Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire—Mongolia from Pre-History to Modern Times

A concise, rich text, with contributions from archaeology to biological anthropology. Presented in five parts, concluding with Genghis’ legacy, the decline of the Yuan dynasty to the present day. Findings from excavations and extensive evidence of handicraft production and metalwork. The book’s clear prose, beautiful design, and wide-ranging illustrations will fascinate general readers as well as scholars.

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Horses have been central to Mongol cultures for thousands of years. Speed and horsemanship are contested as much today as in the past, primarily in *nadaam* festivals held annually in early July. Competitive racing has been an important part of Mongol life for centuries, if not for thousands of years, and was the basis for training Genghis Khan’s 13th-century cavalry troops.

Mongol battle commanders used whistling arrows as sound signals to initiate battle orders and for disorienting prey during the hunt. The sound was created by wind rushing across small cup-shaped hollows in the arrow stem.

After its heyday in the 13th century, the Mongol capital city, Khara Khorum, declined and knowledge of its location was lost. Archaeological work conducted in the 20th century identified its buried remains under and north of the Erdene Zuu monastery. Archaeologists believe the monastery, founded in 1586, is built on the remains of the khan’s palace.
the Chinese elite under the Mongols, "literati painting" would become one of China's most noble traditions. (The term "literati painting" was coined not until the late sixteenth century.) Of even greater import was the invention and successful marketing of blue-and-white porcelain. Not only did this type of ware remain the staple of China's ceramics industry, it also influenced ceramics production all over the world, from Southeast Asia, to the Middle East, to Europe. Today, the finest blue-and-white porcelain from Yuan China are the most valuable Chinese antiquities of all time. In 2003 a jar was sold in London for a staggering £27.7 million, setting the auction record for Asian antiquities (fig. 30.5).21

Ceramics

The once-burgeoning ceramics industry of northern China was devastated in the wars of the early thirteenth century. Under the Yuan dynasty it produced little more than traditional low-end wares for local markets (fig. 30.1). The ceramic kilns of southern China, in contrast, flourished without interruption, driven by a steadily growing international demand. For centuries, many of their wares were shipped to the big coastal trading ports of Ningbo and Quanzhou, where they were loaded onto large vessels sailing to Japan, Southeast Asia, and the Islamic world.22 With the Yuan conquest the lucrative business of ceramics trading simply moved from the hands of the Song dynasty to the agents of the Yuan administration, most notably to the Muslim merchants and entrepreneurs appointed to collect local taxes. What had already been a corrupt business, with local officials habitually overtaxing potters and merchants,23 became under the Mongols a "deregulated" bonanza.24 Hundreds of thousands of ceramics were exported overseas during the Yuan dynasty. Several shipwreck sites attest to this, the most important of which was discovered in 1975 near the Korean coast of Sinan. That ship, which sank on its way to Japan shortly after 1323,25 carried more than 20,000 ceramic pieces (almost all of them green- or brown-glazed stoneware), along with thousands of other goods such as exotic woods, bronze, and silver. In addition to supplying the international markets, southern ceramics also served the markets in northern China; the same types of stoneware found on the Sanan shipwreck were also discovered in the Mongol metropolises of Dadu, Shandu, and Khara Khorum (fig. 30.7).

Although the Mongol elite showed little inclination to use ceramics for eating and drinking, preferring instead expensive gold and silver vessels, certain ritual aspects of Chinese court life required ceramics. Ceramic offering vessels were used in temples, in private worship, and in funerals. Fine ceramic cups and dishes were used by lower-ranking court officials for banquets,26 and some ware may also have been intended as diplomatic gifts or imperial trade goods. To secure such court supplies, in 1278, the Yuan government, established a special porcelain manufacturing office in Fuliang near the rich kaolin clay deposits in what is today the Jingtaihe area in remote Jiangxi province in southern China. The area was at the time one of the large, primarily commercial ceramic centers with more than 300 kilns. From Fuliang the Yuan court initially commissioned porcelain vessels with a pale bluish glaze (qingbai), the typical products of the kilns. But over the subsequent decades, imperial sponsorship transformed the kilns into China's new center of technological innovation. While kilns in other parts of China continued to produce old-fashioned heavy stoneware, the Fuliang kilns expanded on the innovation of making thin, high-quality porcelain from a white clay that, when fired, becomes extremely hard and dense. The administration was intent on obtaining very white porcelain, and the kilns responded in two ways: they managed to make the old bluish celadon glazes almost clear, and they developed a distinct, high-fired porcelain with an opaque white glaze, the so-called shufu ware.27 Pieces for imperial use decorated with dragons, which could be modeled in relief or painted, show them with five claws.

Experiments were also conducted with different mineral pigments for the painted decorations (fig. 30.8). Around 1340 a satisfying and efficient combination of materials was found: unfired vessels were painted with cobalt, covered with a transparent glaze, and then fired. At the appropriate high temperature, which only an experienced kiln master could gauge properly, the cobalt decoration turned a dark blue, permanently protected under the glaze. The technology was groundbreaking. For the first time, a superior product with a durable pictorial decoration could be mass-produced easily and cheaply.

Although scholarship on the matter is still imprecise, it appears that the mass production of blue-and-white porcelain did not result primarily from court demand, but rather from the commercial interests of local officials and merchants with overseas connections.28 There are several reasons to think so. Unlike earlier Fuliang wares, a great number of the blue-and-white pieces were made in Middle Eastern shapes and exported to Muslim communities. Cobalt itself had rarely been used in Chinese kilns before, but it had been a favorite pigment in Middle Eastern ceramic production for centuries; most of the cobalt used by the Fuliang potters was actually imported from the West. The beginning of blue-and-white production, moreover, coincides with a period of decreased court control of the kilns, which had been put under local tax authority in 1324, greatly stimulating the commercialization of what was then the most technologically advanced ceramics industry in China. Blue-and-white wares were also produced for the Chinese market (such as
and they commanded great wealth.

In front of [the wagon of] the khattun are ten or fifteen pages, Greeks and Indians, who are dressed in robes of silk girt, encrusted with jewels, and each of whom carries in his hand a mace of gold or silver. . . . Behind the khattun’s wagon there are about a hundred wagons, in each of which there are four slave girls full-grown and young. . . . Behind these wagons are about three hundred wagons, drawn by camels and oxen, carrying the khattun’s chests, moneys, robes, furnishings, and food.”

Continuing on toward India in 1333 (or 1335), Ibn Battuta had a brief meeting at Samarkand with Tarmashirin, Khan of Chaghadai. This ruler, having made Islam the state religion, receives commendation in the Riḥla as “a man of great distinction,” though his short reign ended in rebellion and factional war not long after Ibn Battuta’s visit.

The Moroccan spent about eight years in India, most in the employ of the regime of Muhammad Ibn Tughluq, the Türkic sultan of Delhi (fig. 29.1). Ibn Battuta fell in and out of favor with this sovereign,

but, in 1341, he received an appointment to lead a state embassy from Delhi to the court of the Great Khan Tugho-Temur in Mongol China. Unfortunately, this mission ended in a maritime disaster off the southern coast of India. Ibn Battuta, however, eventually continued to East Asia on his own, or so he claims. Historians have been skeptical of the description of China in the Riḥla on several counts. For example, Ibn Battuta alleges to have witnessed the funeral of the Great Khan in Beijing in 1346, but this is impossible because Tugho-Temur reigned without interruption from 1333 to 1358. The Riḥla account of the southern coast of China has some credibility, but Ibn Battuta certainly did not reach Daidu.

Returning to Morocco in 1347, and after expeditions to both southern Spain and the West African empire of Mali in the ensuing eight years, Ibn Battuta moved to Fez in 1354 to write the Riḥla in collaboration with a young literary scholar. Meanwhile, all hell broke loose, as it were, across the Eastern hemisphere. The Black Death swept across Inner

Eurasia, the Mediterranean lands, and Europe in 1347 and 1348; production and trade slumped in many regions. By 1368, the four Mongol khanates—Mongolia and China, the Middle East, Russia, and western Asia, plus the Delhi sultanate and several other large states—had either collapsed or seriously deteriorated. As these crises proliferated, Ibn Battuta busied himself with a quiet judgship somewhere in Morocco. He died in 1368 or 1369, lucky to have left the road when he did.