

**Books Reviewed:** Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2004; Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001; Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*. London: HarperCollins, 2004.

What these books have in common is their attempt to recast our perceptions of the Mongols' impact upon the Islamic world. Given the lore of gore thrown up by the intervening centuries, the authors clearly had their work cut out for them. Over the course of those centuries, hardly a schoolchild or even an illiterate villager anywhere in the Islamic world, and certainly in Muslim Central Asia, was not taught to dread and despise the very mention of the Mongols – and especially their two most infamous and notorious leaders, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. To a great degree, the same holds true for children in other parts of the world, especially in Europe, where the works of Chaucer, Marlowe, and others contributed greatly to the vilification of these two Mongols.

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After reading the three books under review, there is no option for the careful reader but to reassess his/her own understanding of the Mongol centuries (the thirteenth and fourteenth CE) and, indeed, of how history may rightly or wrongly be represented and perceived. Much of the information presented in these books is truly eye-opening. There is probably just as much that is ultimately material for continued scholarly consideration and interpretation. However, it is at the human level that any such reading must begin.

If history is really a matter of perspective, let me begin by quoting from Justin Marozzi's work:

Such cultural benefits to Persia of Mongol rule were all very well. But, as David Morgan concluded in a recent study of medieval Persia: "We may justly have our doubts over how impressed the Persian peasants, as they did their best to avoid the Mongol tax-collectors, would have been by developments in miniature painting. For Persia, the Mongol period was a disaster on a grand and unparalleled scale."

It is difficult to disagree.

Thus, while Jack Weatherford points out that the scale of the carnage attributed to Genghis Khan is in no way consistent with the reality of what occurred, especially in view of the forensic evidence, there can be no doubt that the Mongols, from Genghis Khan to Amir Timur, wreaked a degree of havoc upon the civilized (Muslim) world that is unprecedented in the annals of history. And while it is certainly gratifying to read Allsen's account of the benefits derived from the cross-cultural exchange facilitated by the Mongols between eastern and western Asia, it is also quite clear that the lives of ordinary people in those times counted for very little. Indeed, hell on earth would probably be an apt description of what millions of souls were subjected to during those bloody centuries of conquest, rebellion, and reconquest.

But, then, these are things that we knew about. What is it about these three books that brings us to a new understanding? Let's start with Weatherford's *Genghis Khan*. For eight hundred years, the secret burial ground of the Great Khan was protected by his family and tribe, right until the time of the great totalitarian communist regimes of the last century. One would assume that those regimes, given their animosity to anything as seditious as religion or culture, would have done their best to uproot any and every thing even remotely associated with a cult of nationalistic ancestor worship. Instead, the Soviets completely sealed off the area, designating it a "Highly Restricted Area," thereby effectively preserving everything within its confines. Thus, when the USSR collapsed, the Mongols discovered that their heritage had

survived. More incredibly, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, known for centuries only as a rumor, a fabled text, was found and deciphered.

In the 1990s, Weatherford was part of a team of western and Mongol archaeologists and anthropologists who conducted serious on-site studies of the *Secret History's* meanings and mysteries. By means of these studies, much has been gathered about the carefully guarded record of Genghis Khan and his life. There is much here that will enthrall readers with its novelty. But the most important part of Weatherford's work is his examination of what he terms the "global awakening" occasioned by the Mongol conquests, an awakening that is on a scale with the Renaissance in Europe in terms of its significance for world politics and economics. The book's accounts of the capital city of Karakorum and how it was populated with scholars and scribes from all over the world came as a personal revelation, as did the fact that nearly one-third of the Mongols in Genghis Khan's homeland were Muslim and that the armies that rode with him were composed of an equal percentage of Muslim soldiers.

The work of Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, is equally as captivating in terms of its scholarship. In it, one finds a great deal about the Mongol style of administration, Mongol religion and culture, and how these factors contributed to cultural and other exchanges between the peoples living at the far-flung corners of the new empire. To quote from Allsen's introduction: "In this monograph I will speak primarily to the question of the nature and conditions of the transmission of cultural wares between China and Iran."

Perhaps most significantly, Allsen does so by looking more "deeply at the nomads' political culture and social norms which functioned as initial filters in the complex process of sorting and selecting the goods and ideas that passed between East and West." Thus, his first chapters are quite informative and insightful. I found one of the themes of particular interest: that of specialization, apparently a clearly established formula for success in the Mongol world, which openly acknowledged its need for assistance from the sedentary world in matters related to the customs and laws of cities. Allsen's later chapters on developments in agriculture, printing, cuisine, astronomy, medicine, and historiography are likewise well-researched and revealing.

The third book, Justin Marozzi's *Tamerlane*, takes the reader a century or two past the initial Mongol conquests to a repopulated and reconfigured world of Islam that witnessed the consequences of decades of infighting between the scattered factions of Mongols descended from Genghis Khan. Marozzi sees the swath of destruction cut by the conqueror and describes it

in all of its horror. At the same time, however, he is careful to distinguish Tamerlane (also known as Timur the Lame) from his notorious Mongol predecessor. Both men wreaked havoc across half the known world, putting millions to the sword and razing those cities standing in their path. But only Tamerlane saw fit to rebuild, for he was as much a creator as he was a destroyer. This marked him out as a different breed of conqueror altogether. Much of his life was spent honoring the ancient traditions established by his Mongol predecessor; but by the time he died, Tamerlane was his own emperor and in thrall to no other man.

Marozzi's observations as a traveler to the lands of which he writes come as an added attraction and provide a further layer of significance to Tamerlane's accomplishments. For indeed, his accomplishments were many – and many of them were truly grand. For instance, the fact that he attracted such scholars as al-Jazari, al-Taftazani, al-Jurjani, al-Razi, and even Ibn Khaldun to his court is remarkable. One can understand, surely, why poets would have flocked to his court. But the Sufis and the scholars who sought him out were of another caliber entirely.

Finally, each of these books possesses merits of one sort or another. More importantly, however, when taken collectively they open a window on an age that was just as terrible for many of those innocents who lived and died in it as it is fascinating for those of us fortunate enough to be able to look at it through the eyes of modern scholarship. The Golden Age of Islam was brought to a close by the Mongols, or so goes the popular conception. But after reading these works, one is tempted to reconsider much of that. Without the Mongols, one must ask, where would Islam be today?