

## Review

The new book by Dr. George Lane on the Mongol Empire belongs to The Greenwood Press Daily Life through History Series. This work does not pretend to be highly academic and provides a good introduction to different aspect of cultural history, practices and beliefs of medieval Mongol culture.

The first thing that readers will come across in the book is an Epigraph containing an account by Ibn al-Athir on the first Mongol Invasion of the Middle East. The diabolic portrait of the Mongols done by the Arab historian permits a contrast between the idea of the Muslim world about these nomads and the rich culture of the steppes that doctor Lane describes in the rest of the book.

Since the book is dedicated to a public not necessary initiated in Mongolian Studies, the first Chapter gives a brief account of the Historical development of the Mongol Empire from the early life of Chinggis Khan (spelled “Genghis” in the book) up to its division into khanates in Iran, China, Russia and Central Asia. While stressing the most important facts in the political history of the Mongol rule over Asia, the author also suggest that the analysis of the daily life in the Mongol Empire can not be something homogeneous, since the process of acculturation between conquerors and conquered was diverse between the Mongol rule in Iran and China from that of, for example, the Golden Horde.

The second chapter is dedicated to the life in the steppes as a distinctive element in the development of Mongol daily life. The author has to face here the problem of condensing too many institutions and geopolitical concepts into one chapter. Beside this problem, he manages to give an account of the most relevant institutions of pre-imperial Mongol society. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> chapters, the book deals with the “appearance” and “dwellings” respectively of traditional Mongol society. The former offers a selection of the perception had by Christians and Muslims on the Mongols when these advanced unstoppable towards the west in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The last of these chapters underlines the transformation in building skills undertaken by the Mongols from their traditional tend (*Ger*) up to the construction of the Yüan Observatory in Beijing. This is another proof of the cultural and material diversity in the Mongol Empire, since, while in Central Asia and

Russia the Mongols continued living in tents, in China or Iran, they patronised native architects in the construction of temples, observatories and public buildings.

The following chapter focus on the Mongol army. It briefly explain the characteristics of the Mongol military machine that conquered Eurasia, China and the Middle East in 13<sup>th</sup> century. Since scholars have produced a vast amount of literature on this field, Dr. Lane points out different key points on the structure of the army such as the reform introduced by Chinggis Khan, the size of the Mongol hordes, and the psychological tactics used by the Mongols in war.

The next three chapters deal with health issues related with the Mongol Empire. The author underlines the concern showed by the Mongols on Medicine science and health care. Chapter 6 takes medicine as an example of the cultural brokers' role played by the Mongols in transmitting ideas and knowledge across Asia. So various were the products that arrived to the Khans' tables that, as conquest developed, the alimentary costumes of the nomads were gaining in sophistication and diversity, since food and drinks arrived from every corner of the Empire. However, as noted in chapter 7, this traditional habit of drinking may have contributed to the decadence of Mongol rule in Iran. The authors suggest that this attitude towards alcoholic beverages may have been the reason for premature death and decline in fertility that affected the Mongol dynasty of Iran.

Religion, Law and Politics are the topics described in chapters 9 and 10. On religion, a description about the shamanistic practices and creed of the Mongols is given together with the different attitudes of the Mongols towards Islam and Christianity. In this chapter, the mention of the *Qalandars* Sufi sect deserves especial attention, since the author links the appearance of this group in the Middle East to the new religious milieu introduced by the Mongols in the region. On the other hand, the controversy on the existence of a written code of Mongol law (*Yasa*) and the influence of the Mongol rule in Chinese and Iranian jurisprudence is mentioned as the most significant issues of Mongol law.

Especially attention deserves chapter 11, since it focus on a topic very much neglected by scholars of the Mongol Empire. Besides being recognized by historians that women among the Mongols were influential, little research has been done on the field up to date. Dr. Lane structured the chapter as a compendium of biographies of Mongol Khātuns (ladies) that develops chronologically from Chinggis Khan's mother up to Baghdad

Khātun (d. 1336) of Iran. The portraits of these women are supported constantly on original sources, confronting the idea of “silence in the sources” about the role of women in the Empire. This fact, may contribute to encourage future researchers and students to develop further research on the unexplored field of gender relation in Mongol Empire and a possible re-interpretation of the sources from the perspective of gender studies.

The last chapter of the book is a brief compendium of traditional Mongol Folktales with the aim of underline the importance that oral tradition had and still has among the Mongols.

Finally, the book could be described as a course manual due to its introductory and explanatory character. However, it is different to other general books for two reasons. Firstly, it covers topics related with the daily life and cultural history of the Mongols and intentionally avoids spending time on describing factual history (for which there are other books available). Secondly, it is a book thought with didactic purposes and to approach students to the History of the Mongol Empire. To do so, the book has a good variety of pictures in every chapter and constantly illustrates every concept by quoting original sources. This is a good way of showing to the general public and non-introduced students what the base of historical discipline is. The inclusion of accurate maps, a glossary and a list of original sources available in translation are also valuable resources of this book.