The Mongols and Interregional Empires

Swarming like locusts over the face of the earth, they [the Mongols] have brought terrible devastation to the eastern parts [of Europe], laying it waste with fire and carnage. After having passed through the land of the Saracens [Muslims], they have razed cities, cut down forests, overthrown fortresses, pulled up vines, destroyed gardens, killed townspeople and peasants.

—Matthew Paris, from the Chronica Majora (1240)

The Mongols of central Asia marched across much of Eurasia throughout the thirteenth century, leaving destruction and chaos in their wake. The reputation of the Mongols for slaughter spread even farther than their actual conquest. Matthew Paris had no firsthand knowledge of the Mongols as he wrote from the safe vantage point of a Benedictine abbey in England. Like Paris, most writers of the time focused on Mongol atrocities. However, in their quest for blood and treasure, the Mongols also sparked a period of interregional connection and exchange at a level that the world had not experienced in a thousand years.

The Mongols and Their Surroundings

In the twelfth century, the Mongols were multiple clans of nomadic pastoralists living north of the Gobi Desert in East Asia. Life on the arid Asian steppes was harsh, and it shaped the Mongol culture. Mongols were pastoral nomads who herded goats and sheep and were also hunter-foragers. They expected everyone, male and female, to become skilled horse riders, and they highly valued courage, in hunting and warfare. The Mongols were surrounded by other tribes—the Tatars, the Naimans, the Merkits, and the powerful Jurchen in northern China. The Mongols coveted the relative wealth of tribes and kingdoms that were located closer to the Silk Roads and had easier access to luxury goods such as silk clothing and gold jewelry. These early Mongols dressed plainly in long robes and pants made of pelts and had few possessions other than a yurt, a circular, felt-covered tent; horses; and some basic tools used in hunting and herding.
Genghis Khan

The Mongol leader Temujin, born in 1162, spent the early decades of his life creating a series of tribal alliances and defeating neighboring groups one by one. He formed key friendships and married his oldest son to the daughter of a neighboring khan, or king. Temujin was intensely focused on building power. This meant that he sometimes appointing talented nonfamily members to positions over family members. And it often meant he would be ruthless. For example, he killed his own stepbrother. He considered personal loyalty the best way to run his growing kingdom. In 1206, Temujin gathered the Mongol chieftains at a meeting called a kuriltai where he was elected khan of the Mongolian Kingdom. He took the name Genghis Khan, or “ruler of all.”

The Beginning of Conquest In 1210, Genghis Khan and his troops headed east and attacked the powerful Jin Empire, which had been established by the Jurchens a century earlier and now ruled Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and northern China. Its capital was the city of Zhongdu, present-day Beijing. Genghis Khan earned his reputation as a terrifying warrior during this campaign; anyone who resisted was brutally killed in retribution. Sometimes the Mongols wiped out the civilian populations of entire towns after defeating their armies. Stories of Khan’s brutality spread in advance of his new westward campaigns, inducing some leaders to surrender before an attack. In 1219, Khan conquered both the Central Asian Kara Khitai Empire and the Islamic Khwarazm Empire farther west. By 1227, Genghis Khan’s khantate, or kingdom, reached from the North China Sea to eastern Persia. (Test Prep: Write a paragraph comparing Genghis Khan with Alexander the Great. See page 62.)

Genghis Khan at War The skilled and fearsome soldiers under Genghis Khan’s command made his empire possible. Mongolian soldiers were strong riders and proficient with the short bow. They were also highly disciplined, and Khan developed an efficient command structure. Groups of 10 warriors operated as a unit with one soldier in command of the rest. These groups of 10 were then similarly organized into larger groups, up to 10 groups of 1,000 warriors each called tumens. In addition, the cavalry units were divided into heavy and light cavalry: Heavy cavalry wore more armor and carried more weapons than the light cavalry.

To help with communication between units, a messenger force was created whose members rode for days without stopping, even sleeping on their horses while continuing to ride. With the help of Genghis Khan, the Mongolian armies developed special units that mapped the terrain so that they were prepared against attacks and knew which way to go to attack their enemies. Their military strategies extended to surprise and craft. For instance, Mongol forces frequently deployed a band of warriors smaller than that of their enemy, retreating in feigned defeat; usually, enemy forces pursued the retreating Mongols, who then amassed larger forces to confuse and outflank the enemy.

When coming upon an enemy settlement, Genghis Khan sent a small group ahead to ask for surrender. If the enemy refused, he killed all the aristocrats.
Craftworkers, miners, and others with skills, such as the ability to read and write, were recruited for the Mongol Empire. Others were used as laborers for tasks such as carrying looted goods back to the Mongol capital or as fodder in the front lines of battles.

Mongols quickly incorporated into their military the weapons and technology of the peoples they conquered. For example, when they conquered parts of China and Persia, they exploited the expertise of captured engineers who knew how to produce improved *siege weapons*, such as portable towers used to attack walled fortifications and catapults that hurled stones or other objects. To keep contact with the far reaches of the empire, Genghis Khan created a type of pony express, except instead of carrying written letters riders carried oral messages.

**Genghis Khan at Peace** Those who expected Genghis Khan to govern the way he made war were surprised. The period of Eurasian history between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is often called the *Pax Mongolica*, or Mongolian peace. Genghis Khan established the capital of his empire at *Karakorum*, near the center of what is now the modern country of Mongolia. In constructing the city and establishing his government, he consulted with scholars and engineers of Chinese and Islamic traditions. Genghis Khan may have been responsible for more new bridges than any other ruler in history. *(Test Prep: List the similarities and differences between the *Pax Mongolica* and the *Pax Romana*. See page 77.)*

The social policies of Genghis Khan were liberal for the day. For example, he instituted a policy of religious tolerance throughout the empire, which was quite unusual in the thirteenth century. Freed from years of warfare, Genghis Khan’s soldiers took charge of protecting the Silk Road, making it safe for trade. New trade channels were also established between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Those who survived the conquests by the Mongols and their descendants benefited from the reinvigoration of trade routes that had not been heavily used since the days of the Roman and Han Empires.

**Genghis Khan’s Successor** Genghis Khan died while fighting the *Tangut Empire*, south of the Gobi Desert, in 1227. His chosen successor was his third, and reportedly his favorite, son, Ogodei (also spelled Ogedei), who was formally elected emperor by the Mongolian chiefs in 1229.

Ogodei’s skills as a military leader could not compare with his legendary father, but under his leadership the Mongol Empire did continue to expand, making inroads into modern-day Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, as well as capturing land in the Indus Valley and southern China and invading Korea in 1231.

Ogodei also worked to bring a more efficient bureaucracy to the Mongolian Empire, and invested in the greater development of the capital, Karakorum. He wanted to build a permanent city with buildings rather than the traditional Mongol yurts.
### Transfer of Knowledge by the Mongols and the Crusaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empire</th>
<th>Primary Areas Connected</th>
<th>Science/Technology Transferred</th>
<th>Ideas Transferred</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mongols</td>
<td>East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East</td>
<td>• Better bridges</td>
<td>• Increased religious tolerance</td>
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<td>• Skills at tunneling for military attacks</td>
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<td>• New siege weapons</td>
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### Mongolian Empire Expands

Three of Genghis Khan’s grandsons set up their own khanates, further expanding the empire into Asia and Europe.

**Batu and the Golden Horde** In 1236, Batu led a Mongolian army of 100,000 soldiers into Russia, which at the time was a loose network of city-states and principalities. Batu’s army, which came to be known as the *Golden Horde*, marched westward, conquering the small Russian kingdoms and forcing them to pay tributes. In 1240, the capital city of Kiev was destroyed and looted.

The Golden Horde continued pushing westward. An initial period of sympathy for the Mongols, based on religious toleration and promotion of trade, evaporated when Western Europe saw the Golden Horde conquer a Christian region, Russia. In 1241, Batu led the Golden Horde into a successful military encounter with Polish, German, and French knights under the leadership of King Henry of Silesia. Soon afterward, Batu defeated a force of Hungarian knights. He next set his sights on Italy and Austria, but fate intervened. Back in Karakorum, Ogodei Khan died. As a result, Batu called off the attacks, and returned home to attend the funeral and to see to issues of succession. By the time Batu returned to Europe, he had apparently lost interest in conquering Western Europe. Instead he established a new capital on the Volga River, called *Sarai*.

The Mongols ruled northern Russia by working through existing Russian rulers, who sent regular tributes. The Mongols chose this form of indirect rule because they did not want to live in the forests. The rulers of the city-state of *Moscow* began collecting additional tributes, which they set aside to develop an army to resist the Mongols, and began building an anti-Mongol coalition among the Russian city-states. This coalition, under Moscow’s leadership, rose up against the Golden Horde and defeated it in 1380 at the *Battle of Kulikovo*. After this battle, Mongol influence began to decline. By the mid-sixteenth century, Russia had defeated all of the descendant
khans of the Mongols except the Crimean Tatars, who were not defeated until the late eighteenth century. (Test Prep: Create a timeline tracing the history of Russia under the Mongols up to the emergence of modern Russia. See page 335.)

The Mongols had long-lasting impact on Russia. As elsewhere, Russia suffered widespread devastation and death from the Mongol attacks. But once the destruction by the Golden Horde was over, Russia began to recover. The invasions prompted Russian princes to improve their military organization and to accept the value of more centralized leadership of the region. In addition, three centuries of Mongol rule severed Russia’s ties with much of Western Europe. As a result, Russia developed a more distinctly Russian culture than it had before, and resistance to the Mongols created the foundation for the modern Russian state.

**Hulegu and the Islamic Heartlands** While Batu led the western armies, Hulegu, another grandson of Genghis Khan, took charge of the southwest region. In 1258, Hulegu led the Mongols into the Abbasid territories, where they destroyed the city of Baghdad and killed the caliph, along with perhaps 200,000 residents of the city.
Hulegu’s Mongolian armies continued to push west, threatening more of the Middle East. In 1260, however, they were defeated as a result of a temporary alliance between the Muslim Mamluks, under their military leader Baibars, and Christian Crusaders in Palestine. Both religious groups viewed the Mongols as serious threat.

At the time of this defeat, Hulegu’s kingdom, called the Il-khanate, in Central Asia stretched from Byzantium to to the Oxus River, which is now called the Amu Darya. Mongols ruled this kingdom, but Persians served as ministers and provincial and local officials. The Mongols found that this arrangement resulted in maximum tax collection.

Eventually, Hulegu and most of the other Mongols living in the Il-khanate converted to Islam. Before this conversion, the Mongols had tolerated all religions in Persia. After the conversion, however, Mongols supported massacres of Jews and Christians.

**Kublai Khan and the Yuan Dynasty** Meanwhile, in the eastern part of the Mongolian Empire, a grandson of Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, set his sights on China, which was then ruled by the Song Dynasty. China was a more formidable opponent than those faced by the other khans, and Kublai’s armies spent the years from 1235 to 1271 attempting to conquer China. In 1260, Kublai assumed the title of Great Khan, and eleven years later finally defeated the Chinese. Hewing close to Chinese tradition rather than enforcing Mongolian practices of leadership and control, Kublai Khan established the Yuan Dynasty. He rebuilt the capital at Zhongdu, which had been destroyed by the Mongols in 1215, calling it Dadu.

Kublai Khan proved to be skilled at governing a large, diverse territory. Like his grandfather, he instituted a policy of religious tolerance, which inspired loyalty in formerly oppressed groups such as Buddhists and Daoists, who were out of favor in China at the time. His policies were also tolerant toward Muslims and Christians.

With these and other reforms and the protection of the Mongolian armies, most Chinese initially enjoyed the rule of the Great Khan; he brought prosperity to China because of cultural exchanges and improved trade with other countries, including European ones. Chinese arts and literature enjoyed a golden period during the Yuan Dynasty. For example, Wang Shifu wrote the still-popular play *The Romance of the West Chamber* during this period. It is the story of two young lovers who overcome obstacles until they are finally allowed to marry.

**Marco Polo** Also during this time, the 17-year-old Venetian Marco Polo first visited China. After Polo returned to Italy in 1295, he wrote a book about his trip. However, many Europeans refused to believe his descriptions of China’s size, wealth, and wonders. Only when other Europeans followed Polo’s route to China did people widely accept that China was prosperous and innovative.
Mongols Lose Power  Despite Kublai Khan’s adoption of many Chinese customs, Mongolian leaders eventually alienated many Chinese. They hired foreigners for the government rather than native-born Chinese. By promoting Buddhists and Daoists and dismantling the civil service exam system, the Mongols distressed the Chinese scholar-gentry class who were often Confucians. Although the official policy was one of tolerance, the Mongolians tended to remain separate from the Chinese and prohibited non-Mongols from speaking Mongolian.

Just as Batu had reached the limit of Mongol expansion to the west, the Mongolian rulers of China failed to expand beyond China. Starting in 1274, the Yuan Dynasty tried and failed to conquer Japan, Indochina, Burma, and the island of Java. These defeats suggested to the already disenchanted Chinese population that the Mongols were not as fearsome as they once had been. In the 1350s, the secret White Lotus Society began quietly organizing to put an end to the Yuan Dynasty. In 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang, a Buddhist monk from a poor peasant family, led a revolt that overthrew the Yuan Dynasty and founded the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The Mongols’ defeat in China paralleled a general decline in their power elsewhere, and the empire began to shrink. The Golden Horde had lost its territory by about 1369, while Central Asian territories were conquered by Tamerlane, also known as Timur the Lame, at around the same time. (Test Prep: Create a map or series of maps showing the different empires and countries that emerged in the same territory after the fall of the Mongol Empire. See pages 353–363.)

TEN DEADLIEST CONFLICTS IN WORLD HISTORY

What Was the Long-Term Impact of the Mongolian Invasions?

The Mongolian invasions played a key role in history in many ways, positive and negative.

- Mongols conquered a larger area than the Romans, and their bloody reputation was usually well-earned.

- During the period known as the Pax Mongolica, Mongols revitalized interregional trade between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The Mongols built a system of roads and continued to maintain and guard the trade routes.

- The Mongols ruled successfully due to their understanding of centralized power, a capacity that would transfer in many cases to the occupied civilizations. The Mongols devised and used a single international law for all their conquered territories. Thus, after the Mongols declined in power, the kingdoms and states of Europe, Asia, and Southeast Asia continued or copied the process of centralizing power.

- The Mongol conquests helped to transmit the fleas that carried the bubonic plague, termed the Black Death, from southern China to Central Asia, and from there to Southeast Asia and Europe. It followed familiar paths of trade and military conquest. The Black Death had a huge impact on Europe, killing one-third of the population there in a few years, and had similar effects on other areas, including North Africa, China, and Central Asia. South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa were spared because there were few trading ports in those regions.

- Mongol women led more independent lives than women in other societies of the time. In their nomadic culture, women tended flocks of sheep and goats in addition to raising children and providing meals for the family. Since they rode horses like Mongol men, the women wore the same kind of leather trousers. Mongol women could remarry after being widowed and could initiate divorces.

- Mongol fighting techniques led to the end of Western Europe’s use of knights in armor. The heavily clad knights could not react in time to the Mongols’ use of speed and surprise.

- The era of the walled city in Europe also came to an end, as walls proved useless against the Mongols’ siege technology. The cannon is considered by some a Mongol invention, cobbled together using Chinese gunpowder, Muslim flamethrowers, and European bell-casting techniques.

- Males in Western Europe replaced their tunics and robes with the Mongol-style pants and jacket combination.
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: HOW BRUTAL WAS GENGHIS KHAN?

Was Genghis Khan a brutal destroyer who murdered millions, or was he a great unifier who promoted prosperity by unifying most of Eurasia?

The Destroyer Many historians emphasize that Khan was a bloodthirsty tyrant. Military historian Steven R. Ward writes that “Overall, the Mongol violence and depredations killed up to three-fourths of the population of the Iranian Plateau.” Total deaths attributed to the Mongols during his rule and the rule of his descendants are in the tens of millions. Stories of his massacres of innocent people and of using unarmed civilians to protect his own soldiers show him to have little regard for human life.

The Empire Builder Others historians focus on Khan’s role as a great leader. Mongolian scholars, proud of their countryman, argue that charges of brutality have been exaggerated. As historians from Europe and the United States focused more on trade and toleration, they saw benefits of the Mongol rule. Genghis Khan forged a united China and established a system of Eurasian trade that renewed the links between China and Europe that had lapsed. Further, the Mongols were open to ideas and tolerant of different religions. Khan believed in a meritocracy, and he established one writing system across his empire. His rule opened the way for new systems of laws, for trade, and for cultural expansion.

A Man of Energy One Persian historian takes a position broad enough that everyone can agree with: “Genghis was possessed of great energy, discernment, genius, and understanding, awe-inspiring, a butcher, just, resolute, an over-thower of enemies, intrepid, sanguinary, and cruel.”

KEY TERMS BY THEME

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<th>STATE-BUILDING</th>
<th>Sarai</th>
<th>Golden Horde</th>
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<th>Battle of Kulikovo</th>
<th>Hulegu</th>
<th>Baibars</th>
<th>Il-khanate</th>
<th>Kublai Khan</th>
<th>Yuan Dynasty</th>
<th>Dadu</th>
<th>White Lotus Society</th>
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<td>siege weapons</td>
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<td>CULTURE</td>
<td>The Romance of the West Chamber</td>
<td>Marco Polo</td>
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MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1.1 to 1.3 refer to the passage below.

"The road you travel from Tana to Cathay [China] is perfectly safe, whether by day or by night, according to what the merchants say who have used it. . . . Cathay is a province which contained a multitude of cities and towns. Among others there is one in particular, that is to say the capital city, to which is great resort of merchants, and in which there is a vast amount of trade; and this city is called Cambalec. And the said city hath a circuit of one hundred miles, and is all full of people and houses and of dwellers in the said city."

Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, The Merchant's Handbook, c. 1471

1.1 Which statement about China and trade is best supported by this passage?
(A) Trade between Europe and Cathay was greatly enhanced by the security established by the Mongol Khanates.
(B) Merchants rarely traveled between Tana and Sara because the road was more dangerous than the route between Tana and Cathay.
(C) Cambalec was an important trading hub, but it was not a large city.
(D) The author felt the risks of trade with China outweighed the rewards.

1.2 Which development was the turning point that led to the expansion of trade between Asia and Europe?
(A) The formation of the Silk Roads by Marco Polo allowed goods from Asia to be imported into Europe for the first time.
(B) The conquests by Genghis Khan began the Pax Mongolica, which led to improved trade routes and reduced trading costs.
(C) The invention of silk cloth during the early Mongol rule allowed the Mongols to trade for pottery, wool, and other European goods.
(D) The invention of paper money by Venetian bankers helped to facilitate trade between Europe and Asia.

1.3 Which objects, ideas, or germs was the author most likely writing about?
(A) silver, gems, and gold went from Europe to China; wool, horses, and the ideas of Islam went from China to Europe
(B) silk, paper, and Christianity went from Europe to China; gunpowder, silver, and Buddhism went from China to Europe
(C) silver, gems, and gold went from Europe to China; silk, paper, gunpowder, and diseases went from China to Europe
(D) diseases, paper, and Christianity went from Europe to China; silk, gunpowder, horses, and wool went from China to Europe

250 WORLD HISTORY: PREPARING FOR THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT® EXAM
Questions 2.1 to 2.3 refer to the passage below.

"The [Russian] Duke who had spoken before gave a short account of all that had taken place since the death of [Genghis Khan], and the partition of his vast dominions. And then the younger Duke, Wsewolodovichs, took up the tale.

'Lord King!' he began, 'these Mongols don't carry on warfare in an honorable, chivalrous way. They fight only to destroy, they are bloodthirsty, merciless; their only object is to plunder, slay, murder, and burn, not even to make any use of what lands they conquer. They are like a swarm of locusts. They stay till everything is eaten up, till all are plundered, and what they can't carry off, that they kill, or reduce to ashes. They are utterly faithless; their words and promises are not in the least to be trusted, and those who do make friends with them are the first upon whom they wreak their vengeance if anything goes wrong. We are telling you no fairy tales! We know to our own cost what they are, we tell you what we have seen with our own eyes. And let me tell you this, my lord king, their lust of conquest and devastation knows no bounds! If it is our turn today, it will be yours tomorrow! And, therefore, while we seek a refuge in your land, we at the same time warn you to be prepared! For the storm is coming, and may sweep across your frontiers sooner than you think for.'"

Baron Nicholas Jósika (1796–1865), 'Neath the Hoof of the Tartar, or The Scourge of God, a novel about the Mongols

2.1 Which statement best states the Russian duke's view of the Mongols?
(A) The Mongols were interested only in plunder and treasure but not in controlling Russian territory.
(B) The Mongols used horse-mounted warfare and gunpowder to completely overpower and destroy their enemies.
(C) The Russians had been fooled by rumors of Mongol atrocities.
(D) The Russians lost because they were inexperienced in warfare.

2.2 The most valid counterargument to the description of the Mongols by the Russian duke was that the Mongols
(A) took only what they needed to survive from people they conquered
(B) appreciated architecture and art and, hence, rarely destroyed cities
(C) had no reason to invade other areas west of Russia
(D) established political institutions in the territories they conquered

2.3 How would the Mongols use the Russian duke's description to their advantage if they chose to invade Hungary?
(A) to frighten the Hungarians into surrendering
(B) to persuade Hungarians to fight against other Christian kingdoms
(C) to cause the Hungarians to convert to Islam
(D) to attract Hungarian knights who admired their style of warfare
Questions 3.1 and 3.2 are based on the illustration below.

![Illustration of the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258](image)

**Source:** Iran / Persia. The fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258. Rashid al-Din, Jami al-Tawarikh, c. 1305 CE / Pictures from History / Bridgeman Images

The Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258

3.1 Which statement about military tactics is best supported by the illustration?

(A) The Mongols used mounted horsemen only to attack and conquer walled cities.

(B) The Mongols' siege technology was inadequate to breach the walls of a city like Baghdad.

(C) The Mongols adopted military technology from people they conquered and used it to attack others.

(D) The residents of Baghdad surrendered to the Mongols rather than face the wrath of the Mongols.

3.2 Which statement best describes the effects of the Mongol invasions on large cities such as Baghdad?

(A) Large cities lost importance as trading centers as the Mongols provided safe and secure passage for long-distance traders.

(B) Large cities were little affected by the Mongol invasions because the Mongols usually bypassed them during their conquests.

(C) Large cities were often torn down by the Mongols in order to force people to adopt a nomadic lifestyle.

(D) Large cities absorbed Mongols as residents as they slowly abandoned their nomadic customs and beliefs.
SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

Question 1 refers to the passage below.

"And the Monarch of the World, the Hatim of the Age, [Mengü] Qa’an [Khan] passed away, Gyćük, his eldest son had not returned from the campaign against the Qifchaq, and therefore in accordance with precedent the dispatch of orders and the assembling of the people took place at the door of the . . . palace of his wife, Möge Khatun. . . . But since Törengene Khatun was the mother of his eldest sons and was moreover shrewder and more sagacious than Möge Khatun, she [Törengene Khatun] sent messages to the princes, i.e. the brothers and nephews of the Qa’an . . . and said that until a Khan was appointed by agreement someone would have to be ruler and leader in order that the business of the state might not be neglected nor the affairs of the commonwealth thrown into confusion; in order, too, that the army and the court might be kept under control and the interests of the people protected. . . . therefore, until a qurultai [an assembly of Mongol nobles] was held, it was she [Törengene Khatun] that should direct the affairs of the state, and the old ministers should remain in the service of the Court, so that the old and new yasas [political structure or order] might not be changed from what was the law."

Ala-ad Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, a Persian scholar from the thirteenth century, *The History of the Conqueror*

1. Answer parts A and B.
   
   A. Identify and explain TWO reasons why the Mongol nobles would accept the political leadership of a woman.
   
   B. Identify and explain ONE difference in the status of women in Islamic society in the thirteenth century and the status of women in Mongol culture during the thirteenth century.

2. Answer parts A, B, and C.
   
   A. Identify and explain ONE similarity in the political structure of the Yuan Dynasty and the Il-khan Empire.
   
   B. Identify and explain ONE difference in the political structure of the Yuan Dynasty and the Empire of the Golden Horde.
   
   C. Identify and explain ONE change in the social structure of China as a result of the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty.