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Book Review

Timothy May. *The Mongol Empire*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

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Since their thunderous arrival on the doorstep of Europe in the thirteenth century, the Mongol Empire has fascinated both students and historians alike as the exception to so many rules in world history. How did a nomadic, famously religiously-tolerant, primarily de-centralized people forge the single largest contiguous land empire in all of world history? In his most recent work, *The Mongol Empire*, Timothy May answers these questions as well as a multitude of others regarding the political, social and at times military history of the Mongol civilization. May is the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of North Georgia, and a professor of Central Eurasian history, who specializes on the Mongol Empire. The current editor of *Mongolian Studies: The Journal of the Mongolia Society* and a prolific author of seven books and over 30 articles on the Mongol civilization, May's expertise on the history, traditions, and people of the steppe is on full display once again in this book.

Published in the Edinburgh History of the Islamic Empires series, *The Mongol Empire* provides its readers with a painstakingly detailed political and social narrative of the rise and eventual dissolution of the Mongol domains from their origins in the twelfth century to their disintegration in the fourteenth century. At first glance, *The Mongol Empire* may seem out of place in such literary company as other Islamic empires, yet May's stated purpose of his work provides clarity into its inclusion. He states that his book seeks to "explore how the *Yeke Monggol Ulus* (unified Mongol empire), created by a man of no particular religion, was transformed into a number of Islamic empires" (xxi). The fragmentation of the unified Mongol Empire as well as the eventual Islamization of three of the four major Khanates formed in the later part of the thirteenth century give credence to this claim.

This book is divided into thirteen chapters that flow chronologically up to the death of Mongke Khan in 1259. May's book dedicates its first seven chapters to establishing a definitive narrative history of the formation and expansion of the Mongolian empire under first Chinggis Khan, and later his successor sons and grandsons. Chapters eight through eleven are each devoted to one of the fragmentary khanates that emerged after 1259 and chapter twelve analyzes Islamic views and relationships toward their Mongol conquerors. The final section of the book further examines the reasons for the fracturing of the Mongol Empire and makes a very strong case that the reasons for the splintering of the empire continued unabated into each of the successor khanates.

From the very outset of May's book, two main areas of focus are made very clear. One of his primary goals was to provide a definitive narrative history of the Mongol Empire from the view of the Mongols. To this end, it quickly becomes evident that a very wide array of both primary and secondary source materials was utilized for this endeavor. Chief among these is the *Secret History of the Mongols*, which is heavily sourced in the opening chapters of the book. The second area of focus that is also made clear very early is that this book is written for and with college students in mind; the chapters are written in a manner so as not to be overly dense or complex. May's work makes no assumptions about prior knowledge of the Mongols on its readers and is quite literally a one-stop shop of nearly everything associated with the Mongol civilization. Visual aids such as maps, photographs, genealogy tables and even a glossary of Mongol terms are all provided to aid readers with a greater understanding of the material in which May's narrative progresses.

The first chapter of *the Mongol Empire* provides a sweeping contextual overview of life in the Mongolian steppes in the early twelfth century before the rise of Chinggis Khan. Aspects of Mongolian pastoralism, animal herding and cuisine, trade and social structures are all presented as a terrific entry point for anyone not already familiar with the Mongolian way of life. Furthermore, the complicated political webs of tribal alliances and balance of power politics are carefully unraveled in this chapter to better understand the dynamics of exactly how and why the unification of the Mongols eventually took place. Neighboring kingdoms such as Xi Xia and the Jin empire are revealed to have had major roles in influencing the earlier dynamics between the Mongols and various steppe tribes by ensuring that no singular tribe ever became dominant. When one faction of the Mongols seemed to have advantage, the Xi Xia or Jin would simply aid their rivals until a military balance of power was restored. This Metternich strategy provided a terrific political context and transition into chapter two where the rise of Mongol tribes under Chinggis Khan is narrated. Chinggis Khan was ultimately responsible for the conquest and forced unification of multiple steppe tribes that collectively numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The story of Chinggis Khan's rise to power through both marriage alliances and military conquests illustrate the careful planning he had undertaken to achieve his goals. Additionally, the sweeping changes in both the military and Mongol society revealed in this chapter show how the stability of the *Yeke Monggol Ulus* was ultimately realized. An important example of this is when "Temujin (Chinggis Khan) conducted a social revolution by reorganizing society into a military system based on the *minqan*, or unit of one thousand" (39). This reform as stated in the chapter greatly contributed to the evolution of a "military-industrial complex, with a household *minqan* supporting a military *minqan*" (39). This innovation as well as the implementation of a meritocracy based on both ability

and loyalty, allowed for a somewhat fluid hierarchy that was much different from earlier familial-based tribal structures.

Chapters three through seven carefully detail the history of the Mongols from the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227 through the reigns of his son Ogodei, and his grandsons Guyuk and Mongke. The author provides a detailed analysis of the Mongol administration along with valuable insight into the construction of their capital Karakorum, and new tax system. These chapters also vividly detail the military campaigns undertaken by the Mongols against the Jin and Khwarazm empires. It is important to note that a major theme of *the Mongol Empire* is relationships with the Islamic world, and it is in these chapters that this relationship is first covered. Examples of Muslim advisors, engineers, and merchants all serving the Mongols in different capacities abound in these chapters as the widening influence of the Mongols on the Asian continent grows throughout the thirteenth century.

Chapters eight through eleven cover each of the four major khanates formed after 1260. First among these is the Yuan Empire formed by Khublai Khan. The political rivalry between Khublai Khan and his brother Ariq-Boke ended with the victory of Khublai and the founding of his Mongolian-led dynasty in China. This section provides a detailed analysis of the politics, economy, society and religious life in the Yuan dynasty as well as how the Yuan empire successfully conquered its southern neighbor, the Song dynasty, and established a Mongol-minority ruled governmental structure that successfully reigned over the Chinese majority for nearly a century. This narrative of state formation, political structure, economic and religious influences is essentially replicated in the next three chapters over the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Ogodeid and Chaghatayid Khanate in Central Asia, and finally the Jochid or more commonly called Golden Horde Khanate of Russia. All of these chapters elaborate on the Mongol *Chinggisids* (direct relatives of Chinggis Khan), as well as their military conquests, defeats, and decision-making process, which ultimately led to the dissolution of their individual khanates.

Chapter twelve is a unique section in the book, as it breaks away from the chronological narrative of the previous chapters and primarily examines the Islamic views of the Mongol Empire. The Mongol conquest on *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) is covered with excerpts from Chinggis Khan's memorable speech at the Bukhara Mosque in 1221, when he stated that "I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you" (315). This terrifying view is shared by various chronicles and accounts from the Kievan Rus and Eastern European sources as well. After a careful re-examination of historical evidence and sources, which produced the often-quoted speech of Chinggis Khan, May argues that the speech was most likely not made by Chinggis Khan in the way that it is popularly remembered due to the authors' desire to fit the Mongols into an Islamic religious framework. This detailed analysis provides a wealth of information in the Islamic views and interpretations of the period. Finally, the last chapter of *the Mongol Empire* addresses recent historiographical trends in Mongol scholarship before concluding that the rise of the *Qarachu* (non-Chinggisid aristocracy) was ultimately the cause of the continued fracturing of the various Mongol khanates after 1260.

A definitive purpose of this book was to "give students and the public a solid understanding of the Mongol empire" (xxii). Written with the intended audience of college students in mind, *the Mongol Empire* is a wonderfully detailed book that instantly becomes a reference guide for

anything concerning the history of the Mongols. To this end, an invaluable aspect of *the Mongol Empire* is that it has multiple appendices of information and genealogies on the leading Mongol Khans, as well as multiple maps, images, and even a glossary of terms to help readers with identification. These additions to the book greatly increase the ability of readers and students to better understand the complicated, yet thorough histories presented in this work.

Another valuable aspect of *the Mongol Empire* is the level to which May challenges both accepted historiography and sources on events occurring throughout the Mongol Empire. For example, after quoting the famous historian and statesman Rashid al-Din about events concerning the *quriltai* (meeting to determine succession), May writes “Here Rashid al-Din overplays his hand. First, he is suggesting a primogeniture succession, which had never been Mongol custom” (173). Another example concerns the famous venetian Marco Polo. In his description of the 1273 conquest of fortified cities in the Song Dynasty, Marco Polo is said to have taken credit for the construction of military siege engines which were used to conquer the cities. Yet May writes that “Marco Polo credited his father, his uncle and himself with the construction and design of the trebuchets, but he arrived in China a few years after the fall of Xiangyang and Fancheng” (185). These examples as well as countless others demonstrate May’s attempt to critically analyze historical sources and provide readers with a greater understanding of the complexities in which they are situated.

While very insightful, and undoubtedly a key resource for students and laymen of the topic, seasoned historians and scholars of the Mongols will find very little new information here that is not already published or available in other sources. Yet this point is unabashedly addressed by May in his preface when he states that “the discussion included here will not add significantly to what others have written, although it might suggest new avenues of research” (xxi). Taking that into consideration, *the Mongol Empire* is instantly a valuable resource for any student or novice of Mongolian history. A valuable contributor to the historiography of the topic due to its critical analysis and reinterpretation of sources, Timothy May’s work *the Mongol Empire* is an instant must read by anyone interested in either the history of the Mongols or their Islamic descendants in Asia.