

Pox Mongolica
The Impact of Imperial Peace and Plague
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Even during periods of relative peace and prosperity, an ever adaptive and microscopic enemy has waged a deadly war against man. From the thirteenth to the early fifteenth century, the Mongols influenced, either directly or indirectly, one of the largest empires the world has ever seen. It included the valuable Silk Road where traders could bring exotic goods from the Far East to markets in the Arab world, Africa, and Europe. The increased security of the Silk Road due to the stability of the Mongol Empire allowed for more than the trade of goods and ideas; disease also moved along its routes. The Mongols rapidly swept through Asia and Eastern Europe conquering all in their path, regardless of religion, culture, or race. Among the diseases that initiated in the steppes of Central Asia, the Black Death of 1313 – 1353 spread through the trade routes killing millions in its wake. The four decades of that iteration of the plague altered art, religion, and trade at a global scale in no small part due to the speed by which distant lands were connected via the Pax Mongolica and Silk Road. The Black Death caused by the bubonic plague devastated the eastern hemisphere. Mongolian imperial peace and the stability it provided to the ancient Silk Road served as a conduit for cultures to trade and transmit knowledge, goods, wealth and infectious disease.

Spanning more than three millennia and four thousand miles, the trade routes connecting the farthest reaches of East Asia to Europe and East Africa became collectively known as the Silk Road. The origins of the Silk Road are tied to the people of Central Asia and the Indo-European migrations stretching back four millennia.¹ Those who migrated along the routes would learn to utilize them

and act as middlemen for the markets that resided in either geographical direction from them. The European markets craved spices and silks among the myriad of exotic goods traveling westward into the Italian peninsula while gold and salt traveled back to the east. Control of trade routes has long meant control of wealth, thus the regions in which the Silk Road traveled suffered from political instability and conflict. With the spread of Islam in the seventh century, the western regions of these trade routes became more politically stable which in turn created wealth for the peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East. As the Arabs swept their way east towards India and west across the whole of North Africa and into Spain, they maintained existing trade routes and agricultural systems as they sought revenue through taxation and trade.² Historian David Levering Lewis argues in his work, *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570-1215*, that ancient conflicts which began as Persian against Greek evolved into what Western Europeans call a *Crusade* to recapture holy lands and routes of pilgrimage beginning in the eleventh century. It is no coincidence that these pilgrim roads connected to more than spiritual wealth but to the very material Silk Road as well. While the western end of the Silk Road was often in turmoil and conflict, the eastern region remained relatively stable. Ideas and goods were the chief exports of the Far East until the rise of the Mongols.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan, c. 1167-1227, born Temujin, unified the clans of the Mongols under his leadership. "With power and mandate bestowed upon him by Heaven, as he and his sons believed, he set out to subjugate the unsubmitted peoples of the four directions."³ Sweeping down from the steppes, the once isolated population of the Mongols mixed with the cultures around them and along the trade routes to the west. The Mongol conquest of China allowed them to control the

source of the wealth in the Far East and the precious commodities that those on the other end of the Silk Road trekked so far to obtain. By 1279, the Mongols' influence spanned from the eastern shores of China to the border of Hungary in Eastern Europe. The entire length of the great trade route was securely under their control. The days of regional powers jockeying for control over stretches of road temporarily vanished as the efficient Mongols provided stability and speed to trade.

As the Mongol conquests grew, they established a strong communication network in order to manage and control their new-found sphere of influence. The strength of the Mongols lay firmly in their skill as horsemen. Caravans, postal riders, and soldiers sped along the ancient trade routes, which by this time created a territorially vast human web that linked the Mongol headquarters at Karakorum with Kazan and Astrakhan on the Volga, with Caffa in the Crimea, and Khanbaliq in China and with innumerable other caravanserais in between.⁴ While the benefits of imperial peace were numerous, often lost in the shimmering glow of glory were the negative attributes that arose with stability and progress. Due to the speed with which the riders could traverse elements from remote areas goods found their way to the thriving urban markets and cities in very short periods of time. Material goods and food did not travel alone. Rats and parasites were found in the caravans and infested new locales in the process. The speed with which the Mongols were able to travel the trade routes along with the volume of traders that were able to peaceably navigate the Silk Road allowed new diseases to introduce themselves to new hosts in a short period of time. The most deadly of these diseases was the Bubonic Plague, which may have had its origins in the steppes of Central Asia.⁵ Communities exposed to new diseases required adequate time to develop immunities. The Mongols hold over their

empire was not much different from any other great empire. By an occasional show of force, the Mongols quelled rebellions and threats to imperial peace. In addition, savage acts of retribution kept challenges to peace at a minimum. By the early decades of the fourteenth century, the Silk Road was the ideal conduit for the transmittal of potential pandemics. The stability in the region satisfied the requirement that accelerated the change in the nature of controlling the source of a deadly disease and allowing it to flourish within its own environment.

The creation of urban areas gave witness to the rise of communal diseases. Over time man developed methods of public safety to combat the threat of introducing new disease into unaffected communities. The Mongols, a rural people, may have disregarded customs and traditions that had arisen to combat the introduction and spread of viruses as they conquered new areas and unwittingly infected themselves.⁶ Man suffered from the threat of the Bubonic Plague as early as the time of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, 483 – 565. In 1313, another wave of plague appeared on the steppes of Central Asia and in 1331 it reached the Mongolian courts of China. Large buboes, or enlarged glands, appeared in the groin, under the arms, or even on the neck of those suffering from *Pasteurella pestis*, while the microorganisms rapidly multiplied within the victim's bloodstream and in almost every instance brought high temperature and death from septicemia, or blood poisoning.⁷ Those fortunate enough to survive still suffered greatly from the symptoms and never regained full strength. Burrowing rodents, fleas, rats, and humans made fine carriers for the microorganisms. When the infected party travelled from rural to urban centers by way of caravan routes and entered multiple markets the plague was then unleashed to susceptible hosts making its mark on the fourteenth century.

Mongols exposure with more advanced cultures of Eastern Asia did not introduce the fourteenth century version of the plague as evidenced by the length of time between conquest and the spread of the plague. Furthermore, the stability and speed of transportation allowed plague carriers to move rapidly from east to west. The high mortality rate of those with the disease allowed the plague to run its course in isolation with little movement across great expanses. The Silk Road's stability during the reign of the Mongols coupled with their military tactics aided the spread of plague to Western Asia. It eventually became necessary for the Mongols to lay siege to the Genoese controlled Crimean city of Caffa in 1346. While the Mongols besieged Caffa, the plague spread throughout their camp. As a form of biological warfare, the Mongols hurled the plague-ridden corpses into the city in an attempt to weaken Caffa. Significantly, Caffa connected the Silk Road to Europe by sail, fueling speculation that Caffa served as one vector for the plague's introduction to Europe. Historian R.S. Bray argues that the plague may have been introduced via the Tigris River on the spice and silk routes and then up through the Crimea and Levant regions. As a result of biological warfare, survivors of Caffa would have certainly been hosts to and carriers for the disease, enabling its movement outside the city and fueling its spread across the Mediterranean into Europe.⁸ The impact the Black Death would have on Europe would alter the course of history.

The plague killed tens of millions in a very short time period, turning entire villages into graveyards and leaving crops in the field to waste as there was no one to harvest them. Even after the initial wave of contagion had passed, successive outbreaks periodically surfaced. In the first outbreak in Cairo, for example, one-third of the population died and a century later, the population was little more than half of what it was prior to the plague.⁹ It was much more than

just the deaths of citizens, but the implications of this disease were the deficits it created in the affected population's labor force, military size, and the educational opportunities of the lands it ravaged. The feudal economic situation of Europe in the fourteenth century was already a source of contention between the rich landowners and the peasants working the land. Peasants in Europe struggling with hunger became even more susceptible to disease. A new economic and political system rose in a post-plague Europe. Coff mentions, "The lessening of the feudal income and the upheavals owing to the growing proportion of money in peasant dues called the basis of the power of the great into question."¹⁰ Coff's statement indicates that the world was literally transformed because of this toxic disease and traditional roles in society were subjected to change.

While the Black Death caused massive loss of life, an odd side effect of the plague was that there were fewer mouths to feed during a European food shortage. The unrest caused in part by over population in Europe, food shortages, and economic inequalities between the classes changed in the aftermath of the Black Death. The plague served as a great equalizer of man; all were susceptible whether rich or poor, noble or peasant, clergy or layman. Historian Norman Cantor described the dead and dying laying in the streets, abandoned by frightened friends and relatives as a society in flux.¹¹ Revenues of the rich lessened as nature took back cultivated lands. The labor shortage advanced the end of serfdom in Western Europe and created an increase in wealthy peasants. However, it would take many more centuries before the common man gained a voice in government and the rule of the land. The changes brought on by the plague accelerated the process of cultural advancement in Europe.

Cultures require healthy citizens to maintain stability. A stable workforce, soldiers for defense, leaders and merchants all add to the

wealth of a nation. However, a sudden and significant drop in skilled participants from both the active population and the upcoming population hinder a culture's ability to feed, defend, and manage itself. In North Africa, the Black Death destroyed what had been centuries of economic prosperity. The Egyptians provided the defense of Africa against the Mongolian advance and thrived on the edge of the Mongolian Empire. Resilient agriculture and control of trade between Asia and Europe enabled Egypt to combat the Black Death better than the rest of North Africa and the Middle East. However, economic decay in Egypt was nevertheless grave and it coincided with a rebirth and advance of post-plague Europe.¹² Post-plague Africa would later be colonized and rebuilt by a stronger European presence.

While stability reigned under Mongol control, unity of leadership had long been divided. Much like the division of the Roman Empire into two political entities, the Mongols had divided the lands under their control. The Black Death era did not exist in a vacuum, for the fourteenth century witnessed a large number of natural disasters in addition to the plague epidemic. In the wake of these disasters, the Mongol rulers began to lose control over their conquests and the stability of the Silk Road was no more. The Mongols lost China and Persia to rebellions in the decades following the Black Death. The Central and Western steppes remained under the control of the Mongol Golden Horde for two additional centuries, but the treasure chest of the Orient and the profitable pipeline of the Silk Road slipped from their control. Subsequent leaders in Central Asia began ruling under their own name while setting up puppet Khans to maintain the legitimacy and connection with the former glory of the Mongols.¹³ The Mongols suffered the inevitable slow decline that all previous empires experienced and natural factors or elements especially that of the Black Death accelerated the demise

of their empire and freed China, Eastern Europe and the Middle East from their influence.

The landscape of the world had changed for all time. The stability of the Silk Road during the reign of the Mongols allowed for considerable ease of trade and cultural exchange. As demonstrated, one of the by-products of that trade was the exchange of diseases. After the plague and the passage of time, much of Asia and the Middle East returned to their pre-Mongol statuses. Africa struggled greatly to cope with the loss of manpower and slipped into decline. However, Europeans managed to rebound from the enormous loss of life within the course of five or six generations. The plague reoccurred on a smaller scale during the centuries following the introductory exposure of Black Death, but by this time, Europe had begun to adjust. “Europe, in short, entered upon a new era of its history, embracing as much diversity as ever, since reactions and readjustments followed differing paths in different regions of the continent, but everywhere nonetheless different from the patterns that had prevailed before 1346.”¹⁴ European society changed in many ways in the years following the Black Death, and the Silk Road played a distinct role in that change.

With the Silk Road in context, much more than material goods and devastating disease linked Europe, Africa and the Asiatic worlds; ideas were transported through cultures and societies from great thinkers and scientists as they made their way to destinations of their choice along the Silk Road. The exchange of knowledge had been prevalent along the trade routes for millennia, but the tenacity of the Mongol military forces seeded encouragement for many Europeans to travel east in search of fortune. Due to the exchange of ideas across the route, the Arab world long enjoyed the classical knowledge of Greek and Roman philosophers misplaced by Europeans. In the wake of the Black Death, this knowledge, which had

been lost to Christendom for so many centuries, would not only be rediscovered but embraced by the philosophers and artists of Europe. The modern world remained centuries away and rebuilding Europe included great advancements in thought, technology, and trade. Quarantine laws helped Europe prepare for future outbreaks, while an increased awareness and study of medicine aided the advancement of science and anatomy. The instability of the Silk Road in post-Mongol Asia encouraged Europeans to explore alternate routes to trade markets that housed those spices, silks, and wares that were in such high demand in European cities. Sea routes were sought after and the “Age of Discovery” would follow, as a result, providing a means to navigate to the East as well as a providing a link to the side of the world previously unknown to the bulk of Europe. Europe was poised for greatness.

Survivors of the Black Death in Europe laid the foundations for an age that became known as the Renaissance. Italian poets Francesco Petrararch, 1304- 1374, and Giovanni Boccaccio, 1313- 1375, both witnessed the powerful effect of the Black Death on Europe. While the Church remained at the center of the European universe, a growing sense of humanism coupled the rebirth of the classical knowledge. Boccaccio’s *Decameron* tells the story of a youthful group who have gone to the hills outside Florence in hopes to escape the plague. The city-states of Italy were forced to address public health and safety after exposure to the plague. Only Milan escaped the ravages of the Black Death with minimal loss of life. The works of writers such as Petrarch and Boccaccio as well as other artists in Italy would inspire Europe to recapture lost knowledge and expand upon it both in science and art. Boccaccio spoke of an increase in the notion of seeking personal pleasure in the dark days of the plague; that the people “are prompted by their appetites, they will do whatever affords them the greatest pleasure, whether by day or

night, alone or in company.”¹⁵ A societal shift was underway and a more secular man would arise from it.

Another shift in Europe following the Black Death was spiritual. As many as a third of the clergy in Europe succumbed to the plague. Parishioners feared attending Mass, which allowed for a more personal faith to evolve. The clergy who replaced their fallen brethren lacked the experience and knowledge of their predecessors. A rise in mysticism accompanied the plague. Man sought communication from God and assurance that he and his family would be spared. While anticlericalism was not new, after 1346 it became overt and widespread in Europe and provided an element that would contribute to the eventual Protestant Reformation.¹⁶ The Black Death contributed greatly in charting the course for the new Europe.

The plague ravaged Asia with fierce vengeance. Upwards of half the population China perished during the years of Mongol occupation, and despite their savagery and the view of Chinese historians, plague killed the majority of the dead. Villages in Central Asia emptied and the vast caravans that roamed the Silk Road began to vanish. The Mongols’ military might declined in the years after 1346. The heavy losses to plague death hindered the Mongols ability to replenish troops in the outlying areas of their realm. Nomadic overlords were able to reclaim or absorb those areas that the Mongols could no longer support.¹⁷ The need to maintain an agricultural existence in order to survive on the steppes hindered industrial and technological advancements. The old guard had died and a new era, a European era, stood on the precipice of greatness.

The stability of the ancient trade routes known as the Silk Road provided by the military might of the Mongol Empire provided a conduit for goods, wealth, ideas, and death. When the Bubonic Plague-carrying creatures of the Central Asian steppes infected and infested the rural travelers, they in turn became the vector that car-

ried the deadly disease to the urban areas. With that the Black Death of 1313-1353 became a horrific reality. Tens of millions died due to the disease that plagued half of the planet. From the destruction of life sprang many different outcomes for those who survived. As a result, the Mongols lost their imperial influence and military might. China regained its autonomy and recovered its wealth and prowess. Much of Asia returned to a series of independent and warring states. Africa slipped into a downward spiral that resulted in the colonization and control by European nations over African societies. Europe survived and learned from the Black Death. A new era of European culture, polity, and discovery began as Europeans became the most active and dominant force on Earth. While man fancies himself at the top of the food chain, there remains the threat of another plague where a microscopic organism can bring down the mightiest of empires and create another history changing wave of death.

Notes

¹ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 28.

² Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 102.

³ Beckwith, 185.

⁴ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and People* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998), 163.

⁵ Ibid. 163.

⁶ Ibid, 172.

⁷ Frederick F. Cartwright, *Disease and History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1991), 30.

⁸ R.S. Bray, *Armies of Pestilence: The Impact of Disease on History* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2000), 56.

⁹ Hourani, 213.

¹⁰ Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization: 400-1500* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2000), 108.

¹¹ Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 482.

¹² John Iliffe, *Africa: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 48.

¹³ Beckwith, 196-197.

¹⁴ Beckwith, 180.

¹⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* trans. G.H. McWilliam (Franklin Center, PA: Franklin Library, 1981), 18-19.

¹⁶ McNeill, 195.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 200.

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