THE MONGOL HORDES: THEY'RE JUST LIKE US

Scholars now argue that early nomadic empires were the architects of modernity. But do we have the right measure of their success?

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The discipline of "global history," shifting history away from nation-states toward trans-regional processes, was meant to leave behind the ethnocentrism of what had preceded it. The new steppe scholarship shows how tricky a task that is. Art work © Fine Art Images / Bridgeman Images

In September, Pope Francis became the first leader of the Catholic Church ever to visit Mongolia. It must have been a humbling stopover. The country has fewer than fifteen hundred Catholics. The welcoming ceremony, in Ulaanbaatar's main square, attracted a few hundred spectators—a crowd

less than a thousandth the size of one that had gathered to see him in Lisbon a month earlier. One of the attendees had come out to do his morning Tai Chi and unknowingly ended up at the event.

Not everyone understood why the Pontiff was there. A caterer at a banquet for the Vatican entourage asked a *Times* reporter, "What are Catholics again?" But the Pope came prepared. Speaking to diplomats, cultural leaders, and the Mongolian President, he celebrated the religious freedom protected under the Mongol Empire during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—"the remarkable ability of your ancestors to acknowledge the outstanding qualities of the peoples present in its immense territory and to put those qualities at the service of a common development." He also celebrated "the Pax Mongolica," the period of Mongol-enforced stability across Eurasia, citing its "absence of conflicts" and respect "of international laws."

Many earlier Christians would have been staggered by Francis's words. The first recorded mention of the Mongols in Western Europe is from a Benedictine monk who, in 1240, recorded testimony that the Mongols were "an immense horde of that detestable race of Satan . . . thirsting after and drinking blood, and tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and human beings." Five years later, Pope Innocent IV sent Güyük Khan, the third leader of the Mongol Empire, a letter expressing "our amazement" that the Mongols "have invaded many countries belonging to both Christians and to others and are laying them waste in a horrible desolation."

Muslims, too, saw the Mongols as bloodthirsty savages. When Hulagu Khan stormed Baghdad, in 1258, bodies were heaped on the streets; drains reportedly ran red in the heart of Muslim civilization, while Baghdad's great library, the House of Wisdom, burned. For many historians, the sacking marked the end of five centuries of cultural and scientific flourishing—the Islamic Golden Age. In November, 2002, Osama bin Laden claimed that George H. W. Bush's Administration had been more destructive than

"Hulagu of the Mongols." Months later, in the run-up to the Iraq War, Saddam Hussein referred to the United States and its allies as "the Mongols of this age."

The image of Mongols as brutes outlasted their conquests. In a Voltaire play, they appear as "wild sons of rapine" who set out to "make this splendid seat of empire one vast desert, like their own." Today, the name of the empire's founder remains so tied to tyranny and fanaticism that it's become a cliché to describe politicians as "somewhere to the right of Genghis Khan." In Russia and Eastern Europe, the "Mongol-Tatar yoke" denotes not just the period of Mongol rule but also other forms of despotism; days after Francis's comments, the Ukrainian political consultant Aleksandr Kharebin used the phrase to describe Putin's Russia.

But Pope Francis was far from alone in challenging the old tropes. "We have too readily accepted the stereotype of supremely violent Mongols who conquered much of Eurasia with stunning ease," Marie Favereau writes in "The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World" (Harvard). Her work joins other recent volumes—Kenneth W. Harl's "Empires of the Steppes: A History of the Nomadic Tribes Who Shaped Civilization" (Hanover Square), Anthony Sattin's "Nomads: The Wanderers Who Shaped Our World" (Norton), and Nicholas Morton's "The Mongol Storm: Making and Breaking Empires in the Medieval Near East" (Basic)—in a decades-long effort to overhaul narratives about the barbarity of the nomad, and especially Mongols. These works advance a kind of steppe restoration. Instead of blood-drunk man-beasts, we meet crafty administrators who supported debate, commerce, and religious freedom. Yes, they overran cities, but state formation often demanded it. And, yes, they enslaved, but so did lots of societies, and many were much crueller.

The steppe restoration typifies what historians call the global turn, a larger project of shifting histories away from nation-states and colonialist defamation and toward the peoples and processes that have knotted us

together. It's a survey of shadows, a tracing of negative space. It focusses on peoples who, in Sattin's words, "have long been confined to the anecdotes and afterthoughts of our writers and histories." These are some of the most maligned groups in historical chronicles: the uncivilized; the barbarians at the gate; the tribes who seem to appear from some demonic portal, destroy everything in sight, and then recede back into darkness. The steppe restoration repositions them. It treats them as subjects in their own right—as peoples who have their own histories, who formed societies no less complex than the sedentary states they confronted, and who helped craft the world we inhabit.

The Eurasian steppe is a vast curtain of grassland that stretches from Hungary to Manchuria. Its size is almost impossible to fathom: a vista of green and tan whose termini are farther from each other than Anchorage is from Miami or Cairo is from Johannesburg. Its historical significance derives from a curious quadruped that has lived there for roughly a hundred thousand years: the horse. Long-legged, with powerful lungs, elastic tendons, and a gut capable of digesting tough grass, the creature thrives on the open steppe. Horses were well equipped to weather the Ice Age, their hard hoofs able to break through snow and ice to expose grasses underneath.

"The horse has been the most efficient and enduring means of transport humans have ever used," Sattin, a British journalist, writes in "Nomads," "and the ability to ride a horse transformed life on earth, perhaps nowhere more so than on the steppe." Horses were bred in captivity on the western steppe at least five thousand years ago. The wheel was invented around the same time, and the two innovations, combined, allowed nomadic pastoralism to flourish.

The people of the Yamnaya culture were the first to take advantage of the new technologies and dominate much of the steppe. Starting north of the Black Sea about 3000 B.C., they used horses and wheeled carts to traverse

astounding distances; geneticists have found second cousins buried almost nine hundred miles away from each other. They and their descendants also spilled into Europe, India, the Near East, and western China, as Harl, a professor emeritus of history at Tulane, recounts at the beginning of "Empires of the Steppes." The Yamnaya tongue is one of the earliest offshoots of Proto-Indo-European, and an ancestor of such languages as Greek, German, English, Spanish, Old Celtic, Russian, Persian, Hindi, and Bengali. (Today, more than three billion people speak an Indo-European language.) Roughly seventy per cent of us have some Yamnaya ancestry in our DNA. More than the Greeks, the Romans, or the Chinese, it's the nomadic Yamnaya whose legacy survives in our words and our bodies.

In the millennia after the Yamnaya expansion, the makeup of the Eurasian steppe changed. By the seventh century B.C., a people known as the Scythians occupied the western end. The Scythians—whose mounted archers wielded composite bows and rode on saddles with leather toe-loop stirrups—controlled much of the steppelands between the Black and the Caspian Seas. They also helped bring down the Assyrian Empire and, according to Herodotus, twice defeated the King of Persia. Travel to the eastern steppes and jump forward a couple of centuries, to around 200 B.C., and you find the Xiongnu, who for a period collected payment from Han China in exchange for peace.

As with so many steppe nomads, much of what we know about the Scythians and the Xiongnu comes from what sedentary people wrote about them. (Sattin tells us that the name Xiongnu derives from a Chinese word meaning "illegitimate offspring of slaves.") Harl and Sattin combine these accounts with newer genetic and archeological evidence to construct a richer story. Both the Scythians and the Xiongnu, it turns out, were multiethnic confederations. The Xiongnu encompassed a range of tribes across a stretch of steppe about as wide as the continental United States. Under the leadership of a charismatic ruler named Modu Chanyu, they established a complex governing apparatus, complete with Chinese scribes, a bureaucratic

hierarchy, and, according to Harl, their own system of writing. “In constructing the first imperial order on the steppes, Modu Chanyu wrote the script for subsequent steppe conquerors from Attila the Hun to Genghis Khan,” Harl writes.

Among the nomads covered in “Empires of the Steppes,” Harl is most impressed by Genghis Khan and his Mongols. Attila the Hun helped bring down the Western Roman Empire, while campaigns by the later conqueror Tamerlane helped propel the rise of Mughal India, Muscovite Russia, and Shiite Safavid Iran. But the steppe-straddling superpower established by Genghis Khan was uniquely long-lived and expansive. It was through the Mongol Empire, Harl writes, that papermaking, block printing, and gunpowder moved from the East to the West, hastening the spread of knowledge and catalyzing Europe’s conquest of the seas. “The global economy of the modern age was thus born thanks to the Mongol legacy,” he declares.

The idea that the Mongols were the architects of modernity is a mainstay of the new scholarship. Sattin presents an argument similar to Harl’s, adding the compass to the list of innovations sent westward, although he acknowledges that other nomads, such as the Arabs, helped deliver them to Europeans. Both authors are able to draw upon such earlier work as the anthropologist Jack Weatherford’s “Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World” (2004), a charming, poetic, and laudatory introduction to the Mongols that, more than any other book, helped advance the steppe restoration.

All these chroniclers tell a similar story of the Mongols’ ascent. A modest, resourceful, and sometimes ruthless hunter-nomad named Temujin, having been abandoned by his clan as a nine-year-old, united the tribes of the eastern steppes for the first time in four centuries. In 1206, at a gathering of steppe leaders, he was bequeathed the title Chinggis Khan, which means

something like “fierce” or “oceanic” ruler. (The English “Genghis” comes from translations of Persian sources.) In the next two decades, he and his followers became the first to bring under one dominion the lands between the Caspian Sea and the Pacific Ocean, an area nearly as wide as the steppe itself.

After his death, in 1227, Genghis Khan’s domain continued to swell until it covered some twenty per cent of the world’s landmass, from Syria to Korea. In the east, his son Ogedei subdued northern China. When Kublai Khan, Genghis’ grandson, overtook the south, he unified the country and founded the Yuan dynasty. The events of the west, meanwhile, feature in Morton’s “The Mongol Storm” and Favereau’s “The Horde.”

Both books are remarkable scholarly achievements, and the range of sources their authors consult is a testament to Mongol cosmopolitanism. Morton, a historian at Nottingham Trent University, focusses on the realm between the Nile Delta and Anatolia, where Mongols schemed with and against caliphs, crusaders, and Turkish commanders. Favereau, a historian at Paris Nanterre University, tells the story of the Golden Horde, which started in the northwestern sector of the Mongol Empire and, following its breakup, became an autonomous polity that spanned much of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

For Morton, the Mongol invasions were a localized force majeure. Just as an asteroid killed off non-avian dinosaurs and inaugurated the age of mammals, the Mongols set off a firestorm in the eastern Mediterranean that consumed contenders such as the Crusader states, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Ayyubid Empire, creating openings for upstarts including the Mamluks of Egypt and the Ottomans of Asia Minor, both groups themselves descendants of steppe peoples.

Favereau prefers a grander framing, as is suggested by her subtitle, “How the Mongols Changed the World.” The locations and the peoples she lists as

examples of this world-changing, however, seem more Warsaw Pact than League of Nations. She returns most often to the Rus', the cultural ancestors of modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The Mongol campaign against the Rus' lasted four winters, from 1237 to 1241. No more than fifty thousand soldiers were sent to conquer a population in the millions. To do so, the Mongols exploited their opponents' weaknesses. The Rus' state had become fragmented, beset by quarrelling among its princes. By attacking in the cold months, the Mongols surprised the Rus', who didn't expect to go to war that time of year. The Mongols adapted Chinese siege technology to flatten earthen and wooden walls. By the campaign's end, the Mongols controlled some twenty Rus' cities. Many, including the old capital, Kyiv, had been sacked. Most capitulated within days.

A common story of Mongol rule, especially in Russian nationalist scholarship, is of punishing subjugation—of an alien people whose yoke strangled development. Favereau argues otherwise. "The Russian principalities experienced extraordinary economic vitality during their vassalage to the Horde," she writes, pointing to forty or more cities built in northeastern Russia in the fourteenth century. She acknowledges that the Mongols saw the Rus' as sources of revenue, but she contends that their strategy was more commercial than repressive. The Mongols connected the Rus', directly or indirectly, to markets in the regions of the Volga River and the Caspian, the Black, and the Baltic Seas, along with China, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. "Security and free passage for merchants and goods; privileged treatment for elites, clergy, traders, and artisans; carefully planned tax and land regimes; and mostly indirect governance were the stuff of prosperity, for Russian subjects and Mongols alike," she writes. Far from slowing Russia's growth, Mongol policies may have helped bankroll it.

The steppe restoration shows the strengths—and the limitations—of the resplendent new discipline of "global history." Often said to have begun around the start of the twenty-first century, this approach emerged amid the

excitement of a commerce-connected, borderless world. In 2005, Thomas Friedman published his treatise of globalization, "The World Is Flat." The next year, three academics started *The Journal of Global History*. Writing in the first issue, the British historian Patrick O'Brien declared that global history aimed to leave behind "the arrogance of Rome" as well as "the scientific and technological triumphalism of the West." Rather than building stories around the greatness of Europe (or of the Caliphate, or Confucianism), he advocated for a study of "connexions" and "comparisons" that would also spotlight "the manifold achievements of more peoples, communities, and cultures over long spans of human history."

The emerging discipline had to overcome centuries of historiographic hubris. Writing about other peoples has long been in service of self-glorification. Herodotus' "Histories," penned around 430 B.C., covered events on three continents yet culminated with displays of Greek superiority, celebrating the victories of free Greek city-states over the autocratic, barbarian Persians. Chinese dynastic histories like "History of the Han" (111 A.D.) and the "New Tang History" (1060 A.D.) endorsed a Sinocentric ideology. Foreign populations were considered civilized to the extent that they adopted Chinese norms. The ninth-century Arab scholar Ya'qubi started his history of the world with Iraq, "because it is the center of the world, the navel of the earth," and though he wrote of the great pre-Islamic powers—Persia, Byzantium, and more—it was in order to show how they contributed to the greatest polity of all: the Baghdad-based Abbasid Caliphate.

European imperialism shook everything up. As Western powers barged into people's political and psychological worlds, a plethora of ethnocentrisms gave way to Eurocentrism. Histories in Japan, China, India, Africa, and the Middle East were forced to contend with the West's achievements. The preoccupation was most extreme, naturally, in writings by Europeans. In "Lectures on the Philosophy of History" (1837), Hegel declared that "world history travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history,

and Asia the beginning." From 1893 to 1901, the French historians Ernest Lavisse and Alfred Rambaud edited a twelve-volume series, "Histoire Générale"; only ten per cent of its pages were devoted to the non-Western world.

More than a century later, the geographical scopes of world histories have expanded, yet the West's success remains the grand outcome worth explaining. Ambitious books like Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel" (1997), Niall Ferguson's "Civilization: The West and the Rest" (2011), and Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's "Why Nations Fail" (2012) all seriously consider non-Western societies, but with the goal of expounding, to quote the title of another popular book, by Ian Morris, "Why the West Rules—for Now."

Global history was supposed to transcend all such forms of parochialism, and this goal, at first, seems realized in the steppe restoration. The nomads, we are told, created cities, enforced peace, and guaranteed religious freedom. They encouraged trade and cultural interaction, recombining ideas, peoples, and technologies—with world-shaking consequences.

Yet a paradox runs through these books. Steppe peoples are most noteworthy, they seem to assure us, when they look like rich, settled societies. They have a role in "world history" insofar as they affect the rise and fall of sedentary, often European, polities. And so the steppe restoration ends up affirming the standards it set out to challenge.

Consider how historical significance is determined. Scholars routinely scoff at Hegel's comment that history ended in the West, and yet the steppe restoration shows just how ingrained the notion remains. Favereau and Harl spent years unearthing the stories of steppe peoples. Favereau nevertheless centers her analysis on Europe; Harl ends on it. Sattin, in his introduction, caps a list of the ways nomads created the "great empires" with their contribution to the European Renaissance. In the book's final chapter,

he ends a summary of the work by citing the Renaissance and the West's domination and commercialization of the world. Even global histories, it seems, find their epilogues in Europe.

And so it goes. Contrary to the claim that the Scythians and the Xiongnu "were primitive and isolated," Sattin writes, "we know from burials that their leaders dressed in Chinese silk robes trimmed with cheetah fur, sat on Persian carpets, used Roman glass and had a taste for Greek gold and silver jewellery." Harl similarly assures us that the nomads who conquered Hellenic cities "quickly appreciated" the high Greek culture they encountered. It's all well meant, but, like the historiography of yore, these passages reinforce a hierarchy of civilizations, in which the Greeks, the Romans, the Persians, and the Chinese stand at the apex. The way you cease to be barbaric is by trading with these people or embracing their culture, and not through carrying on your own traditions.

The new global history has eagerly set out to establish that steppe nomads displayed key features of classic civilizations and liberal democracies —writing, urbanization, and apparently progressive values. But as long as these advances are considered signs of sophistication, nomads will come up short. Harl says that the Xiongnu developed a new script, but, unlike the writing of their Han neighbors, no widely accepted remnant survives. Mongols built cities, yet those cities were famously disappointing by sedentary standards; the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck remarked that the empire's capital, Karakorum, was "not as large as the village of Saint Denis, and the monastery of Saint Denis is worth ten times more than that palace." And, yes, Genghis Khan permitted some degree of religious freedom, but Mongols who maintained their shamanistic faith naturally deemed all other creeds inferior to their own.

Global history's professed aim of decentering world history requires a more sophisticated grasp of what sophistication looks like. In the case of nomadic societies, we need to shift our orientation from the static to the flexible, from

social complexity embodied in brick and bureaucracies to something that dwells within networks: an ever-responsive capacity for large-scale collective action. What made nomads impressive, after all, is what made them unique. They lived in enormous, travelling societies. They subsumed diverse ethnic groups and could mobilize for war almost instantly. They overran the empires at their borders and ruled over them, sometimes for generations. Mongol organization reached its pinnacle in those hordes—self-sufficient, mobile units that contained as many as a hundred thousand people and that transported homes, statues, workshops, palaces, and supply lines. Through settled eyes, we might call these "moving cities," yet the phrase misses their almost aqueous nature, their ability to restructure around births, departures, and political scuffles.

Historians have worked to show that, in Sattin's words, "the nomad story is neither less wonderful nor less significant than ours." But we'll still be treating ourselves as the measure of everything unless we learn to revise our sense of significance. This may be the greatest gift a more global history offers us: greatness redefined. ♦

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