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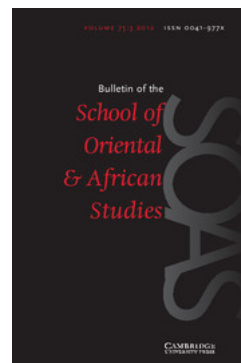
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THOMAS T. ALLSEN:

Culture and conquest in Mongol Eurasia.

(Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization.) xiv, 245 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. £40.

Any new publication by Thomas T. Allsen is justly followed by ripples of excitement in the world of medieval Euro-Asian research. A new book excites those ripples to tidal proportions. Allsen's latest study, following his appetiser, *Commodity and exchange in the Mongol Empire*, fully deserves such anticipatory enthusiasm and few if any could be disappointed at the result of his efforts, *Culture and conquest in Mongol Eurasia*.

Once again the focus of Allsen's attention is the Chinggisid courts in medieval Iran and China, discerned through the medium of Mongolian, Chinese, Persian, Arabic, European and Caucasian sources and presented in Allsen's always readable and lucid style. His conclusions are possibly radical but his argument is convincing and the picture he unveils of the medieval Mongol polity is one that will fit securely behind those who, in recent years, have been urging a reassessment of the traditional, sometimes negative, view of the Chinggisid empire. While acknowledging the existence of both a *Pax Mongolica* and a *Tartar Yoke*, and recognizing the traditional role of nomadic society in facilitating communication while at the same time fostering destruction, Allsen demonstrates how the Mongols initiated and perpetuated cultural exchange on a vast scale in the furtherance of their imperialistic ambitions. Rather than being a by-product of imperial conquest, with urban entrepreneurs and traders taking advantage of newly opening markets, cultural exchange was initiated and promoted by the Mongols themselves, who acted as the agents of their own multinational cultural clearing house. For the Mongols, human talent was just another form of legitimate plunder and a further source of booty which along with land, slaves, animals, precious material and other goods, was expected to be equitably divided among the 'royal family'. It was this human traffic which formed a central element in the empire's cultural exchange.

The extent of this human traffic is made plain from the outset of Allsen's study. The Mongols were a minority in their own empire and they needed the help of 'foreigners' to run their vast administration. These 'foreigners' would ideally be without local political or social ties and it was in Yuan China that the ruling Mongols developed a technique for accommodating these criteria. This entailed dividing the Yuan population into geographically defined groups and determining office, promotion, and work location according to quotas which ensured equal treatment for western Asians and Mongols with those from north and south China. The result was an administration composed, at all levels, of a complex ethnic, linguistic, and religious mix which meant 'thousands of agents of cultural transmission and change dispersed throughout the Yuan realm' (p. 7). The table which accompanies this point graphically illustrates the social depth and extent of this systematic immigration and transmigration, with Italians, Flemings, Scandinavians, Germans and other Europeans among immigrants from western Asia working as everything from leopard keepers and goldsmiths to accountants and singers. To a lesser extent, the same pattern was evident in Iran, with eastern Asians employed in occupations ranging from agriculturalists and stonemasons to cooks and wet nurses.

The book initially outlines the economic and political framework in which

this Mongol-inspired cultural exchange was able to develop. Iran and China had long had commercial, cultural and even religious links dating back to the earliest times and substantial 'Persian' trading centres are recorded in China as early as the mid-eighth century, with Chinese governments establishing institutions to administer these growing communities. With the advent of the Mongols, the centuries-old relationship between Iran and China underwent a dramatic intensification, initiated in particular by the accession of the Great Qa'an, Möngke, in 1251. Allsen deftly emphasizes the significance of the establishment of the Ilkhanate and details the sometimes convoluted history of the Mongols in Iran until the demise of Abū Sa'īd in 1335. Allsen sees this whole period as being of great importance to both China and Iran, and finds the development of their relationship reflected in an 'enduring partnership'. The two countries maintained diplomatic, ideological and military support: 'They exchanged intelligence, commodities, tribute, personnel, and envoys'. And their national resources were 'appropriated, apportioned, and exchanged' (p. 56).

Two men who recognized and took full personal advantage of the enormous cultural opportunities of this 'enduring partnership', and who receive Allsen's full attention and praise, are the Persian wazir Rashīd al-Dīn and the Mongol emissary to China and Iran, the chancellor Bolad Aqa (aka Pūlād and Po-lo]. The detailing of Bolad's career from a number of diverse sources, Chinese and Persian, is particularly welcome since the Yuan sources do not contain his biography. Though commonly credited as 'a literate Mongolian and informant of Rashīd al-Dīn' (p. 79) Allsen acknowledges Bolad as far more than this, characterizing him 'as a Mongolian intellectual—literate, cosmopolitan, and a man of affairs' (p. 79) whom Rashīd al-Dīn frequently praised, consulted, quotes, and to whom he would also defer. However, though Bolad was a respected and powerful Mongol administrator who encouraged reform in both China and Iran and one 'who favoured accommodation and innovation' (p. 79), he remained true to his nomadic Mongolian roots and traditions and is unlikely, Allsen concludes, to have been hauled before any court and tried for 'un-Mongolian activities' (p. 79). Rashīd al-Dīn's particular indebtedness to Bolad in the compilation of the *Jāmi' al-Tawārikh* and others of his literary works, is fully explored in a chapter on historiography.

The body of the work, often of a descriptive nature, concerns specific exchanges of cultural ware. Studies on, for example, astronomy have appeared before, but Allsen has uncovered some fascinating information in the field of agronomy, the Chinese government office over which Bolad held considerable sway, and cuisine, the area which served as the launching pad for both Bolad's and Rashīd al-Dīn's careers. Other areas examined include medicine, printing, geography and cartography.

The final chapters of this welcome book deal with the centrality to this cultural exchange of the Mongols themselves. Muslim astronomers went to China and vice versa, not because their counterparts wanted to exchange scientific information but because their Mongol masters wanted second opinions and further clarification of their astronomical findings.

This is an important book not only for the refreshing light it throws on Chinggisid history but also for the wealth of new material it has uncovered in the process. The Mongols as cultural brokers is an exciting concept in itself but the evidence that Allsen has produced in support of this view will occupy and entertain specialists for some time to come.

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