

Introduction

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*Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.*¹

Calvino's imaginary dialogue between Marco Polo (1254-1324) and Qubilai Qa'an (r. 1260-1294) well represents the various qualities of Qaraqorum's history of rise and decline, from the desire and hope of universality of the 13th century Mongol emperors, to the fear and despair brought about by intra-Mongol rivalries and the end of the empire in the 14th century.

Several works of scholarship have analyzed the imperial Mongols' varying attitudes towards the urbanization of the steppe, as well as their impact on the development of urban centers and settlements, alongside the expansion of the empire into sedentary territories.² On the one hand, the medieval Mongols capitalized on pre-existing urban centers, trade-hubs, and capitals as part of their claim for imperial legitimacy. On the other, their lifestyle brought new meanings and expressions of urbanization across Eurasia, from "felt-cities" to mobile camps, Islamic mausoleums, and multiple capitals.³

John W. Dardess among others has shown how the establishment of urban centers often served as an inflection point between the pastoral nomadic lifestyle of the imperial elite and the need to administer their sedentary subjects.⁴ Further, the medieval Mongols' strong impact on the exchanges along the Silk Roads, both in terms of scale and in terms of institutionalization, led to the creation of new "emporium" and the reshaping and expansion of new trade-hubs. This resulted in important changes in the urban nodes and in the commercial routes connecting western and eastern

¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 44.

² Isabelle Charleux phrases it in terms of "ambiguous relation with cities, based on both need and antipathy" (p. 175) in: I. Charleux, "The Khan's City. Kökeqota and the Role of a Capital City in Mongolian State Formation", in D. Sneath (ed.) *Imperial Statecrafts. Political Forms and Techniques of Governance in Inner Asia, Sixth-Twentieth Centuries*, (Bellingham, WI, 2006), 175- 207. The concept is addressed also by M. Biran, "Rulers and City Life in Mongol Central Asia (1220-1370)", in: D. Durand-Guédy (ed.), *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City Life*, Brill's Inner Asian Library 63 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 257-284.

³ See on this the various contributions in: D. Durand-Guédy (ed.), *Turko-Mongol Rulers, Cities and City Life*.

⁴ J. W. Dardess, "From Mongol Empire to Yüan Dynasty." *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1972-1973), 117-65.

Eurasia.⁵ The shift from trade-oases to emporia and commercial hubs, that had been going on for centuries, reached its peak under the agency of the Mongol Empire: thus, it constitutes a fundamental aspect of 13th-and 14th century Medieval Eurasia.⁶

Another, not less important motive for the development of urban centers - and especially capitals - under the Mongols was the display of charisma and the claim to imperial legitimacy, be it in terms of political legacy, such as in the case of the Yuan capital, or in terms of religion and spiritual geography.⁷

Qaraqorum is an exceptional example among the capitals of the medieval Mongols, as its foundation combines all of these economic, administrative, and ideological motivations. In their desire to create a center to showcase their imperial mandate and the universality of their empire, the first Mongol emperors looked back at Inner Asian precedents. Thus, they choose as their political center the Orkhon valley, home to many Inner Asian empires before theirs.⁸ Yet, Qaraqorum arose also from the desire to build something different, a place of many cultures and many flavors, as attested by the famous fountain described by Flemish Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck (fl. 1248–1255).⁹ The role of the capital as a symbol of power even outside the Mongolian cultural context is easily traceable in the Chinese sources, as for example the section on imperial geography (*dili zhi* 地理志) of the *Yuanshi* 元史 (*History of the Yuan Dynasty*, 1370), which mentions the city as the first place around which the geography of the empire was organized, and as the literal point of origin of the Yuan dynasty.¹⁰

Yet, while symbolizing a strong connection with their territory of origin, the destiny of Qaraqorum also symbolizes the difficulties that the medieval Mongols encountered in administering the various regions of their growing empire and keeping

⁵ For a classic example see: N. Di Cosmo, “Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A Reassessment of the Pax Mongolica“, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* Vol. 53, No. 1/2 (2010), 83-108.

⁶ This became such a notable feature of Mongol Eurasia, that Prazniak’s recent work even takes cities and their development as a symbol of the cosmopolitanism and cultural interconnectivity of medieval Eurasia under the Mongols. See: R. Prazniak, *Sudden Appearances: The Mongol Turn in Commerce, Belief, and Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019).

⁷ A classical study on spiritual geography among the medieval Mongols is T. T. Allsen, “Spiritual Geography and Political Legitimacy in the Eastern Steppe“, in: H. Claessen and J. Oosten (eds.), *Ideology and the Formation of Early States* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 116–135. On the Yuan capital see: N. S. Steinhardt, “The Plan of Khubilai Khan’s Imperial City“, *Artibus Asiae*, 44, issue 2-3 (1983), 137-58.

⁸ Allsen for example has shown that the Mongols derived their legitimacy and their sense of belonging from the connection to the two places Burqan Qaldun and Qaraqorum. T. T. Allsen, “Spiritual Geography“, p. 118-121 (for Burqan Qaldun) and 121f (for Qaraqorum).

⁹ See the translation of Rubruck’s account in: Ch. Dawson, *The Mission to Asia: Narratives and letters of the Franciscan missionaries in Mongolia and China in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries*, edited by Christopher Dawson, translated by a nun of Stanbrook Abbey, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 175-176.

¹⁰ Song Lian 宋濂, *Yuanshi* 元史 (repr. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), *juan* 58: 1382-3, translated in: F. W. Cleaves, “The Sino-Mongolian Inscription of 1346.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol. 15, 1/2 (June 1952), p. 25.

up with their project of universal expansion, all while tormented by internal disputes and rivalries within the imperial lineage.

Still, after slightly more than 800 years since its foundation, Qaraqorum remains a starting point to understand the significance of the Mongol empire for the history of the medieval and early modern worlds. The papers gathered in this volume address this idea by combining insights and perspectives from various disciplines and sources, from archaeology in the paper of Anne Sklebitz, to material culture in the paper of Yuka Kadoi, to history in the paper of Morris Rossabi and that by Francesca Fiaschetti, to literature and ethnography in the paper by Gerelt Honichud. As the volume shows, there are still many sources that need to be studied to fully comprehend the history and development of the capital of the Mongol empire.¹¹

Sklebitz's study on ceramics found in the Chinese artisan quarter in Qaraqorum shows the strategic importance of the city, at the crossroads of trade and communication routes connecting 13th century Mongolia on the one hand to China, which provided not only grain but also trade goods for both the nobility and local consumption, and on the other hand to Baghdad.

Kadoi's paper analyses the visual evidence for the introduction of Buddhism and Buddhist motifs in Mongol Iran, showing the role of religion in shaping a universalizing, multicultural court culture across Eurasia. Religious encounters and religious architecture (from Buddhist pagodas to the Erdeni Zuu monastery) strongly contributed to the idealization of Qaraqorum as a symbolic place for the imperial Mongols. The symbolic power of the city is further addressed in the paper by Rossabi, who reviews the development of the capital, from the imprint of the nomadic Uyghur style to the adoption of Chinese administration up until the Ming (1368-1644). The political legacy of Qaraqorum between the mid-Yuan and the early Ming periods is further taken up in the paper by the author of this introduction. The paper shows how shaping a linkage with Mongolia, in terms of symbolic geography as well as words of power, remained a fundamental priority of the emperors ruling over East Asia well beyond the 14th century and the end of the Yuan dynasty.

Honichud explores the travels of West and East Asian explorers crossing Mongolia under Qing rule (1644-1911) to discuss the legacy of Qaraqorum in the late modern period. By looking at the travelogues left behind by these explorers, and at the motives behind their expeditions, Honichud reconstructs the powerful role of Qaraqorum as a symbolic place for the representation of the identity of modern Mongolia.

¹¹ As a main reference on the archaeology and history of Qaraqorum see: Ulambayaryn Erdenebat, *Mongolyn эртний нийслэл Kharkhorum* Монголын эртний нийслэл Хархорум [*Qaraqorum - Ancient Capital of Mongolia*], (Ulaanbaatar: Mongol Ulsyn Ikh Surguul', Mongol Sudlalyn Khurèèlèn, Монгол Улсын Их Сургууль, Монгол Судлалын Хүрээлэн, 2018). A more recent overview is provided in: J. Bemann, S. Linzen, S. Reichert, L. Munkhbayar, „Mapping Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol Empire”, *Antiquity*, vol. 96 (2022), 159-178.

The papers collected in this volume originate from a conference organized in celebration of the 800-years history of Qaraqorum, and which had been planned for Vienna in 2020. The original impulse for the conference came from Yuka Kadoi and Morris Rossabi, to whom I am thankful for involving me in this project. Due to worldwide travel restrictions, the conference could not take place in 2020, yet I am thankful to the authors of the papers for contributing, with these pages, a virtual point of gathering and discussion, when a physical one was unachievable. Further, the editors of the volume have agreed to include additional articles to the conference papers in order to broaden the thematic and chronological focus of the issue.

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