

Document 12.2

A Letter from Chingghis Khan

Historical Background: Document 12.2 comes from a remarkable letter that Chinggis Khan sent to an elderly Chinese Daoist master named Changchun in 1219, requesting a personal meeting with the teacher. Changchun in fact made the arduous journey to the camp of Chinggis Khan, then located in Afghanistan, where he stayed with the Mongol ruler for almost a year, before returning to China.

CHINGGIS KHAN
Letter to Changchun
1219

Heaven has abandoned China owing to its haughtiness and extravagant luxury. But I, living in the northern wilderness, have not inordinate passions. I hate luxury and exercise moderation. I have only one coat and one food. I eat the same food and am dressed in the same tatters as my humble herdsmen. I consider the people my children, and take an interest in talented men as if they were my brothers... At military exercises I am always in the front, and in time of battle am never behind. In the space of seven years I have succeeded in accomplishing a great work, and uniting the whole world into one empire. I have not myself distinguished qualities. But the government of the [Chinese] is inconstant, and therefore Heaven assists me to obtain the throne... All together have acknowledged my supremacy. It seems to me that since the remote time...such an empire has not been seen... Since the time I came to the throne I have always taken to heart the ruling of my people; but I could not find worthy men to occupy [high offices]... With respect to these circumstances I inquired, and heard that thou, master, hast penetrated the truth... For a long time thou has lived in the caverns of the rocks, and hast retired from the world; but to thee the people who have acquired sanctity repair, like clouds on the paths of the immortals, in innumerable multitudes... But what shall I do? We are separated by mountains and plains of great extent, and I cannot meet thee. I can only descend from the throne and stand by the side. I have fasted and washed. I have ordered my adjutant...to prepare an escort and a cart for thee. Do not be afraid of the thousand li.^o I implore thee to move thy sainted steps. Do not think of the extent of the sandy desert. Commiserate the people in the present situation of affairs, or have pity upon me, and communicate to me the means of preserving life. I shall serve thee myself. I hope that at least thou wilt leave me a trifle of thy wisdom. Say only one word to me and I shall be happy.

^oli: a great distance.

Source: E. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (London, 1875), 37–39.

Document 12.3

A Russian View of the Mongols

Historical Background: The initial impression of the Mongol impact in many places was one of utter devastation, destruction, and brutality. Document 12.3 offers a Russian commentary from that perspective drawn from the Chronicle of Novgorod, one of the major sources for the history of early Russia.

The Chronicle of Novgorod

1238

That same year [1238] foreigners called Tartars^o came in countless numbers, like locusts, into the land of Ryazan, and on first coming they halted at the river Nukhla, and took it, and halted in camp there. And thence they sent their emissaries to the Knyazes^o of Ryazan, a sorceress and two men with her, demanding from them one-tenth of everything: of men and Knyazes and horses—of everything one-tenth. And the Knyazes of Ryazan, Gyurgi, Ingvor's brother, Oleg, Roman Ingvovovich, and those of Murom and Pronsk, without letting them into their towns, went out to meet them to Voronazh. And the Knyazes said to them: "Only when none of us remain then all will be yours."...And the Knyazes of Ryazan sent to Yuri of Volodimir asking for help, or himself to come. But Yuri neither went himself nor listened to the request of the Knyazes of Ryazan, but he himself wished to make war separately. But it was too late to oppose the wrath of God... Thus also did God before these men take from us our strength and put into us perplexity and thunder and dread and trembling for our sins. And then the pagan foreigners surrounded Ryazan and fenced it in with a stockade... And the Tartars took the town on December 21, and they had advanced against it on the 16th of the same month. They likewise killed the Knyaz and Knyaginya, and men, women, and children, monks, nuns and priests, some by fire, some by the sword, and violated nuns, priests' wives, good women and girls in the presence of their mothers and sisters. But God saved the Bishop, for he had departed the same moment when the troops invested the town. And who, brethren, would not lament over this, among those of us left alive when they suffered this bitter and violent death? And we, indeed, having seen it, were terrified and wept with sighing day and night over our sins, while we sigh every day and night, taking thought for our possessions and for the hatred of brothers.

...The pagan and godless Tartars, then, having taken Ryazan, went to Volodimir... And when the lawless ones had already come near and set up battering rams, and took the town and fired it on Friday before Sexagesima Sunday, the Knyaz and Knyaginya and Vladyka, seeing that the town was on fire and that the people were already perishing, some by fire and others by the sword, took refuge in the Church of the Holy Mother of God and shut themselves in the Sacristy. The pagans breaking down the doors, piled up wood and set fire to the sacred church; and slew all, thus they perished, giving up their souls to God... And Rostov and Suzhdal went each its own way. And the accursed ones having come thence took Moscow, Pereyaslavi, Yurev, Dmitrov, Volok, and Tver; there also they killed the son of Yaroslav. And thence the lawless ones came and invested Torzhok on the festival of the first Sunday in Lent. They fenced it all round with a fence as they had taken other towns, and here the accursed ones fought with battering rams for two weeks. And the people in the town were exhausted and from Novgorod there was no help for them; but already every man began to be in perplexity and terror. And so the pagans took the town, and slew all from the male sex even to the female, all the priests and the monks, and all stripped and reviled gave up their souls to the Lord in a bitter and a wretched death, on March 5...Wednesday in Easter week.

^o**Tartars:** Mongols.

^o**Knyazes:** Princes.

Source: Robert Mitchell and Nevill Forbes, trans., *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016–1471* (New York: AMS Press, 1970; repr. from the edition of 1914, London), 81–83, 88.

Document 12.4

Chinese Perceptions of the Mongols

Historical Background: Chinese responses to Mongol rule varied considerably. To some, of course, the Mongols were simply foreign conquerors and therefore illegitimate as Chinese rulers. Marco Polo, who was in China at the time, reported that some Mongol officials or their Muslim intermediaries treated Chinese “just like slaves,” demanding bribes for services, ordering arbitrary executions, and seizing women at will—all of which generated outrage and hostility. Document 12.4 illustrates another side to Chinese perception of the Mongols. It comes from a short biography of a Mongol official named Menggu, which was written by a well-educated Chinese scholar on the occasion of Menggu’s death. Intended to be inscribed on stone and buried with the Mongol officer, it emphasizes the ways in which Menggu conformed to Chinese ways of governing. Such obituaries were an established form of Chinese historical writing, usually commissioned by the children of the deceased

Epitaph for the Honorable Menggu

1274

Emperor Taizu [Chinggis Khan] received the mandate of Heaven and subjugated all regions. When Emperor Taizong [Ogodei Khan] succeeded, he revitalized the bureaucratic system and made it more efficient and organized. At court, one minister supervised all the officials and helped the emperor rule. In the provinces, commanderies and counties received instructions from above and saw that they got carried out. Prefects and magistrates were as a rule appointed only after submitting [to the Mongols]. Still one Mongol, called the governor, was selected to supervise them. The prefects and magistrates all had to obey his orders...

In the fourth month of 1236, the court deemed Menggu capable of handling Zhangde, so promoted him...to be its governor... Because regulations were lax, the soldiers took advantage of their victory to plunder. Even in cities and marketplaces, some people kept their doors closed in the daytime. As soon as Menggu arrived, he took charge. Knowing the people’s grievances, he issued an order, “Those who oppress the people will be dealt with according to the law. Craftsmen, merchants, and shopkeepers, you must each go about your work with your doors open, peaceably attending to your business without fear. Farmers, you must be content with your lands and exert yourselves diligently according to the seasons. I will instruct or punish those who mistreat you.” After this order was issued, the violent became obedient and no one any longer dared violate the laws. Farmers in the fields and travelers on the roads felt safe, and people began to enjoy life.

In the second month of 1238, Wang Rong, prefect of Huaizhou, rebelled. The grand preceptor and prince ordered Menggu to put down this rebellion, telling him to slaughter everyone. Menggu responded, “When the royal army suppresses rebels, those who were coerced into joining them ought to be pardoned, not to mention those who are entirely innocent.” The prince approved his advice and followed it. When Wang Rong surrendered, he was executed but the region was spared. The residents, with jugs of wine and burning incense, saw Menggu off tearfully, unable to bear his leaving. Forty years later when he was put in charge of Henei, the common people were delighted with the news, saying, “We will all survive—our parents and relatives through marriage all served him before.”

In 1239 locusts destroyed all the vegetation in Xiang and Wei, so the people were short of food. Menggu reported this to the great minister Quduqu, who issued five thousand piculs of army rations to save the starving. As a consequence no one had to flee or starve...

At that time [1247] the harvest failed for several years in a row, yet taxes and labor services were still exacted. Consequently, three or four of every ten houses was vacant. Menggu ordered the officials to travel around announcing that those who returned to their property would be exempt from taxes and services for three years. That year seventeen thousand households returned in response to his summons...

When there was a drought in 1263, Menggu prayed for rain and it rained. That year he was given the title Brilliant and August General and made governor of Zhongshan prefecture. In 1270 he was transferred and became governor of Hezhong prefecture. In the spring of 1274 he was allowed to wear the golden tiger tablet in recognition of his long and excellent service, his incorruptibility, and the repute in which he was held where he had served...

The house where Menggu lived when he governed Zhangde nearly forty years ago, and the fields from which he obtained food then, were just adequate to keep out the wind and rain and supply enough to eat. When he died there were no estates or leftover wealth to leave his sons or grandsons. Therefore they had to model themselves on him and concentrate on governing in a way that would bring peace and safety, show love for the people, and benefit all. They have no need to be ashamed even if compared to the model officials of the Han and Tang dynasties.

Source: Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed. and trans., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 192–94