during their time”.44

Natives were “Mongols in general”. They lacked a common ancestor. Groups under different names, such as the Qonggirat, had a golden vase as an ancestor. Rashid al-Din goes to great pains to give a meaning to “the golden vase” as an ancestor. In the end he found this phrase illogical.45 Structurally they were semi-stratified or scattered kinship groups with many leaders, each ruling over their own clusters.

  - ii. The Nirun (backbone).46 They “came into being from a single origin”.47

In contrast to the Törolkin, who had no common ancestor, here the emphasis is on the ancestress Alan Qo’a, who gave birth to Bodonchar, the Chinggisid ancestor. Moreover, in contrast to other groupings, kinship degrees and generations are given in detail for the Nirun.48 The Persian text emphasizes the fact that origin is “apparent and the descent lines are clear”.49 Thus, they consisted of the peoples that “branched off from the three sons of the wife of Dobun Bayan, Alan the Fair (Alan Qo’a), who were born after the death of her husband. Dobun Bayan was of the original Mongols”.50

**CHARACTERISTICS OF KIN AND NON-KIN GROUPS**

Excluding the chiefdoms like the Kereit, which had already formed a political group with a substrata, rulers and the ruled, the others had kin groups at their core.51 A careful reading of the historical accounts, like Rashid al-Din’s *Compendium of Histories* and *The Secret History of the Mongols*, leads us to distinguish semi-stratified kinship groups with many leaders (like the Jalayir and Qonggirat) who lived in clusters and the Nirun, who seem to have lived according to kinship principles. There were also others who were scattered like the forest people. They all functioned as social, political and economic units. Of these, the kinship groups like the Jalayir, Tatar (classified as Turkic groups who were now Mongols and had subdivisions with specific names), as well as the Törolkin (Turkic tribes anciently Mongol) and the Nirun, had many leaders, each ruling over their own cluster. It was only among the Nirun that kinship ties between different clusters were strong.
The Nirun were non-stratified, closely knit groups. For instance, the Tayichi’ut and the Borjigin spoke of kinship ties among themselves to the Jin authorities, whereas among the Qonggirat (Törölkin) of Dei Sechen and Terge Emel, such bonding did not exist. It is among the former group that Temüjin grew up.\textsuperscript{52}

A non-kinship organization that is not enumerated by Rashid al-Din consisted of the followers and retainers of a leader called nökör.\textsuperscript{53} Temüjin is a successful example of a person leading such a group. At this juncture, members of groups consisting of retainers, such as the Kereit, the Naiman and Temüjin’s polity, were rivals. They did not depend on their clansmen and other kinship connections but on their followers (nökör), who came from diverse backgrounds.

In The Secret History of the Mongols structural differences as well as varieties of leadership are mentioned as features still lingering from earlier times. What we have here is oral history, poetic passages that reflect the situation earlier. In one scene, Chinggis Khan’s wife, Börte, became worried about succession.\textsuperscript{54}

She said:

\begin{quote}
When your body, like a great old tree,
Will fall down,
By whom will they let govern people, [by whom will they be governed I.T.]
Who are like tangled hemp?
When your body like the stone base of a pillar,
Will collapse,
By whom will they let govern your people,
Who are like a flock of birds?\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

De Rachewiltz, who commented on these lines, states: “By comparing the subject people to tangled hemp and flock of birds, Börte indicated that they are troublesome and difficult to rule”.\textsuperscript{56}

In this study, on the other hand, these lines are interpreted as describing the makeup of the society before the creation of the army of conquest. The fact that these lines are uttered by two different persons in exactly the same poetic form would indicate that they have been used by the author in a proverbial manner. Thus, there is no doubt that these lines refer to earlier times.

Here the catchwords are netkel and tuyal. Netkel appears in Chinese gloss as luan ma, which is translated by Cleaves as “entangled hemp” and by Haenisch as wirrer Hanf, “wild hemp”.\textsuperscript{57} In Cleaves’ translation, netkel is descriptive and neutral, whereas in Haenisch’s translation it has negative connotations, similar to De Rachewiltz.

Actually, what is being described here as entangled hemp seems to refer to the kinship groups. These groups were referred to earlier in history as xing, translated as clan in general.\textsuperscript{58} They were entangled in terms of kinship. Because of these entangled relationships, they have also been called baw (“tie”) in later history. These groups were self-sufficient and thus were able to survive by themselves. If they agreed, they could also be the backbone (nirun) of a larger political structure.\textsuperscript{59} When overpowered, they knew how to bend and bow like the bamboo. As they wanted to hold on to what they had in terms of property and traditions, they were inclined to negotiate and to compromise. As a result, political structures could benefit from their cooperation.
The flock of birds, on the other hand, seems to refer to the nökör, who initially had volition and could decide for themselves whom they would serve. This is how they formed the retinue of a would-be leader. But they could also leave the leader in the same fashion. This is why they are referred to as a flock of birds. The nökör, the buluo of earlier times, attached themselves to a leader as long as it was beneficial for them. Otherwise, they dispersed, voting with their feet. Like birds, they gathered when there was food; when nothing remained, they flew away. This is why these lines could not refer to Chinggis Khan’s era, because members of the army of conquest were not permitted to leave their units. These lines from The Secret History, on the other hand, support the above postulation about the society’s division into kin and non-kin groups.

The kin groups in turn were divided into real and fictive ones. The Nirun always referred to their genealogy in real generational terms. The Törölkin, on the other hand, did not supply us with specific historical information. Moreover, one of the stories of origin (of the Qonggirat) going back to a golden vessel is a good illustration of kinship as ideology. The real kinship groups were non-stratified and regarded age as determining status. But those who claimed fictive kinship, like the Törölkin, were semi-stratified.

Chiefdoms, on the other hand, were stratified political formations. Kinship did not necessarily refer to blood relationships but to ideology covering social, political and economic relations. Additionally, there were the nökör who assembled around a küriyen, “an encampment around which the carts are drawn up in the form of a circle for protection”, and appeared as commanders and members of the future army of conquest.

EFFECTS OF MOBILITY AND IMMOBILITY ON STRUCTURE

None of these groups had fixed structures or locations. Inner Asian society of the 12th century was fluid, with shifting alliances, both sedentary and nomadic. Among the Inner Asian nomads, both tribalization (political regrouping) and dissolution of these formations occurred. From the division of the Mongols and Turks into non-stratified and stratified groups, we can follow the transformation from one to the other in historical records. Understanding “Turkic” and “Mongol” as structural differences, we can say that during the rule of the Early Türk (“400 years ago”) some of the earlier non-stratified kinship groups (Mongol) transformed themselves into “tribe segments” or were transformed by the dominant political structure into members of the bodun or buluo. In other words, they were incorporated into a stratified society. After the demise of the Early Türk and the Uyghurs, they did not take part in conquests or migrations, but remained in one place (Ergene-Qun) and became non-stratified (“300 years ago”).

On the one hand, there were those like the Nirun (Mongols) who were in the process of tribalization; there were also many people who were, so to say, out “on the steppe” and who followed a particular leader because it was beneficial to do so. The strife and the conflict arising from these four types (stratified, non-stratified, chiefdoms and nökör) of organizations and the ensuing migrations is the story of The Secret History of the Mongols. The opening of the story gives us
a glimpse of the problems and alliances that characterized this period of political fluctuation.

[There] were the two brothers,
Duua the Blind and Dobun the Clever.
In the middle of Duua’s forehead there was one great eye.
With this eye Duua could see a place so far away. . .
Looking out from the mountain [Duua said]
“In the middle of a band of people I see coming this way,
at the front of a black cart,
there’s a fine-looking woman,” he said.
. . .
Dobun came to marry
Khorilartai’s daughter, Alan the Fair.
So Alan the Fair came to live with Dobun.64

It was this Alan the Fair who gave birth to Bodonchar;65 he was born by a divine light and thus was not a descendant of Dobun Mergen.66 He was the ancestor of Temüjin, the later Chinggis Khan. By stating that these events happened 300 years ago, Rashid al-Din takes us back into the 9th century when political unity in Inner Asia was broken by the Kirgiz.

The story above is a good illustration of migrations that took place due to conflicts and the formation of new alliances in societies that gave refuge to newcomers. This was a nomadic pastoral society, whose method of survival was moving away from an unfavorable situation, rather than engaging in warfare, making incursions or invading sedentary strongholds. Although intertribal warfare also took place at times, it did not set the tone. In the excerpt above, we see two Mongolian groups strengthen their alliance by way of marriage. Alan the Fair, the maiden Dobun Mergen was going to marry, was of the Qorolas, i.e. of the Törölkün, according to Rashid al-Din.67 In the Secret History, she was of the Qori Tümed who lived in the north. There is, however, no agreement whether it was west or east of Lake Baikal.68 This northern area was rich in game and fur and provided them with a livelihood. When neighboring clans restricted hunting in this region, the resulting tension could not be resolved by marriage alliances. The conflict caused them to move to the southeast, to the region around the sacred mountain of Burqan Qaldun, where the Borjigin of Dobun Mergen resided.69 The ban on hunting reflected a worldview where might made right. In such a world, the not-so-mighty simply moved away. In addition to the ban on hunting, another source of conflict was control of summer and winter pastures. Increase in flock size necessitated more land, especially since some pastures were over-grazed. Although tensions such as the ban on hunting or control of pastures existed, these types of problems were not necessarily resolved by warfare but by moving away from the source of tension and taking refuge with other people, where one would find protection. Giving protection to those who were disadvantaged was another trait frequently seen in the historical narratives.70
SURVIVAL METHODS IN THE STEPPE

The pastoral nomads had been migrating between their winter and summer pastures without leadership since the middle of the 9th century. The last time they had been united was under Uyghur rule in 742–840. They were not only a society on horseback but also had ox-driven carts. The circular nomadic tents (gers, also called yurts) placed on the carts were actually their homes. When they were not traveling, they placed the carts or the yurts in a circular arrangement to protect the animals that provided milk and were kept inside the circle. Other animals such as sheep, cattle and horses were generally free to move about in herds, and in the summer, they spread out and used the land extensively. In the winter, on the other hand, land was used more intensively, as the horses stamped on the thin sheet of ice with their hooves, breaking the ice and making holes in order to feed on the grass that lay underneath. After the horses had broken the sheet of ice, cattle and sheep grazed on what was left over. The horses were free to roam around, but their owners watched from afar. This kind of herding, where the animals would be left on their own, free to roam around, also served as a means to make the horses strong enough to brave the weather conditions and find food on their own. But when a severe winter set in with a thick layer of ice, and the horses were not able to break through the thick ice sheet with their hooves, it spelled disaster for all the animals as well as the people. These times, called zhud (jut), were also causes of migrations en masse.

Although horse meat was favored, in general they ate lamb and mutton or hunted wild game. They also drank airagh (kumiss), fermented mare’s milk. When kumiss was made, the leather jars were filled with mare’s milk during the day, then all night they would beat the jars till the milk had fermented. In addition to the preparation of meat, women also gathered various kinds of herbs.

When settled, they set down their yurts so that the doors faced south, allowing the sunlight from the east, south and west to seep in, while outside of the tent, they referred to the southern part of the tent as the front and the north as the back. The place of honor was for the master of the house and for the guests in the north, facing the entrance of the tent. Male guests and male members of the family sat to the right (west) of the master and women to the left (east).

This gendered division of the tent was also accompanied by an age hierarchy, where elders took their places towards the north – the seat of honor – while the younger ones sat close to the entrance. In the center of the yurt was the family hearth connected to the smoke hole at the top. The hearth, with the burning stove, signified the family. It was also a channel to connect with those in the family who were not alive, the ancestral spirits. The keeper of the family hearth was the youngest son (otchigin), who inherited the family possessions after all his elder brothers were married off. While the hearth signified the living family, the smoke hole through which the smoke of burnt offerings left the tent was a channel to reach ancestral spirits. Ancestors also occupied an important place at the entrance, as idols in the form of men. At times, they offered libations to these idols.

Animal sacrifice also provided a means to venerate ancestral spirits. Women played an important role in these ceremonies. Women of the kin group would gather, cut up meat, divide it among themselves and then burn it. Such ceremonies could also be
used in the expulsion of people from the group or the clan. By not inviting someone to the ceremony or not allowing them to participate in the sacrifice, women made it clear that the other party was unwanted. In other words, people not only moved away as a matter of choice, but also because of expulsion. Decamping was another form of expulsion, in which people moved away and abandoned the unwanted. These were all passive forms of conflict resolution.

Kinship groups emphasized seniority and one’s place in the life cycle. The intricate terminology used by Mongolian kinship groups for their blood relationships shows how intertwined they were.76

**STRUCTURAL CONFLICT LEADING TO TRIBAL STRIFE**

By the 12th century, these methods of survival changed as the structure and social composition of the tribal societies changed. Before the 12th century, some groups that were organized according to kinship lacked a designated leader, and anyone from the group could become the commander through seniority or dominance. Members of the stratified kinship groups, on the other hand, often had more than one leader. At the beginning of the 12th century, however, we witness the emergence of chiefdoms. These chiefdoms were found in areas where there was contact with sedentary civilizations in the form of encroachments by agriculturalists, military expansion or relations with trade and trade routes.77 Gradually these chiefdoms acquired the form of independent rule and character and had political structures with hierarchical forms. We see this situation when Kereit Ong Khan’s son Senggüm raised an objection to the proposed marriage of his sister to Temüjin, saying:

> If a kinswoman of ours goes to them, she would have to stand by the door and only face towards the back of the tent; but if a kinswoman of theirs comes to us, she would sit at the back of the tent and face towards the door,78

implying that the Borjigid of Temüjin did not know how to value their women and would request services from a new bride, whereas the Kereit would offer the seat of honor to the new bride. *The Secret History* embellishes this incident by saying twice, “imagining himself to be very important, he spoke disparagingly of us” (*SHM* §165). The leaders of chiefdoms were referred to as khans, and they themselves were khanates. According to Rashid al-Din, these chiefdoms were the Kereit, Naiman, Tangut and Uyghur, among others. Some were Mongolian-speaking, some Turkic, and others were bilingual. With respect to the Kereit, who were most probably bilingual, we have more detailed information. They had a ruling family at the top, followed by retainers and common soldiers led by the commanding elite who constituted the “center”. The larger tribal layer consisting of various subgroups, on the other hand, constituted the periphery.79 Earlier, when there was no “center”, in the event they were discontented, tribal people could decamp and thereby “vote with their feet”. The creation of a “center” made it possible for the leaders to have a military force (*cherig*), dependent on the center, the “great middle”. The creation of the center also started to be an impediment against shifting alliances; as a result, the concept of loyalty emerged as a novelty.80 While earlier, might and dominance were occasionally the rule, with the emergence of chiefdoms and the center, methods of enforcement and coercive power
started to become more and more visible. Competition between chiefdoms was frequently encountered. Competition was over manpower and over the control of trade routes. However, these were all novelties that did not yet change the complete picture.

NOTES

* This paper has been prepared with partial support from TUBA (Turkish Academy of Sciences).
1 Togan 1998, 1–16; Frye 1962, 252–255.
2 Lindner 1982; Rykin 2004; Atwood 2015; Sneath 2007.
3 Vladimirtsov 1934, 62; Morgan 1987, 63.
4 Rudy Lindner with his seminal article (1982) was the forerunner of the idea of non-kinship tribes but does not differentiate between different structures among “tribal” groups.
5 Togan 2015.
7 Klyashtorny 2005, 55–56.
8 For the Rouran see Golden 2013.
9 I am grateful to Miao Runbo for supplying the above references on the basis of his research on early Liao history.
10 The term nökör is glossed in SHM with bandang (伴當), usually translated as “companion” (Haenisch 1962, 119). For references on the nökör see De Rachewiltz 2004, 256–257.
11 Togan 2015; Atwood 2015, 74.
12 Pulleyblank 1990.
13 For the terms bu 部, buluo 部落 and xing 姓and their historical evolution see Togan 2015.
14 Togan 2013.
15 For the Ashina see Klyashtorny 1998.
16 Di Cosmo 2017.
17 The Xue Yantuo (7th c.) and later the Uyghurs (8th c.) followed this pattern.
18 Drompp 2017; Chen Hao 2018.
19 Hamilton 1955, 41–44.
21 Drompp 2017.
22 Drompp 2017.
24 They had also acknowledged the Xue Yantuo rule during the interim period of the Early Türk (630–680).
26 Kradin 2014, 151–162; Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng 1949.
28 Cai Meibiao 2012, 257.
29 Cai Meibiao 2012, 262–263.
30 For the different categories of slaves (bo’ol) see De Rachewiltz 2004, 505–506.
31 Wittfogel and Feng 1949, 634.
32 RDT, 26.
33 RDT, 24.
34 W. Thackston translated the aqwām of Rashid al-Din sometimes as “nations”, sometimes as “tribes”. I have used “peoples”.
36 RDT, 25.
37 RDT, 25.
38 RDT, 26.
40 RDT, vii, 10 and 25. These were the Jalayir and branches, Sönit, Tatar, Merkit, Kürlü’üt, Oyirat, Tümed and Forest Uriangqai.
41 See RDT, vii, 25, 61. They were the Kereyit (Jirgin, Tongqayit, Toba’ut and Albat), the Naiman, the Önggüt, the Tangqut, the Uyghur, the Bekrin, the Kirgiz, the Qarluq and the Qipchaq. RDK, 26.
42 Biran 2005, 26–29; Wittfogel and Feng 1949, 100–112 and 633–634.
43 For instance, the Uriangqai and the Qonggirat.
44 RDK, 111; RDT, 79.
45 RDT, 79.
46 The word niru’un or nirun means “backbone, spine”. In fact, this group, from which Temüjin comes, was going to be the backbone of the later state and empire. Understanding the term nirun in this way suggests that these terms were generated retrospectively. Rashid al-Din, however, explains the term as “pure loin” (RDT, 98).
47 They are introduced in RDT, vii, 10, 26 and discussed in detail in I: 98–112.
48 RDT, 79, 98.
49 RDK, 111.
50 RDK, 111.
51 Togan 1998.
52 Togan 2006.
53 The term nöökör is usually translated as “companions, retainers”. Thackston uses “liege men” for this term.
54 According to the argument put forward in this paper, these verses reflect the situation from earlier times.
55 SHM §245.
56 De Rachewiltz 2004, 882.
57 Haenisch 1941, 122.
58 Togan 2015.
59 Togan 2013.
60 Togan 2015.
63 SHM, §33–35.
64 Kahn 1984, 5–10.
65 Rykin 2010
66 Skrynnikova 2010, 4.
67 It is probable that Rashid al-Din or his informant wanted to establish a parallel with Chinggis Khan’s mother, who was a Qorolas.
68 RDT, 57; De Rachewiltz 2004, 248; Skrynnikova 2010.
69 De Rachewiltz 2004, 229.
70 Togan 1998, 163–166.
72 SHM, §74.
73 Kahn 1984, 78–79, SHM, §165.
74 TMM, 9.
75 SHM, §71.
76 Earlier they were called omogh, translated as “clan” in general. For a recent study on omogh see Rykin 2004, 2011, 25–47; Atwood 2015.
— Mongolia before Chinggis Khan —

77 Scott 1975; Di Cosmo 2015.
78 SHM §165.
79 Togan 1998, 125.
80 Togan 1998, 72.

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RDK, See List of Abbreviations.

RDT, See List of Abbreviations.


SHM, See List of Abbreviations.

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