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Mobility and Immobility in the Mongol Empire

Dittmar Schorkowitz[1]

[1] Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Department of Law & Anthropology
(36 Advokatenweg, 06114 Halle/Saale, Germany)
Ph.D., Dr. Phil. Habil., Head of Research Group for Historical Anthropology
0000-0002-0137-5483. E-mail: schorkowitz@eth.mpg.de

Abstract: *Introduction*. Mobility, and less so immobility, has been always in the focus of socio-cultural analysis of Mongolian societies given their nomadic way of live and the interconnectedness of its various communities scattered all over Eurasia particular in the apogee of the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Yet, what are the concrete manifestations and the limits of mobility, how can we measure them? *Goal.* This article will briefly readdress some well and perhaps lesser known topics of the medieval Mongolian world generally related to mobility in a wider sense before fuller attention is given to the epistemological arenas of culture transfer and long-distance trade. In the first part the dialectics of mobility is discussed as socio-cultural mobility, e.g. carrier making, loyalty, integration by difference, models of inclusive ethnicity and exclusive descent (the 'Chinggisid Principle'), invention of genealogies, marriage alliances, and religious tolerance (until Islamisation). The second part deals with spatial mobility particularly in terms of tribute relations and military service, culture transfer and travelling ideas, movement control and population transfer, the flow of goods and peoples.

Keywords: Mongol Empire, socio-cultural mobility, spatial mobility, carrier making, loyalty, integration by difference, ethnicity, descent, genealogies, marriage alliances, military service, culture transfer, continental trade

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Мобильность и неподвижность в Монгольской империи

Диттмар Шорковиц[1]

[1] Институт социальной антропологии Макса Планка, факультет: права и антропологии (36 Advokatenweg, 06114 Галле / Заале, Германия)
Ph.D., руководитель исследовательской группы по исторической антропологии
0000-0002-0137-5483. E-mail: schorkowitz@eth.mpg.de

Аннотация: *Введение*. Мобильность, а в меньшей степени неподвижность, всегда были в центре внимания социокультурного анализа монгольских обществ, учитывая их кочевой образ жизни и взаимосвязанность различных сообществ, разбросанных по всей Евразии, особенно в период апогея Монгольской империи в XIII и XIV вв. Но каковы конкретные проявления и пределы мобильности, как мы можем их измерить? *Цель*. В статье кратко рассмотрены некоторые хорошо и, возможно, менее известные темы средневекового монгольского мира, обычно связанные с мобильностью в более широком смысле. *Результаты.* Освещены эпистемологические основания трансфера культуры и международной торговли. В первой части работы диалектика мобильности обсуждается как социокультурная мобильность, например создание карьеры, лояльность, интеграция посредством различий, модели инклюзивной этнической принадлежности и исключительного происхождения («принцип Чингизидов»), изобретение генеалогий, брачные союзы и религиозная терпимость (до исламизации). Во второй части рассматривается пространственная мобильность, особенно с точки зрения дани и военной службы, передачи культуры и идей путешествий, управления перемещениями и перемещением населения, потоков товаров и людей.

Ключевые слова: Монгольская империя, социокультурная мобильность, пространственная мобильность, карьерный рост, лояльность, интеграция по различию, этническая принадлежность, происхождение, генеалогии, брачные союзы, военная служба, передача культур, континентальная торговля

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Introduction

Mobility in Mongolian societies, and less so immobility, has always been in the focus of social and historical studies given the nomadic way of life and the political encroachment of the Mongols into various parts of Asia and Europe. The Mongol Empire in particular has continuously attracted attention as a result of its expansion

speed and establishment of a *Pax Mongolica* (roughly 1270–1360) in a relatively short period of time[1]. During the 13th and 14th centuries the Mongols not only launched an early Mongol state [Krader 1968; Krader 1969; Krader 1978; Franke 1978; Khazanov 1981; Kradin 1995a; Kradin 1995b], but within just a few decades had extended their hegemony into China, Central Asia, Persia, Caucasia, Eastern Europe, and Siberia — culturally very diverse areas that now became closely interconnected [Rashīd al-Dīn 1971[2]; Juvaini 1997; Spuler 1943; Spuler 1985; Rossabi 1988; Allsen 1983; Allsen 2001; Weiers 2004; Jackson 2005].

If we may call this a success story in medieval empire building, then mobility — "the ability of people, ideas, and artifacts to move or be moved across both space and society" [Biran 2018: 136] — surely played a decisive role. The question is, how can we measure mobility, and what are its concrete manifestations? In order to define the capacities and limitations of mobility, in this chapter I shall readdress several topics, both well-known and less familiar, from the medieval Mongolian world related to mobility in a wider sense before turning to the epistemological arenas of culture transfer and long-distance trade. In the first part the dialectics of mobility and immobility will be discussed as 'social and cultural mobility' in terms of career-making, loyalty, integration, ethnicity, descent, genealogies, marriage, and religion. The second part will focus on 'spatial mobility' in terms of tribute relations and military service, culture transfer and travelling ideas, movement control and population transfer, and the flow and restriction of goods.

Social and cultural mobility in the Mongol Empire

Social mobility can be defined as "the movement in time of individuals, families, or other social units between positions of varying advantage in the system of social stratification of a society" [Müller & Pollack 2015: 640] including class, status groups, kinship units, and social origins; it thus provides us with an analytical tool that can be applied not just to the present, but also to societies of the distant past. The relevance of social and spatial mobility for the late Middle Ages in Europe has been securely established [Herlihy 1973] and it is even more central for the expanding Mongol Empire with its comparatively weaker institutional boundaries and its higher degree of cultural diversity.

An early well-known example of career-making and loyalty is reported in the *Secret History* for the year 1206 when Temüjin was proclaimed Khagan of all Mongols. With the Mongol Empire still at an early stage of state formation, Genghis Khan fundamentally reformed the military organization. When judging over his enemies and allies he said: "To those who sided with me when I was establishing *our* nation, I shall express my appreciation and, having formed units of a thousand, I shall appoint them commanders of a thousand" [Rachewiltz 2006: 133–34]. Besides loyalty, other selection criteria were proficiency and leadership in matters of warfare, while ethnic belonging ranked further down, below even family and kinship ties.

Genghis Khan's military reform included reorganizing his former favorites or bodyguards *khishigten* (*keshig*) into one *tümen* (i.e. 10,000 men) selected from

[1] On the concept of *Pax Mongolica* and Mongolian world domination see Sagaster [Sagaster 1973] and the references provided there. For a recent reevaluation of the concept see Di Cosmo [Di Cosmo 2010].

[2] Here I use the classic work of Boyle, although there is a newer translation into English by Wheeler McIntosh Thackston [Rashīd al-Dīn 1998–1999].

95 *mingqan* (i.e. 1,000 men) chosen from among the sons of his commanders and the common people based on their combat skills. And he was crystal-clear in his orders to his newly appointed commanders on how to choose men for military service: "When guards will be recruited for Us, and the sons of commanders of ten thousand, of a thousand and of a hundred, or the sons of ordinary people, will enter Our service, those shall be recruited who are able and of good appearance, and who are deemed suitable to serve by Our side" [Rachewiltz 2006: 152–153]. The *khishigten* was a vanguard of multiethnic composition and ranked above normal troops; it was divided into three departments: the privileged night watch (*kebtegül*, totaling one *mingqan*), the archers or quiver bearers (*qorčin*, also one *mingqan*), and the day watch (*turqa'ut*, eight *mingqan*). The remarkable career of Chormaqan-Qorči, a high-ranking officer from the second department, is illustrative of the social mobility that was possible. Originating from the Sunud (Sonid, Sönid, Sünit) clan of the Ötegen (Oteget) Mongols, he was first decorated by Genghis Khan after the siege of Urgench in 1221. Subsequently Ögedei Khan sent him to Persia in 1229, where he became famous for conquering Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia in the 1230s, although he was not himself a member of the ruling Borjigid lineage [Haenisch 1948: 33, 77–79, 104–11, 131–139; Pelliot 1960: 31–32, 85–86; Hesse 1982: 113–116; Schorkowitz 1992: 60–66; Atwood 2004: 348–354].

The same selection criteria were applied in the administrative and cultural hemispheres of the Mongol Empire, emphasizing the very same principles of 'integration by difference'. There are abundant examples of those 'able and of good appearance' who made their way to the upper echelon of the imperial elite irrespective of ethnic or class belonging. The famous judge (*yeke ǰarquči*) Šigi Qutuqu (1180–1260) responsible for the compilation of the Mongol Code '*Yasa'* starting in 1206 was a Tatar child of noble origin who was adopted into Temüjin's family around 1182–1183, becoming thus either a stepbrother (according to the *Secret History*) or, more likely, a stepson (*örgömel düü*) of Genghis Khan (according to Rashīd al-Dīn). Šigi Qutuqu, like many Tatar nobles, learned the Uighur script upon orders of Genghis Khan; he was most probably taught by T'a-t'a T'ung-a, a Naiman *daruqa* who entered the service of Genghis Khan and introduced the script for official purposes after the defeat of Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking (possibly mongolized) people, in 1204 [Ratchnevsky1965: 87–88, fn. 2, 90–91, 96; Rachewiltz 2006: XXXV–XXXVII, 58, 134–135]. Šigi Qutuqu's biography is depicted in greater detail by yet another prominent, almost contemporary retainer of the empire, the great historian and statesman Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318) who is himself an example of the possibilities of social mobility. Born into a Jewish family of Hamadan in northwest Persia, he converted to Islam by the age of thirty and entered the court of the Ilkhanids as a physician, becoming an influential advisor to Abaqa Khan (1265–1282) and later a vizier to Mahmud Ghazan (1295–1304) and Öljeitü (1304–1316). Rashīd al-Dīn has been credited with designing and implementing the reforms of Ghazan Khan on the basis of "Iranian traditions of a centralized feudal form of government [and] the necessity for a just taxation policy" [Petrushevsky 1970: 151; Encyclopædia Britannica 2010: 946].

In spite of all this, it has often been said that the Mongols could conquer the world on horseback, but that "it cannot be ruled from a horse" [Shagdar 2000: 131], as Ögedei Khan was told. This is suggestive of a revealing kind of immobility. The Mongols main strategy was in fact limited to the extraction of resources and taxes from peasants, urban dwellers, and merchants. However, to achieve this aim, their rulers were flexible enough to adapt to local experience, to integrate cultural techniques and governmental expertise from the region, and to change their official faith either to Christianity, Buddhism, or Islam when necessary. But by doing so, the Mongol elite underwent various forms of cultural change, too.

The dynamics of Mongol expansion and conquest followed a few simple rules, not invented but rather elaborated by Genghis Khan and his successors at a time when economic growth and infrastructure in Eurasia had reached levels unparalleled in earlier empires, such as the Xiongnu or Rouran Khanate. As with preceding steppe empires, local rulers could either assent to his demand for surrender or face subjugation and destruction. Those who surrendered in good time were offered positions, while those who changed allegiance too late were often regarded as not reliable and deployed at the front lines of the battlefield. They then were the first to attack their neighbors when the Mongol command decided to move on, a situation which local rulers were generally anxious to avoid at any cost, offering an alliance instead. But even then, they were obliged to provide troops, horses, food, and services to the Mongol army and collect taxes for the Khan, a burden that was compensated only in part by plunder and the spoils of war (Mong. *sauqa*) they could gain for themselves. The effects of this snowball dynamic have often been cited as an explanation for the rapid drive of empire building from the Mongolian to the Hungarian plains within little more than three decades, and rightly so. Indeed, the conquest into ever-new territories and their subsequent exploitation by victorious auxiliary forces was a decisive factor in the empire's success as well as its eventual collapse. However, the origins of imperial overstretch cannot be attributed to territorial expansion alone. Accelerating contradictions between core and peripheries, between cultural continuity and change, as well as a weakening resilience of long-tested integration strategies produced limitations of their own.

These dynamics are very well documented in the historical records of the *Secret History*, the *Altan Tobči*, and *Erdeni-yin Tobči*. The Oirat people, for example, who in 1201 were still part of the opposing Jamukha camp, but were among the few who submitted in good time, are a case in point. They entered the services of the state in 1207, contributing significantly to early empire building, and received a privileged place among the tributary peoples. Rewarding the military merits of this cooperation, Genghis Khan made Quduka Beki, the most prominent Oirat noble, his kinsman. He gave Qoluiqan, the daughter of his eldest son Jochi, to Quduka Beki's eldest son Törölchi, whose younger brother Inalchi received his daughter Checheyigen [Rachewiltz 2006: 62–64, 163–65; Bawden 1955; Saγang Sečen 1956; Zhao 2008: 39, 129–131; Biran 2018: 144]. Thanks to these marriage alliances, which spread to other Borjigin lines in the following generations, the Oirats received a distinguished status.

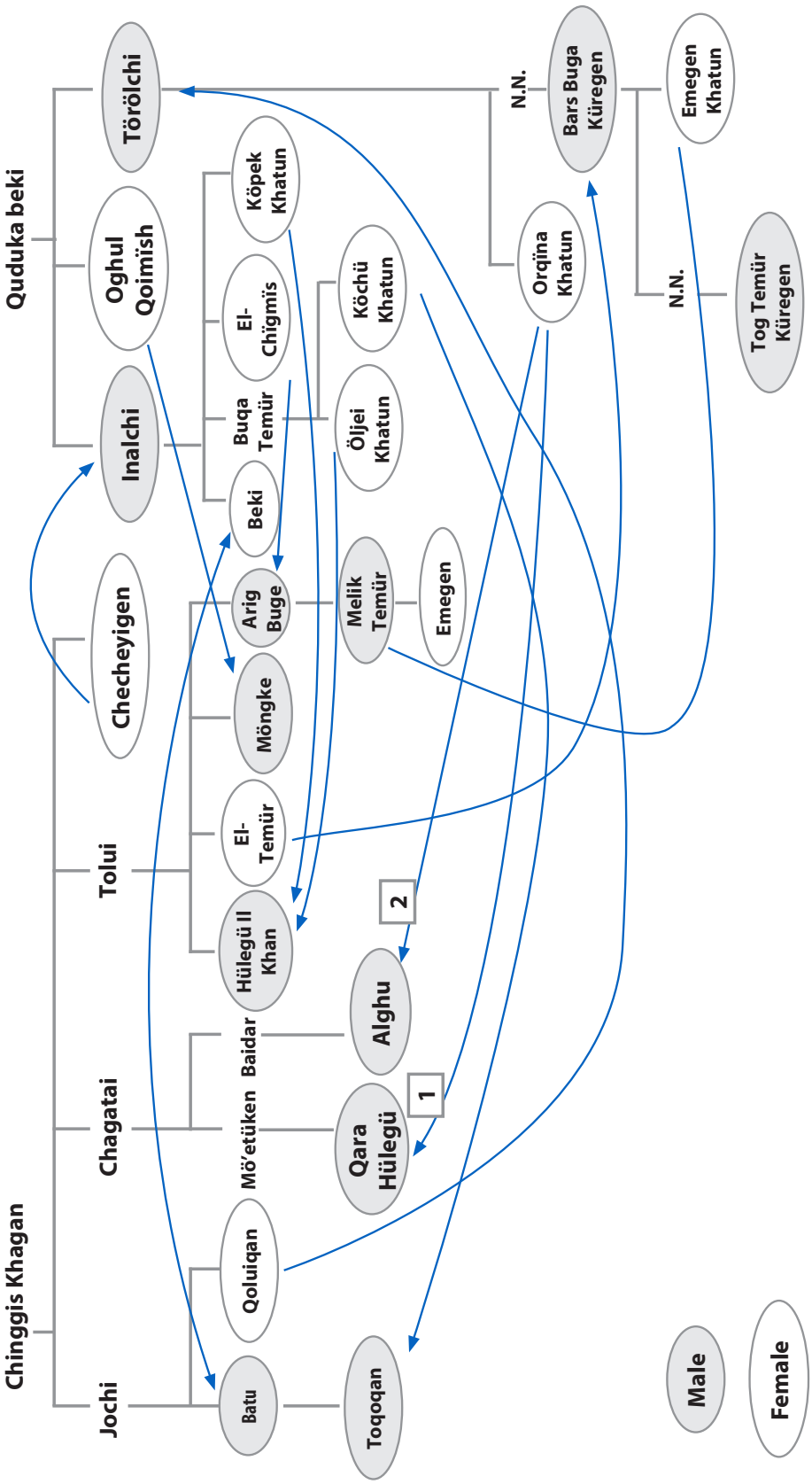

Fig. 1. Marriage Alliances between Borjigin and Oirats

In the Mongol Empire they now formed the left or 'eastern wing 14', *je'ün qar* (pronounced like *zun gar,* hence Zungharia), of the westernmost part of the empire. After the collapse of the Mongol-ruled Yuan dynasty in 1368, the Oirats were still an important player and among the first to engage in feudal warfare: following Elbeg Nigülesügchi khagan's death in 1399, Toghon tayishi (Tsoros) declared himself khagan of all Mongols and the Oirats formed an independent yet short-lived khanate (1401–1404).

While this account tells us much about the Mongol model of inclusive ethnicity and integration by difference (as opposed to the principle of 'integration by sameness' typical of the modern nationalizing state) [Schlee 2013], it also highlights some of its limitations, such as exclusive descent and the politics of kinship. Though various groups and individuals could achieve high positions in the imperial hierarchy through merits and awards, the affiliation with a Chinggisid lineage — preferably by blood, otherwise through marriage — remained the essential condition for the acquisition of political power. This has been called the 'Chinggisid Principle,' which implied that "only male descendants of Chinggis khan were entitled to call themselves khans" [Miyawaki 1992: 266, cf. Sinor 2010]. However, this ultimately led to fierce succession wars and resulted in a very 'creative' usage of genealogies. Hence, the 'Chinggisid principle' became dysfunctional over time and was gradually replaced by the 'divine' legitimation and authentication of the Dalai Lama following the late sixteenth-century re-invention of Tibetan Buddhism among the Western Mongols [Ahmad 1970: 99; Elverskog 2008: 105–107, 120–121; Miyawaki 1992: 269–272].

Marriage alliances, fictive kinship (*andanar*), polygyny, adaptation, and the fusion or fission of clans were principles widely practiced in nomadic social organization in order to maintain social and political mobility. However, what worked well on a communal basis for providing asylum and shelter to widows, war orphans or refugees, often became counter-productive when applied to society as a whole in an imperial context. Polygyny resulted in unclear claims to power and spurred succession struggles among competing lineages. Marriage alliances, though frequently used as a device to reinforce bonds that bridged rivaling polities, often turned into a source of intrigue and conflict among the participating parties [Schorkowitz 1993].

Spatial and economic mobility in the Mongol Empire

If we turn now to spatial and economic mobility, the relations between expansion and conquest on the one hand and local governance and tribute collection on the other are quite obvious. In order to rule, the Mongols had to introduce check-and-balance-systems at their peripheries. In order to tax local populations, tax collectors and census takers were needed. And in order to communicate with foreign powers in Asia and Europe, expertise in foreign languages and diplomatic conventions was indispensable. To put it in a nutshell, the Mongols were able and flexible enough to combine and re-combine the principles of their own political organization with the institutions, practices, and inventions of the peoples they brought under their rule. They not only adapted to and learned from sedentary civilizations, but also hired foreign experts when needed and relocated populations and war prisoners for their own purposes, happened to farmers from Central Asia and China, German craftsmen

from Transylvania, or carpenters and goldsmiths from Russia [Rashīd al-Dīn 1971: 69–70; Itinera et relationes 1929: 224–225, 252–253; William of Rubruck 1990: 144–146, 182; Carpini 1930: 220–224, 229, 236, 239–240, 253–254, 262; Carpine 1989: 305–312, 316–319, 324–325, 331; Robinson 2009: 31, 44, 50].

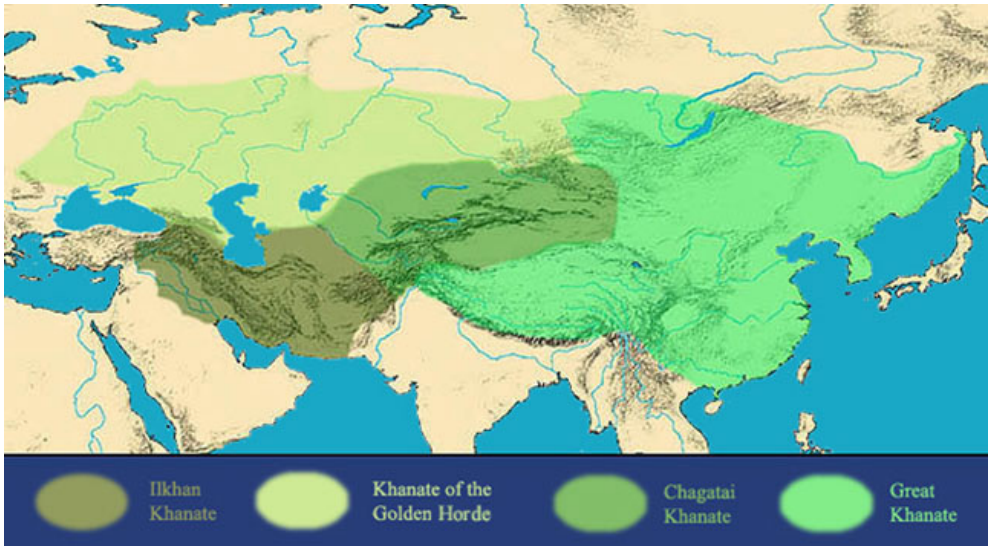

Fig. 2. Extension of the Mongol empire[3]

As a result, the *Pax Mongolica* created a situation of intensified culture transfer, travelling ideas, and an enhanced flow of goods in which all parts of the empire could participate. The empire thus acted as a mediator of 'cultural goods' from China, Central Asia, and Persia for a highly ambitious elite, significantly shaping cultural identity in western Eurasia and the *Slavia Asiatica* in particular [Allsen 2001: 191; Allsen 2009: 144–145; Schorkowitz 2012; Schorkowitz 2014]. The Ulus Jochi, for instance, known also as the Golden Horde and located northwest of the Chagatai khanate, designated the Qipchaq language as the *lingua franca* of its newly subdued subjects, as well as of Volga Bulgarians and to some degree the Rus' as well. The Uighur script, introduced to imperial bureaucracy by Genghis Khan, was widespread until the Golden Horde's Islamisation, when it was replaced by Arabic writing. Official correspondence and decrees, known as *yarlyks*, were translations from the Mongol into the Qipchaq language that were written down in Uighur script [Приселков 1916; Григорьев 1985; Григорьев 2004; Heywood 2002]. The Mongols introduced the supply and postal system *jam* with a network of stations that enabled the Italian traveler Plano Carpini to cover 3,000 miles in 105 days, the *tarkhan* (*tarxanlïq*) privileges that served as an award for princely services and a tool for elite group-building, and, last but not least, the offices of *basqaq* and *daruqa* in the Golden Horde, the first designating a governor of an administrative-territorial unit, the latter a tax collector or a commander [Vásáry: 1976; Vásáry 1978; Vásáry 1987; Golden 2001; Shagdar 2000: 133].

[3] Available at: http://pages.uoregon.edu/inaasim/Hist%20487/Hist%20487_16.htm (accessed 10.7.2020).

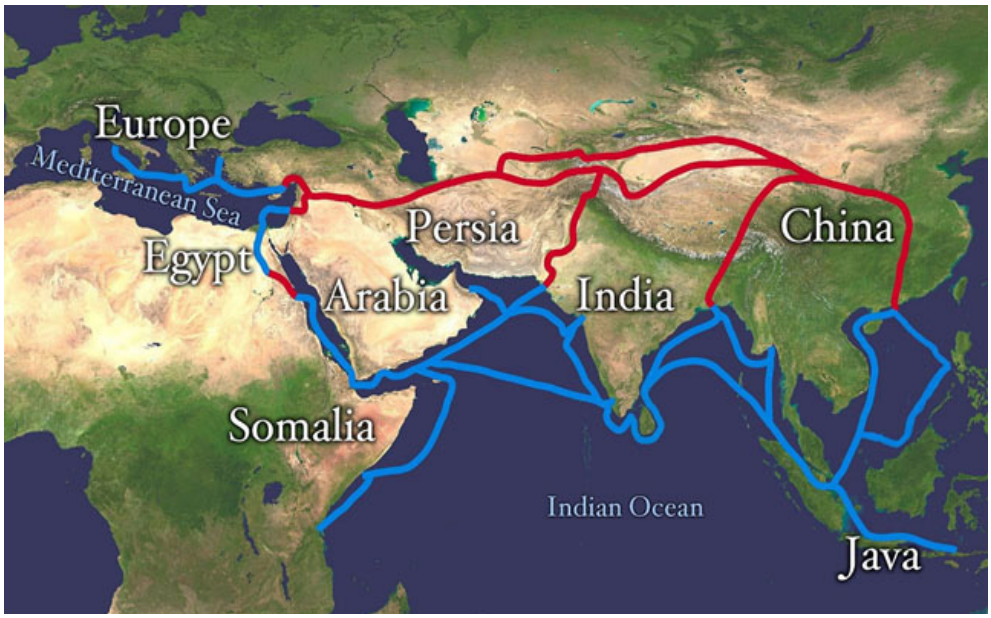

Fig. 3. The Silk Route[4]

Based on these innovations and their transcontinental rule and integration strategies, the Mongols also determined the trading terms for 'commercial goods' along the 'silk roads and spice routes' for a long time. With territorial expansion coming to a close in the mid-13th century, faltering incomes from heavily taxed populations, and the drain on financial reserves due to the continuous financing of the military retinue, long distance trade between Asia, Africa, and Europe became more and more important for the Chinggisid elites, who initially showed a great interest in the free flow of commodities and the skimming of profits. To this end, they guaranteed the safe movement of foreigners and caravans within their respective territories and the maintenance of communication and infrastructure, and thus considerably increased the conditions for mobility within the Mongolian Empire[5].

However, by the fourteenth century the once symbiotic relationship between khan and merchant had turned into a mutually dependent relation in which the former granted protection and the latter financed the many skirmishes of the Chinggisid lineages, who were competing over Caucasian and Middle Asian trade revenues and trade control [Endicott-West 1989; Ciocîltan 2012]. Religious belonging now became a criterion for exclusion from privileged trade-offs and thus for higher tariffs on trade. This paved the way for the Islamisation of the Golden Horde, which expanded the silk road from Urgench to Sarai, to Tanais (Azov), and Kaffa (Feodossija). Jani Beg's raids against Genovese and Venetian commercial settlements on the Crimea in 1343 as well as Tamerlane's destruction of trade centers in Sarai, Astrakhan, and Tanais in 1395 are striking examples of these conflicts[6]. The loss of long-distance trade generally resulted in a rapid collapse of the central power — illuminating yet again the limitations of mobility in the *Pax Mongolica*.

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Mongolica#/media/File:Silk_route.jpg

[5] On the intensifying commercial aspects of this transcontinental empire see particularly Allsen [1997].

[6] For more entangled history aspects of the Italian Black Sea "emporia" and Mongol-controlled continental trade, see Di Cosmo [Di Cosmo 2010].

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