UC Merced

The Undergraduate Historical and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies Journal at UC Merced

Title

More Than Strategy: The Mongols' Brutality as Seen Through the Lens of European and Islamic Historians

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0hh100fv

Journal

The Undergraduate Historical and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies Journal at UC Merced, 10(1)

Author

Hatanaka, Castner

Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.5070/H310165510

Copyright Information

Copyright 2025 by the author(s).This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

More Than Strategy: The Mongols' Brutality as Seen Through the Lens of European and Islamic Historians

By Castner Hatanaka

The Mongol Empire, under the rule of Genghis Khan and his successors, became the largest contiguous empire in the world during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. They are known for their warfare, military tactics, trade, and cultural exchange. As early as the 13th century, the Mongol Empire was able to swiftly conquer almost the entirety of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, overwhelming their enemies' forces. The core of their success was their military tactics that were unseen by sedentary civilizations, allowing them to outmaneuver and overpower their enemies using nomadic-based military tactics. These military tactics were influential enough, as Timur the lame, who was a Turko-Mongol conqueror who founded the Timurid Empire, took inspiration from the Mongol Empire's military tactics and used them himself. This paper explores key military strategies and how these strategies provided the Mongol Empire with a significant advantage over its enemies by analyzing Carpini, Ibn al-Athir, and Al -awādi al-ğāmia as historical sources. However, it is essential to recognize that these accounts are written by non-Mongols, and therefore, they may reflect biased perceptions shaped by fear, hostility, or cultural misunderstandings. This caveat should be kept in mind when analyzing their views on Mongol warfare. This paper explores how non-Mongol writers such as Giovanni da Pian del Carpini and Ibn al-Athir described the Mongol Empire's military tactics. Their views show that people were not only impressed by the Mongols' military skills but also deeply afraid of them, and that fear shaped how they were described in Mongol Warfare.

The heart of their conquest and rapid expansion can be credited to many of their qualities such as flexibility, numbers, and adaptability throughout the conquest. Another advantage that gave them a lead was the invention of the saddle, allowing the Mongol rider to turn 180 degrees

to shoot arrows behind them while on horseback. Their efficiency in marksmanship and exceptional horseback riding skills gave them an edge in mobility, maneuverability, and range. These qualities stemmed from childhood, while being raised, they were expected to all learn how to shoot a bow and arrow, along with horseback riding. Having these two qualities allowed the Mongols to swiftly attack their enemies, depending on the type of warfare they were to encounter.

These qualities of horseback riding and bow and arrow mastery are not solely a result of their mass victories during their expansion across the regions of the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. A factor in addition to their mass victories is structure. Ghengis Khan implemented his troops into the decimal system. The decimal system is when a leader divides his troops into groups of 10, 100, 1,000, & 10,000, and so on if needed. This system was instilled to efficiently use the number of men needed for what campaigns and orders given. Regarding Ghengis Khan's decimal system, A tümen represented 10,000 soldiers, a minghan was 1,000, a jaghun was 100, and an arban was 10 soldiers.[1] Along with having a decimal system, Ghenghis Khan also implemented strict rules to follow that ensured his men would refrain from disobeying him. As noted from *The History of the Mongols:* Giovanni Da Pian Del Carpini, "if one or two or three or even more out of a group of ten run away, all are put to death."[2] This punishment instilled fear in the men to prevent revolts within the military ranks and the decimal system. A way to curb revolts was the "spoil system" Ghengis Khan had also implemented, by giving out goods after campaign's he kept his soldiers and leaders' morale and emotions high with rewards. Carpini's

[1] McCreight, Richard D. "Mongol warrior epic: masters of thirteenth century maneuver warfare." PhD diss., Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1983.

[2] Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

focus on strict rules and harsh punishments helped build the image of the Mongols as scary and highly disciplined, something that may have seemed strange and threatening to Europeans.

In his journey to the heartlands of the Mongols, a Franciscan by the name Giovanni Da Pian Del Carpini lived from 1185- 1252, went on countless missions around the Eastern, Western, and Southern parts of Europe. Carpini visited during Güyük's reign, when the Mongol Empire was solidifying power. The European campaigns, ordered by Ogedei, were led by Batu Khan and the Golden Horde. He is mostly recognized for his mission to the heartland of the Mongol Empire during the years 1245 -1247. Carpini wrote about his firsthand account of the hospitality and knowledge he received and gained during his visit to the heartlands after returning home. His work later became known as *The History of the Mongols* by Giovanni Da Pian Del Carpini. Carpini was sent to the heartlands by Pope Innocent IV to gather knowledge on the Mongol people and their ways, for Pope Innocent had fears of the Mongol Empire's intentions to conquer Europe.

An ambush is a military tactic in which a foe lies and waits for the enemy to come within range and attack. This was a commonly used tactic by the Mongols, only when needed. An observation of Carpini, who learned of their military methods during his travel,s states "It should be known that when they come in sight of the enemy they attack at once,"[3] demonstrating their swift and decisive approach in battle. Carpini highlights how fast and effective the Mongols were, possibly to warn European leaders. His account mixes respect with warning, showing the Mongols as almost impossible to defeat and urging others to be ready. Along with attacking at once, another warfare tactic that was used by the Mongols was open warfare, stated by Carpini

[3] Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 36.

"If they can avoid it, the Tartars do not like to fight hand to hand."[4] This is where they held the advantage. Hand-to-hand was not a weakness for the Mongols, but more of a secondary aspect of their fighting style. If the Mongols see they are not going to be victorious in battle, they retreat to their safeguard lines, as the ambush awaits. They would ambush their enemies by surrounding them and proceeding to kill them. The tactic of surrounding their enemy originated from the military training of the Mongol warriors. Hunting taught these warriors skills such as archery, horsemanship, and tactical thinking. Through this training, the Mongols not only mastered tactics like ambushes and open warfare but also developed essential qualities such as independence, self-reliance, leadership, and unity traits that shaped them into one of history's formidable military forces.

However, while these tactics demonstrated the Mongols' military discipline and effectiveness, accounts from those who faced their invasions, such as the Muslim historian Ibn al-Athir—reveal the terrifying brutality that often accompanied their strategic precision. In his account (Al-Kâmil fi'I-Târîkh), *Irruption of the Mongols into the lands of Islam: Ibn al-Athir.* He states, "Even the antichrist will spare those who follow him; but these Mongols spared no one, slaying men, women, and children; ripping open the bellies of pregnant women and slaughtering the unborn."[5] Ibn al-Athir's emotional account, full of graphic details, shows the deep grief of a Muslim society in ruin. Rather than focusing on strategies, he condemns the Mongol morality, seeing them as a force of divine punishment rather than just conquerors. Actions such as these tilted the Mongol soldiers to have savage and barbaric tendencies. The Mongol soldiers held very little remorse for the enemy's life and the inhabitants of such cities throughout their campaigns,

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibn al-Athir, *Al-Kâmil fi'l-Târîkh* (The Complete History), ed. K. J. Tornberg, vol. 5, 233-235, trans. John E. Woods (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1851-1876) 1.

looking to instill fear into the enemy. The cruelty of their tactics included mass slaughtering and destruction of cities aimed at crushing the spirit of any resistance before any revolt took place.

In addition to the Mongol Empire's military mastery, they were exceptional at psychological warfare as well. Using fear and deception can have huge effects on the enemy, knowing who and what they are soon to come into contact with. Their reputation was not solely built on brutality amongst their enemies, but also created by clever tactics and creating a sense of terror amongst their enemies. One such tactic they would use to deceive the number of military forces they would bring to battle consisted of each Mongol taking with them "a string of several horses."[6] As well as "mounting dummies on spare horses, could have the effect, on the battlefield, of multiplying the apparent size of the army."[7] Deceptions caused enemies to doubt themselves as well as their military brothers, which led to their defeat. The fear of facing such overwhelming forces can cause the enemy to make rash decisions before and during battles. Many times, the enemy would surrender before anything escalated further.

In addition to Western sources capturing the cruel ways and acts of the Mongol Empire, like Carpini, the author who captured the way the Muslims perceived their Mongol invaders was Ibn al-Athir. Ibn al-Athir was a Muslim historian (12th-13th century) who spent most of his life in Mosul, along with being renowned for his work titled *al-Kamil fi al-tarikh.* Originally Ibn al-Athir was hesitant to write about the invasion of the Middle East and how it caused great destruction, but in the end decided to write and publish what he experienced during his own personal experiences during his lifetime. Ibn al-Athir's background in a scholarly environment helps provide us with an accurate depiction and account of the invasion of the Middle East, as

[6] David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 76.

[7] David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 76.

well as the fall of Islam. Personal motivations for writing his account were to express and explain the struggles of the Islamic Empire at the time, and events such as the invasions, we can learn and grow.

Expanding on the theme of cruelty and savage behavior, a killing spree period would be applied after capturing a city "with the exceptions of those they wish to have as slaves, they kill with the axe."[8] A more detailed example of a killing spree period that took place would be during the Battle of Baghdad. The invasion of Baghdad (1258) occurred thirty-one years after the death of Ghengis Khan, The invasion was led by his grandson Hulagu Khan, son of Tolui Khan. During this time, the Mongol Empire was being led by Möngke Khan and sent Hulagu Khan on a campaign to seize land in the Middle East. Another source we can examine about the brutality of the Mongols is Al-Hawādiḏ al-ğāmi □, the ownership is completely anonymous to historians. Which have translated and dissected this document word by word, sentence by sentence, but there are thoughts of it belonging to either one of these two Iraqi historians by the names of Ibn al-Kazaruni or Ibn al-saI, Ibn al-Fawati's teacher. In the chronicle newspaper, read the translation by H. Gillli-Elewy, on February 11th during the invasion of Baghdad (1258), after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate, the inhabitants "were subjected to 40 days of continuous killing, pillaging, enslavement; and they tormented the inhabitants using different ways to torture."[9] These treatments were a regular occurrence in their warfare, becoming a powerful weapon in itself, causing many to surrender out of fear long before the Mongols even arrived. It should be

[8] Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 38.

[9] Hend Gilli-Elewy, "Al-awādi al-ğāmia: A Contemporary Account of the Mongol Conquest of Baghdad, 656/1258," *Arabica* 58, no. 5 (2011): 367.

known that the inhabitants of cities were given the option to surrender before the arrival of the Mongol Empire.

Aside from killing the inhabitants of cities and enemies, the Mongol Empire was strategic in their treatment of captives. They valued men with skills such as engineers, craftsmen, and soldiers. They were integrated into Mongol society to serve a purpose, engineers were used to improve siege engines for siege warfare such as rams or catapults, which were essential for breaching city walls. Instead of sending Mongol soldiers they would send soldiers they had captured to be the front force to make contact with the enemies.

While both Carpini and Ibn al-Athir document Mongol tactics, their perspectives reveal differing motivations. Carpini, as a Christian envoy, offers a detailed look at the Mongols' military strength, perhaps out of respect or to understand a potential threat to Europe. In contrast, Ibn al-Athir, writing from a devastated Muslim society, condemns the Mongols' brutality, painting them as merciless conquerors. This difference raises questions: why did Carpini portray the Mongols with a somewhat neutral or even admiring tone, while others saw them as apocalyptic forces? Was it the Mongols' hospitality that shaped Carpini's view, or was it a strategic choice to gain intelligence? These varying perspectives shaped how Mongol warfare was remembered: either as disciplined strength or a terrifying force of destruction.

Renowned for their speed and physiological warfare, the Mongol Empire was also skilled in siege warfare. They were skilled and resourceful, using such engineers to build and operate engines such as catapults to destroy and break away city walls to then enter. If this did not work, the Mongols were often patient when it came to siege warfare. Carpini states that "they

do not leave fighting by day or night, so that those inside the fortress get no sleep."[10] To achieve this constant fight, they would divide up their soldiers to keep the attack going for as long as they are ordered to. Along with using engines such as the catapult, they would "take the fat of the people they kill and, melting it, throw it on the house."[11] These, along with other tactics, such as flooding out fortresses, if there is a nearby river, and or making "an underground passage and bursting forth into the cities"[12] demonstrates the Mongols' adaptability to ingenuity in warfare. If all these tactics failed, the Mongols were more than prepared to wait as long as it would until those in the fortress were ready to surrender or run out of food. In one case, "in the lands of Alans, they have been besieging a hill for the past twelve years."[13] Against cities with walls, the Mongol Empire was patient when it came to this type of warfare.

Another source offering a positive view on the Mongols is Juvaini, or by his full name Ala' al-Din 'Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226-1283) was a diplomat for the country of Iraq and for the Mongolian Empire to be more specifically the governor of Baghdad. He is most known for his account "*The History of the World Conqueror*" which illustrates the Mongol invasions of countless lands, including the Islamic lands, Central Asia, the Uighurs East lands, and many more. In his account, Juvaini focuses on documenting his personal experiences, the history and achievements of the Mongols, legitimizing the rule of the Mongol Empire, and focusing on their

[10] Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 37.

[11] Ibid., pp 37.

[12] Christopher Dawson, ed. and intro., *Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, trans. a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 42.

[13] Ibid., pp 49.

positive impact on the lands they conquered, even saying they turned regions "from a prison into a garden."[14] However, it is important to question how genuine Juvaini's positive portrayal is. As a high-ranking official in the Mongol administration, he might have been restricted from speaking out against the empire. This raises the possibility that Juvaini's account was shaped by his position; he may have been writing to keep his job and stay in the Mongols' favor rather than expressing an honest opinion.

In conclusion, the Mongol military success was not about just large numbers; it was well organized and made up of many different peoples they conquered, which gave them a strategic advantage, along with brutality but a combination of advanced strategies, adaptability, and psychological warfare. Their tactics range from organizing soldiers with the decimal system, strategic gathering of information, their expertise of ambushes, siege warfare, and the manipulation of fear. Additionally, the strategic use of captives, drawing on their skills and knowledge to reinforce their forces and help win future campaigns, Genghis Khan's leadership and unity of his forces played an important role in the success of the tactics. The Mongol's ability to adapt to different battle situations, the creation of the saddle, and brutal tactics all helped the great Mongol Empire expand quickly, becoming one of the strongest military forces in history.

[14] 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle, from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 22.

Bibliography

Carpini, John of Plano. *History of the Mongols*. Translated by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey. Edited and with an introduction by Christopher Dawson. New York: Harper & Row, 1955.

Gilli-Elewy, Hend. "Al-awādi al-ğāmia: A Contemporary Account of the Mongol Conquest of Baghdad, 656/1258." *Arabica* 58, no. 5 (2011): 353-371.

Ibn al-Athir, ‘Izz al-Din Abu’l-Hasan. *Al-Kâmil fi’l-Târîkh* (Chronicon, quod perfectissimum inscribitur), edited by K. J. Tornberg. Translated by John E. Woods. Vol. 12, 233-235. Leiden: 1851-1876.

Jang, Jaehyuk and Kim, Kisun. "A Comparative Study of the Military Tactics of the Mongol Empire and Goguryeo Kingdom (Goryeo)" *Mongolian Diaspora. Journal of Mongolian History and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2023): 53-68. https://doi.org/10.1515/modi-2023-2001

Juvaynī, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Aṭā Malik. *The History of the World-Conqueror*. Translated by John Andrew Boyle. From the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

Mission to Asia: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. Translated by a Nun of Stanbrook Abbey. Edited and with an Introduction by Christopher Dawson. Harper Torchbooks. New York: Harper & Row, 1955.

Morgan, David. *The Mongols*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Smojver, Domagoj. "Special Military Tactics Employed by the Mongols During Their 13th Century Conquest." *Pregledni Rad*, August 16, 2023. Accepted November 2, 2023.