The ‘owl of misfortune’ or the ‘phoenix of prosperity’? Re-thinking the impact of the Mongols

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ABSTRACT

The impact of Mongol conquests across Eurasia is still controversial: did they destroy everything in their path or rather create a “Mongol peace” under which the Silk Road exchanges flourished? Too often medieval authors are cited merely for their negative reaction to the Mongols. Yet both the written sources and evidence from archeology show a picture of some complexity that requires critical analysis. The emphasis here is on archeology, often ignored or slighted by historians of the Mongols, and on evidence from Central Asia and Eastern Europe, primarily as reported in Russian-language scholarship. The impact of the Mongols varied depending on the location and the priorities of the new conquerors.

Map of Central Asia and Eastern Europe showing locations (approximate for the cities) of some key places mentioned in the text. Base map: Google Earth.

The metaphors in my title are those of the 13th-century Persian historian Ata-Malik Juvaini who worked for the Mongols, expressed genuine admiration for Chinggis Khan, but also lamented the destruction wrought on his...
homeland of Khorasan in northeastern Iran. Juvalin’s account, which in many ways can be appreciated as one of the most honest contemporary responses to the establishment of the Mongol Empire, encapsulates many of the apparent contradictions we face in attempting even today to assess the impact of the Mongols. Despite a great deal of scholarship which has called for a balanced assessment of that impact, it is still all too common to portray the Mongols in negative terms, in particular, I argue, because of the compression of immediate impacts of invasion and war with subsequent developments. One popularizing website indicates that Chinggis Khan is tied with Mao Zedong with 40 million victims in second place on the list of the greatest human-caused disasters inflicted on humanity in history (World War II earns first place on that list). While we should not dismiss such numbers as total nonsense, in the case of the Mongols, we need to realize that to a considerable degree they are estimates arrived at by an uncritical reading of written sources which tend to be biased or incomplete. Underlying such sources is the more general problem that their authors tend to be formally educated members of sedentary societies who lacked any understanding of nomads. Few of the most damning sources are contemporary with the events they describe and thus present a retrospective imagining of what happened.

If we are to attempt to assess the impact of the creation of the Mongol Empire, we need, first of all, to critique carefully the written sources (and in the process may discover important evidence not previously cited), and find ways to test them against other evidence. In particular here, we need to look closely at the evidence from archeology, which too often has been neglected or misunderstood by historians. In some cases, it confirms what the written sources tell us, in others it contradicts them, and in general it suggests we need a much more nuanced approach to determining the consequences of Mongol conquest and rule. We are talking here of complexity, where no simplistic calculus of good vs. evil is going to provide an objective framework for answering the question.

My focus will be on archeological evidence from Central and Western Asia, primarily that published in Russian-language scholarship which too frequently is inaccessible to scholars interested in the history of the Silk Roads. To a considerable degree, this then means looking at evidence from urban sites, both those we might label as cities, or others which may have been but small villages around them. Just as the written sources require critical scrutiny, so also does the archeological evidence. We always must ask how selective excavation has been (leaving open the possibility that new excavation may in fact force us to reconsider earlier conclusions based on limited evidence), and we must consider carefully the degree to which it is possible to establish an accurate chronology. Excavations may reveal evidence of destruction or its opposite, flourishing, but then can we always know who was responsible and when? We need to avoid generalizing from the immediate events of military invasion – any wars involve destruction, after all. What is the picture which emerges from a longer perspective?

1. Central Asia

Archeology in what is now Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan over a period of several decades has produced impressive results. We can distinguish two areas that are of particular interest for determining the impact of the Mongols: firstly parts of southeastern Kazakhstan and adjoining areas in what is now northern Kyrgyzstan including the Talas River Valley and Semirech’e (Turkic: Zhetyku) – that is, the “Seven Rivers” region northeast of Almaty and south and east of Lake Balkhash (see map); and secondly the middle reaches of the Syr Darya river in southern Kazakhstan. The fate of urban or semi-urban sites with the coming of the Mongols seems to have been different in the two regions. Archeology in the first of them has been producing striking evidence that forces us to reassess what we thought we knew about the very nature of what we traditionally have called “nomadism.” That is, even back in the Bronze Age, there is now substantial evidence to demonstrate that pastoralists in this region were not simply wandering herders. In fact, settlement (if seasonal) or at least regular interaction with settlements was a normal part of their lives. In the centuries just prior to the coming of the Mongols, there is substantial evidence now to show that the size and importance of settlements in the region was growing, possibly because this region was one of the main thoroughfares in the east-west trade route we term the Silk Road.

The initial incursion of the Mongol armies into the Ili River Valley, Semirech’e and the Talas Valley seems to have involved little disruption of this pattern of growing “urbanization”: the pursuit in 1218 of the Naiman usurper who had taken over the Qara-Khitai realm in the region “did not severely harm Semirech’e and the Tarim Basin” (Biran, 2009, 47). That said, it is difficult to find detailed information about the first decades of Mongol rule in the region and its impact on towns. The important Khitan administrator for the Mongols, Yelü Chucai, passed through on his way west in 1218 (Bretscher, 1967, esp. 17–19). In particular he noted the importance of Almalyq in the Ili Valley, surrounded by flourishing orchards and with various other towns under its administration. Without elaborating, he mentioned in passing dozens of other towns along the route farther west, one of them Taraz. We obtain similar infor-
mation from another of the few significant written sources, the largely dispansionate account of travel through the region in 1221 by Ch'ang-Ch'un, the Daoist master who had been summoned to Chinggis Khan, still on campaign in Central Asia. Ch'ang-Ch'un passed through the Ili Valley and then along the northern slopes of the Tien Shan, before turning south to Transoxania. Along the way he observed flourishing irrigated agriculture and mentioned visiting towns, although it is impossible to know whether he saw in them was evidence of unbroken prosperity from an earlier era. When he retraced is steps in 1223, he tells us even less, beyond having stopped at the town of Almalyq in the Ili Valley, where clearly there was significant worship by the local population at certain shrines.

Yet by the time the Franciscan William of Rubruck traveled through the region in 1253, the picture seems to have changed. His evidence is mixed: the town of Taraz on the Talas River may still have been important, and Qayalih in Semirech'e had a large bazaar to which merchants came in large numbers. But in much of the Ili Valley “there used to be sizeable towns lying in the plain, but they were for the most part completely destroyed so that the Tartars could pasture there, since the area affords very fine grazing lands” (Rubruck, 1990, 144–49; here 147). This picture was confirmed a few years later by the Chinese envoy Ch’ang Te when he traversed the area between the Ili and Chu Rivers, noting the irrigated fields but also “numerous ancient walls and ruins” (Bretschneider, 1967, 129). In summarizing this written evidence, the prominent historian of Central Asia, V. V. Barthold underscored Rubruck’s suggestion as to the reason for the disappearance of towns, although it seems possible that the political conflicts which developed during the second quarter of the 13th century, and not simply the influx of nomadic pastoralists and the granting to them of grazing lands, bear some of the responsibility for the changes (Bartol’d, 1965, 66; cf. Baipakov, Savel’eva, & Chang, 2005, 126). There is some confusion as to the exact chronology of these developments, although it seems likely that the civil strife following the death of the Great Khan Möngke in 1259, accelerated developments that were already underway.

Generalized data from archeological evidence would seem to confirm that following the arrival of the Mongols, there was a decline in urban life. In the Talas Valley, for example, some 200 pre-Mongol towns and settlement sites were identified by archeological surveys in the 1930s and 1950s, but in the same region for the 13th and 14th centuries, only a couple of dozen could be identified, one of them being the important city of Taraz (Senigova, 1972, 20). In the Ili region, only some half dozen towns seem to have lived on after the arrival of the Mongols. If we look more closely at the archeological evidence though, we encounter serious questions about what exactly it tells us. In his recent contribution to the history of “urbanization” in Kazakhstan, K. M. Baipakov cites various statistics about the numbers of settlements across the region we term Semirech’e. The Chu River valley (in both Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan) has 21 sites with long walls (i.e., towns of substantial size) dating from the 9th to early 13th centuries. In addition, there are some forty smaller sites identified as “tortkuls”, which might have been caravan-sarays, forts or agricultural settlements. In the Ili Valley (not clear whether this means only that part within the boundaries of Kazakhstan, but not the upper part in China), there are some 90 settlements for the same period, the majority of which apparently were relatively small, with populations estimated at from 100 to no more than 250 individuals (Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 297, 300). At least some probably were originally nomadic seasonal camps. Determining their exact chronology is difficult; it seems we cannot be certain how many continued to be occupied right down to the establishment of Mongol rule. Nor is it yet clear what happened to those that survived into the Mongol period. While Almalyq, as the main camp and capital of Khan Chaghadai when he was in residence, continued to prosper, the literature would seem to suggest the smaller sites largely disappeared during the 13th century.5

Among the larger towns in the region (by most definitions a real city in terms of size and functions), Taraz illustrates well the limits of what archeology, at least so far, can tell us.6 By one defensible if rough estimate, in the 9th–12th centuries its population may have exceeded 10,000 individuals (Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 246). The respected Kazakh archeologist Erbulat Smagulov went so far recently as to state: “None of the archaeologists who have studied the medieval layers of Taraz have found any traces in them of the destructive events of the beginning of the 13th century... Toward the end of the 13th century Taraz remained as before the center of its region and even expanded its territory...” (Smagulov, 2011, 73–74). Should we be satisfied with this argument ex silentio? Even though there have been fairly intensive archeological campaigns there, as Baipakov reminds us, to date but about 3% of the shahristan (the main residential area adjoining the citadel) has been excavated (Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 219). Excavations at Taraz in the citadel and shahristan have uncovered strata going back to the time of the site’s earliest settlement (at least as far back as the 1st century of the Common Era), although there are still many unanswered questions as to when it acquired the three main divisions of a “classical” Middle Eastern city: citadel, shahristan, and suburban rabad. There certainly is a lot of evidence about its size and complexity in the centuries just prior to the Mongol invasions; its major architecture included a mosque, a bath, and on the outskirts a substantial caravan-saray.10 There is ev-

5 For the text, see Ch’ang-Ch’un/Waley, 1931, here esp. 84–89, 120–21. See also the earlier translation in Bretschneider, 1967, 68–73, 98–99.
6 Baipakov et al., 2005, 125; also Akishev et al., 1987, 11, indicating that only 8 of some 66 sites continued to be occupied following the coming of the Mongols.

7 Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 186–87. In his Ch. IV, beginning on p. 254, Baipakov discusses in some detail various tortkuls and what we may learn about their possible functions.
8 For Almalyq, the argument is based on the continuing minting of coins; see Davidovich, 1972, 135.
9 The most important summary of the first excavations is Senigova, 1972, which now must be supplemented by the work that resumed but a few years ago. See Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 213ff, for the updates and cautions about how much we really know.
10 For the Tortkol’ caravan-saray “near Taraz” see Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 397–401.
idence of significant destruction by fire some time before the end of the 12th century, the blame for which has to be attributed to struggles between the Kara Khitai and Khwarezmians. There appears to have been a revival at the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th century (Senigova, 1972, 142). However, the neat stratigraphy breaks down for later periods, due in the first instance to disturbances created by modern construction. So, even if for important parts of the city the archaeologists map a significant decline in amount of ceramics (one of the most important and otherwise best preserved kind of artifacts), it is uncertain whether this merely reflects poor preservation in the archeological record or whether it is an indicator of significant urban decline in the century of the establishment of Mongol rule (Senigova, 1972, 54–56, 191–92). The finds from these disturbed upper layers are largely from surface scatters, which lack the secure chronology of the lower strata. Granted, by analogy with better preserved sites in other parts of Central Asia, such ceramic evidence is suggestive of the fact that life continued in the town, even if its locus on the site seems gradually to have shifted away from the citadel. The most impressive examples of metalwork – notably bronze lamps and mirrors, imports which can be dated by analogy to those from other locations – all come from chance finds (Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 371). Even if their production may have been in the 11th to early 13th centuries, we cannot be certain whether they are a witness to the flourishing trade of Taraz in the pre-Mongol period. They could be later deposits. There is, however, ample reason to agree that various crafts developed extensively in Taraz and its immediate suburbs, where the local craftsmen imitated the largely more skilled and elegant imports. The most persuasive datable evidence about the recovery of Taraz (if in fact it needed to recover) following the initial appearance of the Mongols is from numismatics: significant minting of coins there is documented starting in the last third of the 13th century, a fact that questions the long-held view expressed by V. V. Barthold that the decline of cities in Semirech’e extended down into the 14th century (Davidovich, 1972, 148).

In sum, for Taraz, we are left with something of a hole in the data for much of the 13th century, before the material evidence bears witness to substantial prosperity in subsequent centuries. There is no way to put a number on the possible impact of Mongol rule or even do more than guess as to whether the city really suffered. And whatever changes we can document in settlement patterns may have little to do with proactive policies of Mongol rulers. By and large, here as in other towns of Central Asia, whether they survived and flourished seems to have depended on the degree to which political stability was maintained in the Mongol period. If the absorption of Semirech’e into the Mongol Empire left little dramatic evidence in the written record of the Mongol conquests, the same is not the case for the cities along the Syr Darya and further to the south and west in the territories that were ruled by the Khwarezm shahs. One of the most frequently quoted descriptions of their fate is the sweeping condemnation by Ali ‘izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir, writing probably in the early 1230s, little more than a decade after Chinggis Khan’s army swept through Central Asia: “This thing involves the description of the greatest catastrophe and the most dire calamity (of the like of which days and nights are innocent) which befell all men generally, and the Muslims in particular…It is unlikely that mankind will see the like of this calamity, until the world comes to an end and perishes” (Ibn al-Athir, 1998). Little more than an example of pious medieval rhetoric. Interestingly though, he goes on to point some of the blame at the ruler of Khwarezm: “Their achievements were only rendered possible by the absence of any effective obstacle; and the cause of this absence was that Muhammad Khwarazmshah had overrun the lands, slaying and destroying their Kings, so that he remained alone ruling over all these countries; wherefore, when he was defeated by the Tatars, none was left in the lands to check those or protect these, that so God might accomplish a thing which was to be done.” This is exactly the point made by the more specific and (arguably) less biased and better informed Juvaini.

Juvaini is of particular interest for what he tells us about the reason Chinggis Khan invaded the territories of the Khwarezm shah. In this account, the Mongol khan was interested in developing trade with Central Asia, since he already knew of its value from visits by Muslim merchants to his court. So he equipped a large trade mission, which the governor of Otrar (located on the Syr Darya) made the unwise decision to rob and execute almost to a man. As a result, in Juvaini’s rhetorical description, “for every drop of their blood there flowed a whole Oxus; in retribution for every hair on their heads, it seemed that a hundred thousand heads rolled in the dust at every crossroad; and in exchange for every dinar a thousand qintars were exacted” (Juvaini/Boyle, 1997, 80). Juvaini proceeds to describe in some detail the Mongol campaign in Central Asia, which first brought Chinggis’ army to the walls of Otrar. In the end, the Mongols leveled the walls and took off into captivity those who had survived the siege, in particular seizing artisans who could be put to work elsewhere. Such was the “Otrar catastrophe,” the allegedly complete destruction of one of the most important Central Asian cities.

The degree to which the Mongol invasion left a path of destruction through Central Asia is a matter of dispute. Introducing their detailed reports about excavations at Otrar, published beginning about half a century ago, the Kazakh archeologists adhered to the then accepted view articulated authoritatively much earlier by V. V. Barthold on the basis of the written sources that cities were left in ruins, the economies crippled, and so on (e.g., Akishev, Baipakov, & Erzakovich, 1987, 5–6). That said, the evidence from archeology emphasized how in many cases, recovery from the invasion was much more substantial and rapid than had customarily been assumed. Recently though, another respected Kazakh archeologist, Erbulat Smagulov (2011, 74–77), already quoted regarding the archeology in Taraz, rather bluntly questioned whether archeology in fact confirms the picture of devastation:

[In Otrar], another major city of southern Kazakhstan which suffered from the Mongol invaders … no trace of

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11 Senigova, 1972, 43; also, foldout table II, following p. 34. See also Baipakov, 2012–13, II, 213.
the “Otrar catastrophe” was found. In the later excavations of the medieval sites of southern Kazakhstan (Turkestan, Sairam, Sygnak, the Shymkent fort, Aktobe...etc.) similarly no layers were uncovered with the remains of fire and mass destruction which could unequivocally be attributed to the Mongol conquest.

The absence of traces of the tragic events of the beginning of the 13th century connected with the Mongol conquest or with other, earlier events ... which in the written sources are characterized as “destructive” or “devastating” but are not reflected in the stratigraphy of cultural layers, to date has not been explained in the archaeological literature... [So, one must ask:] Why have not the destructive and devastating historical events recorded in the written sources left any trace in the stratigraphy of the cultural layers of medieval cities?

One can propose several possible answers:

1. The conquests in fact were not so catastrophic for the physical fabric of cities which consisted mainly of the inhabitants’ residences;

2. The medieval authors exaggerated for “rhetorical effect” the degree of destruction caused by one or another event;

3. Archaeology is incapable of identifying layers which can be matched with the results of any destruction caused by the conquests.

Smagulov clearly believes the first two of these explanations. He is not about to reject archeology, but nonetheless proceeds to highlight the doubts expressed by the excavators at Otrar about the reliability of the dating of the strata encompassing the period of the invasion. The main focus of his book, the results of excavation at Sauran/Karatobe, reveals no evidence of Mongol destruction of another of the important cities of the middle Syr-Darya, even if the main locus of settlement shifted, due to changes in the water table locally. Let us look more closely here at the evidence from Otrar, to see whether Smagulov’s sweeping statement is justified.

The Otrar oasis is an area along the middle Syr Darya where the only major tributary in that region, the Arys’, enters from the northeast (for Otrar and its excavations, see Akišev, Bāipakōv, & Erzakōvich, 1972, 1981; Akišev et al., 1987; Bāipakōv, 1990, 2012–13, 105–20). Located on the north side of the Syr Darya, the mound which was the center of the ancient and medieval city. Otratobe, is the most prominent of several such mounds in the region that remain from once dense settlement. It rises abruptly, on the average between 10 and 15 meters above the surrounding plain. This central, roughly polygonal area, containing the citadel and shahristan, was once enclosed by walls, the four longest sides of which each measuring between 350 and 400 m. Beyond the walled central mound were two rings of fortification enclosing a much larger area of settlement (the rabad) and apparently antedating the Mongol invasion. The population estimate for the 9th–12th centuries is roughly 16,000 inhabitants (Bāipakōv, 2012–13, II, 178–79). The location is a strategic one for its natural resources of abundant water and good soil for agriculture as well as excellent pasturage extending up into the neighboring mountains. It also is at a key intersection of trade routes connecting into Transoxania and beyond to Iran or India in the south, and west to the Caspian and on to the Black Sea. It is easy to see why Otrar has had a history of almost unbroken occupation for all of the centuries down nearly to modern times.

For the layman, understanding the strata uncovered by the various seasons of excavation at Otrar is not easy, due to the opaqueness of the terminology.12 The initial campaigns of the 1960s opened a large area at the highest point of the mound, encompassing the parts of the citadel and shahristan. Here more than 30 layers (iarusy) were uncovered, encompassing various strata with evidence of manmade structures (“construction horizons”) whose boundaries might or might not coincide with those of the numbered strata. The built layers further display evidence of sequential construction, where each building erected in the place of a previous one is delineated by its floor. The floors then provide a kind of micro-stratification indicating at least relative chronology, even if the basic dating of a construction horizon does not differentiate among them. In this original determination of the strata, the layers that seem to bracket the time of the Mongol invasion are Nos. V and VI (containing floors 8, 9 and 10), where V is the upper layer. Further confusing the discussion is the summary determination that seven cultural layers (slois) can be distinguished. That for the 13th and 14th centuries includes the 7th construction horizon (floors 8–10) with layers (iarusy) V and VI. The evidence for dating these crucial layers is in the first instance finds of a few coins, most of which in fact antedate the Mongol invasion and only a couple dates from the later 14th century. There also is pottery which can be dated only by analogy and then roughly. Since some of this concrete evidence was found in rubbish piles, one cannot be confident in its value for dating. In summarizing the results of Excavation 1 that established the basic chronology for Otrar, the authors concluded that it provided no evidence whatsoever of the “Otrar catastrophe” – that is, traces of fires or destruction in the layers for the 12th and 13th centuries. In explaining away this apparent discrepancy with the evidence of written sources, they suggested that perhaps the Mongols destroyed only the citadel but not other parts of the city. That said, the fact that a great deal of building rubble (broken bricks etc.) was used in subsequent construction, arguably provided indirect evidence that the Mongols had destroyed a lot. Possibly too, they ventured, evidence of the Mongol destruction of the city is to be found in other, yet unexcavated parts of the city.

Indeed, a decade later, renewed excavations in the main mound, focusing on parts of the shahristan, uncovered a large area of housing whose lowest stratum was layer V (referred to the scheme of the earlier excavation).13 Within layer V were three floor levels, two of which had evidence of fire, but with no indication of rubble from major de-

12 For a discussion of the strata uncovered in the seasons of the mid- to late 1960s, see Akišev et al., 1972, esp. 51–83.
13 For a discussion of the strata and dating for this later excavation, see Akišev et al., 1987, 15–19.
struction that might be associated with it. In fact, there was some suggestion that the strata did not preserve a clear chronological sequence. The youngest of the coins found in layer V, at least one located in the burnt material, dated from the early 13th century, suggesting the conclusion that indeed the fire was to be associated with the Mongol invasion of 1220. However, the coins could have continued to be used later in the 14th century; other evidence of the upper floor suggested that the whole layer might date from the middle of the 13th century. At very least, the authors concluded, for more definite conclusions more excavation was needed, which might, inter alia, provide a substantial series of coins and thus more secure chronology.

This then seems to be the sum and substance of what has been learned so far from the stratigraphy of Otrar. Smagulov may exaggerate in the way he puts it, but at least there is serious reason to doubt that to date any hard evidence has emerged pinpointing from archeology the immediate impact of the Mongol invasion. That said, the excavations certainly have produced ample evidence that by and large the city continued to be inhabited, or, if there was any hiatus due to depopulation, it was but a short one. While there are some exceptions (for example, in techniques of ceramics manufacture and style of the vessels), on the whole there seems to have been a great deal of cultural continuity between the pre-Mongol and Mongol periods in the history of the city. The ongoing excavations, some taking place in the rabad, away from the central mound, have uncovered evidence of significant construction: a mosque that probably was first built before the Mongol invasion, a quite elaborate late 13th to early 14th century bath, brick factories of some size and sophistication, centers of ceramic production, and evidence for local metallurgy. Even if we accept the idea that Chinggis Khan’s armies inflicted a lot of damage to the city, its importance in the region and along the trade routes was not destroyed. The question then remains as to whether we can point to a particular moment which might have made a difference in the revival of its prosperity.

Here the evidence of numismatics is suggestive, although, as with any kind of historical data, it must be carefully critiqued. A common and reasonable assumption is that the issuing and circulation of money may be a measure of the degree to which an economy is monetized— that is, uses money in transactions, in contrast to the situation in what we assume might be a “more backward” economy of natural exchange and barter. If we can determine that a once monetized economy reverted to one of natural exchange, that may be an indication of economic stress. Return to a monetized economy would indicate economic revival. Of course the matter is not as simple as whether or not there is coinage. What kind of coinage (is it gold, silver, or copper, and what is its degree of purity?) and what is inscribed or depicted on it (does one find the name or depiction of a ruler?) may be crucial indicators as to the use of coins. A few gold coins, for example, may be more for political or ideological purposes and bear little relationship to actual market transactions.

In 1972, Elena Abramovna Davidovich published a study of monetary production and circulation in 13th-century Central Asia which overturned long-held assumptions about the impact of Mongol rule on the region’s economy. Earlier scholarship, notably work by V. V. Barthold, and following him, by A. Iu. Iakubovskii, had argued that the major turning point in monetary production (and thus the impetus for stabilization and improvement of the regional economy) was a monetary reform involving standardization of coinage initiated in 1321 by Chaghadaid Khan Kebek. By re-examining the evidence (which included much newly discovered material), Davidovich argued instead that the important changes in Central Asian currency were the work of the mid-13th century official, Mas’ud Bek, son of the important administrator for Chinggis Khan, Mahmud Yalawach. As important entrepreneurs before they took up Mongol administrative posts, the family understood much better than the Mongol rulers the needs of the local sedentary economy and thus did what they could to protect it and promote its development, at the same time that they had an obligation to maximize tax revenues for the Empire.

An important part of Davidovich’s argument involves making a careful distinction between different types of coinage for different purposes. On the one hand, there are issues clearly intended primarily for limited regional use. On the other hand, there are those intended to address the challenges posed by longer distance trade throughout the Empire. It is the move to address the problems in the latter category which signaled a significant shift toward improvement of the economy. As Davidovich explains, in much of Central Asia (especially in the Ferghana Valley), in the century or so prior to the coming of the Mongols there was a monetary crisis, with insufficient acceptable coinage being issued to meet local economic needs. That said, silvered copper dirhams issued in a good many cities were accepted across the region. Following the coming of the Mongols, for a time only Samarkand and Bukhara continued to issue coins, an interesting fact that suggests, as does a careful examination of other sources, that the two cities did not suffer from the Mongol conquest as much as some would have it, even though they both took a major hit. These new issues of copper coins though clearly were intended only for local use. Elsewhere, the impact of the Mongols on the economy was catastrophic (Davidovich, 1972, 130):

...the majority of regions of Central Asia in the first stage after the Mongol conquest experienced a “moneyless situation”; internal exchange, apparently, declined to the level of barter and as a result exchange sharply contracted. As a consequence, the Mongol invasion resulted in starvation and destruction for the population of Central Asia, inflicted a crushing blow as well in that aspect of economic life: for a quarter of a century in many regions of Central Asia for all practical purposes, monetary exchange ceased.

An exception to this grim picture was Almalyq in the Ili Valley, close to the Khan’s main camp and where local elites had remained in place with the coming of the Mongols. In Almalyq coins continued to be issued, and the monetary

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14 Davidovich, 1972, where the concluding chapter, pp. 121–51, lays out in some detail the substance of her argument and is the basis of my summary here.
economy prospered. The first steps in the establishment of a common and stable currency for the larger areas of the Empire followed on the kuriltai of 1251, which addressed in particular the regularization of taxes. Gold dinars of a fixed probity were now issued in several places (including Otrar). While all the aims of Möngke Khan’s reforms of 1251 (the architect of which was Mas’ud Bek) were not achieved, there is good reason to believe that at least in Central Asia, the monetary reform had a positive impact. The authorities did not stop with the issue of gold coins. In Otrar now, there was regular minting of silvered copper coins (intended for use in the markets), which circulated well beyond the immediate region. Almalyq continued regular minting of gold, silver and copper coinage.

The subsequent and most important stage of the monetary reform was initiated in 1271/72, when, in addition to Almalyq, other mints came on line to issue silver dirhams and provide the basis for a standard currency throughout the region. Otrar seems to have been the first of these new mints. For the first decade, the most successful implementation of this reform was in the northeastern part of the Chaghataid realm, from Otrar northwards and including Taraz. On the whole, that region’s economy had fared better than the economy to the south during the first decades of Mongol rule. In fact, the coin evidence supports the conclusion that assessments of the economic decline of Semirech’e and its adjoining regions in the 13th century are too pessimistic (pace Barthold). The success and scope of this last stage of Mas’ud Bek’s monetary reform of the last third of the 13th century can be seen, among other things, in the multiplication of mints, some now established in secondary cities, which would seem therefore to have been benefitting from the general economic recovery of Central Asia.

In short then, the numismatic evidence buttresses the argument that the impact of the Mongol invasions on Central Asia was quite uneven, and even in the areas hardest hit, recovery was relatively rapid. In Otrar, where we cannot even be certain to what degree the city had been destroyed in 1220, certainly within a generation the economy was back on its feet and the city growing and prospering. A similar picture emerges for other cities – for example, according to Juvaini, Bukhara had recovered much of its former glory within a generation of the conquest. It is likely that a close examination of numismatic evidence for other cities taken by the Mongols will produce similarly interesting results: both in Baghdad and in Balkh, two cities that, according to the written sources, were devastated by the Mongols, within a year or so of the conquest, coins were being minted by the Mongol conquerors.\(^\text{15}\) Was this just an empty assertion of sovereignty, or does it indicate those cities had survived, even in reduced circumstances? The medieval narratives concerning Balkh contain contradictory information on the Mongol conquest in 1221; there is good reason to think that within a decade or so, the city already was recovering (Akmedov, 1982, 21–22). New studies focusing on Baghdad and drawing on previously untapped written sources, suggest its fate when taken in 1258 was far from being as grim as commonly assumed (Biran, 2016).

### 2. The Golden Horde in Eastern Europe

The western part of the Mongol Empire was the ulus assigned by Chinggis Khan to his eldest son Jöchi, even though at the time most of its territory was yet to be conquered.\(^\text{16}\) When Jöchi pre-deceased his father, the grandson, Batu, led the Mongol armies into Eastern Europe. After an earlier reconnaissance in the 1220s, the Mongol armies invaded Eastern Europe in force in 1236, reaching as far as the Adriatic and eastern Austria before retreating in 1241. Batu then elected not to contest for rule over the entire empire but rather settled on the lower Volga in his capital at Saray. At its greatest extent, the territories of the “Golden Horde” (the name is one assigned much later and not by the Mongols themselves) extended to Hungary and Poland in the west, encompassed much of the northern littoral of the Black Sea and the northern Caucasus, claimed at least indirect control over most of the Russian principalities way to the north, and extended east into Central Asia. Its most important urban outpost there was Urgench, south of the Aral Sea in the area once ruled by the Khwarezm shah. Much of the history of the western half of the Mongol Empire in the second half of the 13th century and first half of the 14th century involved the political and economic rivalry of the Golden Horde and the Ilkhanid realm in the Middle East. The Golden Horde prospered, especially during the reign of Khan Özbeg (r. 1313–41), under whom Islam became its official religion. The Golden Horde benefitted from its control over key cities: ports in the Crimea and at the mouth of the Don River managed by the Genoese, several cities in the Volga Basin, and Urgench. When the armies of Tamerlane finally swept through its territories and destroyed most of its cities in the late 14th century, the Golden Horde, already in decline, would never recover. Of particular interest for us here is what we can learn about the cities incorporated into or founded by the Mongol rulers of the Golden Horde in the first century of its existence.

The Russian sources, primarily narratives written after the fact by Orthodox clerics, portray the advent of the Mongols in apocalyptic terms not vastly different from what

\(^{15}\) For a silver dirham from Balkh, dated 1221, in the collection of the British Museum, see [http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/bm/bm2007_395.jpg](http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/bm/bm2007_395.jpg), accessed 26 August 2016. The National library in Cairo holds a gold dinar minted in Baghdad in 1258–59; see [http://enl.numismatics.org/id/4581](http://enl.numismatics.org/id/4581), accessed 26 August 2016. I am grateful to Prof. Jere Bacharach, who supervised the cataloging of that collection, for bringing this coin to my attention. Another example of this dinar is in the British Museum, where, oddly, the museum dates it 1256–65, that initial date two years prior to the Mongol taking of the city.

\(^{16}\) For introductory overviews, see the essays by Waugh, 2013, and Kramarovsky, 2013. The best book in English on the western part of the Mongol Empire is Jackson, 2005. Among books by Russian authors, note the “classic” by Grekov & Iakubovskii, 1950, in which the sections by Iakubovskii dealing with the Horde internally are still worth reading. The Russian archeologist German A. Fedorov-Davydov wrote a number of important studies of the Golden Horde, of which note Fedorov-Davydov, 1973, 1994, 2001a. Some of his work has been translated into English: Fedorov-Davydov, 1984, 2001c (the latter much criticized for its editing though it is nicely illustrated). Except for what I consider to be a problematic final chapter on what he argues was Russian “silence” about Mongol rule, Halperin, 1985, provides a judicious assessment of the Mongol impact in Russia.
we have seen in Ibn al-Athir’s account about the conquest of Central Asia. The “Tale of the Destruction of Riazan’”, one of the first towns taken by the Mongols in 1237, concludes: “And all this happened because of our sins. There used to be the city of Riazan’ in the land of Riazan’, but its wealth disappeared and its glory ceased, and there is nothing to be seen in the city excepting smoke, ashes, and barren earth.” Accounts such as this, written long after the event and inspired by Christian dogma, in subsequent eras formed a building block in Russian nationalist perceptions about victimhood that have been used to explain distinctive features of Russian development such as authoritarian rule and “economic backwardness” (compared to the economic development of Western Europe). It is thus something of a surprise to find a recent Russian book with the sensational title: How the Golden Horde gilded Rus. Don’t believe lies about the “Tatar-Mongol” yoke! (Shliakhtorov, 2014). Somewhat more sober in content than its title would suggest, this polemical book in fact points to a number of aspects of Mongol rule in Russia that provide a counterweight to narratives of Mongol destructiveness.

As in Central Asia though, in fact the Mongol impact on urban life in the territories of the Golden Horde varied considerably. The archeological record is revealing. There has been substantial excavation of the Golden Horde cities in the lower Volga River region and in some of their neighboring settlements. The main towns of Volga Bulgaria (not far from the city of Kazan’ in the middle Volga region) have received a lot of attention, and increasingly, recent archeological excavation has resulted in reassessment of the record for key towns of the Russian principalities in the first century of Mongol rule. We will begin our examination of the results with the Russian principalities and then look at some of the evidence from the adjoining regions.

There is no doubt that much was destroyed and many people killed or led off into captivity in the Russian principalities that were directly in the path of the Mongol invasion. As elsewhere, the pattern of devastation varied, depending on the degree to which there was any armed resistance. Even after the smoke had cleared, there were occasional armed incursions, often instigated not by the Mongol rulers themselves but rather by Russian princes who enlisted Mongol support for attacking other Russian princes. While some of the archeological evidence is dramatic: broad layers of ash and cinders or mass graves that might be reasonably dated to the 1230s, some of the same challenges of evidence and interpretation that were to be found for the Central Asian towns leave us with serious questions about the extent of devastation and the chronology of recovery. Recovery in fact occurred and apparently quite rapidly, even if the result was a diminished social and economic situation compared to pre-Mongol times.

A conference by Russian archeologists some 15 years ago (and the resulting collection of published papers) offers a sober assessment of what we know and do not know, and points to the need for much further work before we can close the books on the question of Mongol impact. The scholars responsible for that project highlighted a number of important issues which are relevant for our broader assessment of archeological evidence about the impact of the Mongols in the areas they conquered. Certainly nationalist beliefs, which still color interpretations, need to be put aside at the outset. Perhaps most significant methodologically is to appreciate the fact that the Mongol invasion has too often been assumed to mark a significant boundary in the material record, even if explicit evidence of that has been lacking. That is, many who have studied it (in the given instance here, for the history and culture of medieval Russia) have elected not to look beyond the 13th century, preferring instead to focus on the “Golden Age” imagined to have preceded the Mongol conquest. Such conscious focusing has played a role in decisions as to where to dig, and in the degree to which attention has been paid to strata laid down on top of those antedating the early 13th century. While this is not a matter of particular bias but rather a limit imposed by resources, it is important to recognize that only a small fraction of most major archeological sites has been excavated. New excavation might well force the abandonment of earlier conclusions. Establishing precise chronologies has been difficult. Periodization of evidence (for example ceramics chronologies) has often been bounded by the coming of the Mongols not the material characteristics of the finds. Compounding these problems is the reality that often the strata which post-date the 12th century are the ones most likely to have been disturbed by their being closer to the surface, a surface which has seen modern construction, agricultural development or the like. As is the case with any effort to explain major historical changes, determining cause and effect for what in fact were many substantial changes in the medieval Russian principalities may require some nuance and the examination of multiple factors. Yet it has been too easy to attribute change to the Mongol impact without seriously exploring alternatives which may reflect internal developments, not the imposition of change from the outside. In short, then, the Russian archeologists who gathered in Moscow in 2000 to re-examine the “dark time” of the 13th century, called for a radical re-focusing of efforts to understand the first decade or so of Mongol rule in Russia.

One of those conference papers reviewed the results of recent archeology at the site of Old Riazan’ – the remains of the city the Mongols attacked in 1237 (Chernetsov & Strikalov, 2003). On the eve of the Mongol conquest, it was one of the largest of the Old Russian cities in its area of settlement, and its population of at least 5–6000 meant it was a sizeable place even when compared to the major medieval European cities (Darkevich & Borisevich, 1995, 44). It occupied a strategic location on important trade routes near the borders of the Russian principalities with the steppe.

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17 For the Old Russian text with a modern Russian translation, see “Povest’ o razornii Riazani Batyem,” in Biblioteka, 2000, 140–55, with commentary 472–79. While there are indications that thematically and stylistically it may be connected with works written in the last third of the 13th century, the tale in its present form is a 16th-century work, known in copies no earlier than from that century. An English translation is in Zenkovsky, 1974, 198–207.

18 The summary in this paragraph is based primarily on the opening essays by N. A. Makarov and A. V. Chernetsov, in the important volume Makarov & Chernetsov, 2003, 5–16.
The Oka River, on whose banks it lies, flows into the Volga; its upper reaches and tributaries provide access to the Dnieper and Western Dvina river basins. There also were routes south across the steppe to the Black Sea. Given its prominence historically (and in part because of its emblematic status in narratives of the Mongol conquest), Riazan’ was the focus of some of the earliest Russian archeological work. Major scientific archeology there was first undertaken by Soviet teams in the 1940s, and reported in a pioneering monograph by the head of the project, A. L. Mongait, in 1955. In many ways, Mongait displayed admirable caution in how he interpreted the historical record and the archeological evidence. Of some significance was the fact that when Grand Prince of Vladimir Vsevolod III attacked the city in 1208, he ordered the population out with all the possessions they could carry and then burned it. Thus, “in all probability, part of the destroyed homes found in the excavations and dating to the first decades of the 13th century burned not during the taking of Riazan’ by the Tatars, but rather during its destruction by Vsevolod in 1208.”19 In one part of the defensive wall which his team excavated, he emphasized that it was impossible to tell whether it had been destroyed in 1208 or 1237, although at least following the latter date, it was to some extent rebuilt (Mongait, 1955, 37). Since the excavation reached layers earlier than the Mongol invasion, house remains dating to “deep antiquity” were uncovered; but there also were houses destroyed either in 1208 or 1237 and ones from later in the 14th century. “Apparently, the Mongol invasion, which fundamentally changed life in the city (a fact reflected in part in the change of the inventory of ordinary objects), did not bring about a sharp transformation in the basic organization of homes. The residences of the 14th century were similar to those of the earlier, pre-Mongol era” (Mongait, 1955, 71).

Mongait’s cautiously positive assessment of post-1237 Riazan’ has been categorically questioned by some of the key scholars involved in more recent excavation there. One need but read their report on the mass graves uncovered in the late 1970s to appreciate the scope of the slaughter, evidence that reinforces some of what Mongait had already determined as he fixed the date of such burials (Darkevich & Borisevich, 1995, 372–85; Mongait, 1955, 29). Darkevich and Borisevich explicitly state that nothing in the archeology disputes the accuracy of the description of the Mongol attack penned by the medieval churchman.20 Indeed, it was Darkevich who was in charge of major excavations which opened an area in the southern part of the site and found there two distinct construction strata bounded by layers of ash, the upper one evidence of the destruction of the city in 1237 (Darkevich, 1974). Of particular interest in this excavation of 1969 was the discovery of a residence of one of the medieval elites, which, it appeared, had been abandoned at the time of the invasion. Everything pointed to a hasty evacuation, the storage areas had been locked, and the more precious objects including a lot of silver jewelry had been buried. While there seems to have been no doubt about the abandonment of this urban compound and its destruction by the Mongols, in an adjoining area of fortification, it was impossible to delineate clearly from the lower layer of ash and cinders the deposits that must have been laid down later (Darkevich, 1974, 61, 64). That is, it seems certain only that this section of fortification was destroyed in 1208.

Major excavation campaigns at Riazan’ have been resumed in recent decades, but to date have not covered more than about 5% of the central area of Old Riazan’ encompassed by its walls and even less of the total urban and suburban area that centered on the city.21 While Mongait began in the northern sector of the city, the location of the deepest archeological strata where more recent excavation has been refining his chronology, increasing attention has been devoted to the larger southern area within the old line of walls, whose strata were compromised by plowing down through the centuries and where, especially recently, looting has been a problem. In 1995, an excavation near the remains of the medieval Cathedral of the Savior uncovered a residence that had been occupied in the 14th and 15th centuries (dated from imitations of the coins issued in the late 14th century by Tokhtamysh Khan), proof that occupation of the city had continued even late in the Mongol period.22 A stone plaque with the name of a Khan Timur was found in disturbed layers (thus no precise dating possible), but has been interpreted as the equivalent of a paize, the Mongol badge of authority, suggesting that the town may have retained its importance for the Mongols as an administrative or military outpost. Other archeological evidence suggested continued occupation whose details need to be confirmed by further work. In general, this is not at odds with some of the written sources which, for all their emphasis on destruction in 1237, suggest as well that life resumed in the city by the middle of the 13th century. Part of the reassessment of the Mongol impact involves study of archeological sites in the broader Riazan’ region, some of which suggest population shifts following the Mongol invasion, but certainly not the creation of a wasteland. The city of Riazan’ itself was replaced by Pereiaslav’-Riazanskii as the most important local princely seat; agricultural villages continued in their previous locations as inhabitants who may have hidden from the Mongols in the woods returned to their homes. One theme in the volume Rus’ in the 13th Century concerns fundamental changes in Russian politics and society which may be explained by internal factors (among them ecological changes which still await their historian). So, what one can begin to see in the Riazan’ region is in part a reflection of more wide-spread developments.

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19 A. L. Mongait, 1955, 27. When he published his admirable volume dealing with the history and archeology of the larger Riazan’ region in 1961, Mongait (1961, 149–50) deliberately excluded specific discussion of the city of Riazan’ itself, referring readers to his 1955 monograph instead.

20 Darkевич & Borisevich, 1995, 430–31. Even if one might dispute their conclusion (see below), their book is the best description of the city up to the Mongol period and is enhanced by numerous reconstruction drawings of its fortifications and overall appearance and the construction of its houses.

21 For updates on excavations into the beginning of the 21st century, see Chernetsov & Strikalov, 2003, and Chernetsov, 2014.

22 While their book appeared prior to this discovery, Darkevich & Borisevich, 1995, 431, emphasize that there seems to have been no rebuilding in Riazan’ before the 15th century, and it never subsequently was more than an insignificant backwater. To what degree ongoing excavation at the site may prove otherwise is an open question.
not necessarily related to its location near the exposed and dangerous steppe frontier or the events of 1237.

The reassessment of Riazan’s history beginning in the 13th century is by no means the only example where old assumptions about the impact of the Mongol invasion or Rus’ have come under scrutiny. Kiev fell to the Mongols in 1240, the devastation so thorough that one of the most prominent archeologists to work on the site in the 20th century, M. K. Karger, even went so far as to deny the existence of a cultural layer for the 14th and 15th centuries. He suggested it was impossible to delineate any ceramics for the 14th and 15th centuries, even if, as it turns out, the problem is not that they did not exist but rather classification of them has been imprecise. To raise questions about the impermeability of the boundary marked by the Mongol attack on Kiev in 1240 invites a re-examination of the written sources, some of which attest to the city’s continuing (if reduced) importance, a fact that has too often been conveniently ignored. Beyond Kiev, in the middle Dnieper region, recent work suggests the need for a more nuanced scheme of the decline of some settlements, whose fate cannot necessarily be connected with the Mongols. The decay of the built environment within Kiev itself may in part best be explained by much later developments; what seems to have been a more general hiatus in the building of new masonry structures in Rus’ may not necessarily be an index of the levels of Mongol devastation of the medieval Russian economy.24

Of course the Golden Horde incorporated non-Slavic towns, perhaps the most important in the Bulgar state on the Middle Volga. Although Volga Bulgaria rarely has attracted the attention of historians of early medieval Europe, prior to the coming of the Mongols it was one of the most important stops on the Eurasian “silk roads.” Settled by the Turkic Bulgars and incorporating other ethnic groups, it was located in a region well suited for extensive agriculture, and, more importantly, advantageously situated on trade routes with access to significant natural resources. It controlled the strategic Volga waterway connecting the Baltic with the Caspian and Central Asia, and via the Kama River, a tributary of the Volga, accessed major resources of valuable furs in the forests of the Urals. Some of the most significant finds of Central Asian and Middle Eastern silver from the 4th to 9th centuries have been found along the river routes of the Urals region (Darkevich, 1976). Volga Bulgaria had been important in the period of Khazar rule (their state centered on the lower Volga). One of the most famous medieval travel narratives, that of Ahmad Ibn Fadlan from the 920s, relates his visit to the region of Bulgar, where he encountered converts to Islam, even if in his view they did not always understand or observe the tenets of the faith. The region was important in the trade of the medieval Russian principalities, although relations with them were not always peaceful.

Two of the cities of Volga Bulgaria are of particular interest for us here. Bulgar, directly on the Volga, was an important trading post which in the Mongol period became the capital of the region.25 Beginning around the 10th century, and continuing down to the Mongol invasion, Biliar, located to the east on one of the lesser rivers and somewhat inaccessible, but in a region that was densely settled, had served as the capital of the developing Bulgar polity. While there has been substantial disagreement regarding the history of these two settlements, Biliar seems to have reached its apogee, encompassing a sizeable area within more than one ring of walls, in the late 12th century. There is pretty convincing evidence to indicate it was the focal point of the successful Mongol attack in 1236, at which point it was totally destroyed. Both cities have seen extensive excavation. Here we will focus on the results of that at Bulgar, since it once again became the principal urban center in the region under the Mongols.

In her detailed summary of the stratigraphy and dating of the archeology of Bulgar, T. A. Khlebnikova indicated with some certainty that a distinct layer of ash and cinders attested to the total destruction of the town by the Mongols in 1236. More recently, F. Sh. Khuzin has cast some doubt on that evidence, emphasizing that in that layer there are few objects and human bones, suggesting that at very least the population managed to escape with their valuables (cf. Khlebnikova, 1987, 61, and Khuzin, 2001, 126–30). Moreover, as Khuzin emphasizes, the subsequent history of the town under the Mongols has to raise doubts as to whether Batu’s forces would have wanted to destroy it completely. For there is ample evidence that the city of Bulgar grew rapidly starting in the middle of the 13th century and reached its peak of prosperity over the next century, prior to a devastating attack on it in 1361 during the period of major civil conflict over political control of the Golden Horde. Clearly its importance was recognized by the Mongols; it is known that Batu’s normal seasonal migration took him up and down the Volga. The first coins minted by the khans of the Golden Horde were issued in Bulgar as early as the 1240s, at least two decades before any were minted in the capital of Saray.26 Significant masonry construction in the once largely wooden town began under the Mongols in the 13th century, the buildings including substantial baths and a main mosque to replace a more modest one which had existed earlier. The architectural models for these buildings can be found in the Caucasus and Central Asia, although

23 This paragraph is based on Ivakin, 2003, which effectively summarizes ideas he has developed more extensively in other publications.

24 See Ivakin’s passing comment, Ibid., 64, but cf. Miller, 1989. I have long cited Miller’s article for his use of evidence about masonry construction as a proxy for the absence of hard economic data to illustrate the impact of the Mongols. What he showed is not simply that the low point occurred in the 1230s, but also that the revival of masonry construction in the following two centuries was extremely rapid, suggesting then a rapid return to economic prosperity with the disposable income that would have funded such structures. His data are skewed by the abundant evidence from Novgorod, which never was subjected to Mongol attack.

25 On their pre-Mongol history and archeology, see Khuzin, 2001, a detailed examination of the earlier scholarship and evidence that disagrees with some important conclusions others had reached. On Biliar, see also Issledovaniia, 1976. On Bulgar, the first of several volumes reporting on the result of substantial archeological excavation is the still essential Fedorov-Davydov, 1987a. For a brief introduction to Bulgar in the 13th century, see Polubniarina, 2003, 103–07; for a recent survey of the Bulgar territory under Khan Özbeg in the 14th century, see Rudenko, 2013, 209–20.

26 An excellent, detailed overview of the monetary history of Bulgar is Fedorov-Davydov, 1987b; for the earliest coins minted there under the Mongols, see pp. 160ff.
the form which the Friday Mosque took when it was expanded and rebuilt in the 14th century displays some unique features, with a fortress-like outer wall and bulky round towers at the corners.\(^{27}\) Even though the taking of the city in 1361 was a significant setback, it recovered and experienced continuing prosperity, although perhaps not repopulating entirely the large areas encompassed prior to that date. Settlements on its outskirts seem not to have survived. Evidence of another destructive fire marks the close of the “later Golden Horde” period of the city’s life, when it was sacked in 1431 and subsequently failed to recover. By then, the distinction of the major political and economic center of the middle Volga region had passed to Kazan’. The reconstruction, and perhaps more importantly, development from scratch of towns by the rulers of the Golden Horde, were a significant feature of its history, the most famous of the new ones being its capital Saray, whose exact location (and whether or not there was a succession from an “old” to a “new” Saray) has been a matter of substantial controversy.\(^{28}\) Irrespective of the location of the Saray mentioned in some of the written sources, several major urban sites have long been known and extensively studied.\(^{29}\) One of the most important recent developments in Golden Horde archeology has been to study their hinterlands, what we might term “peri-urban” areas with smaller settlements, since it is only by looking at larger sub-regions that we can fully appreciate the history of the urban center itself.\(^{30}\) The archeology of Golden Horde cities has documented changing patterns of settlement involving, among other things, the sedentarization of the Mongol elite. Archeology has complemented the written sources which highlight the size, prosperity, and multi-ethnicity of these cities in the steppe region. Perhaps the best known of the accounts is that of Muhammad Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan who traveled through Saray and on to Urgench in the 1330s and left detailed (if perhaps colorfully exaggerated) descriptions of what he encountered (Ibn Battuta/Gibb, 1961–71, 468–569). An educated and sophisticated cosmopolitan of the Islamic world, he was suitably impressed.

There is, of course, a great deal more which might be said about the impact of the Mongols and the nature of both the written and archeological evidence attesting to it, a subject for several books in fact. On the basis of this quick and selective survey, it is safe to conclude that though the picture which emerges is one of complexity: we encounter here both the owl of misfortune and the phoenix of prosperity. Even at the time of the Mongol invasions, far from everything in their path was destroyed. Some areas remained in ruins, but others recovered thanks in part to the conscious efforts on the part of the new Mongol overlords. In examining this history though, we should not connect all the developments documented in the material record with the Mongols, as other factors need to be taken into account. The archeology itself, underutilized in too many of the histories of the Mongol Empire, needs to be critiqued. If we are eventually to hope for a better understanding of the period of Mongol rule in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, we must start by putting aside preconceptions about universal destruction, since such biases can only skew our analysis of the evidence.

**Conflict of interest**

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\(^{27}\) On the architecture of the Golden Horde (with extensive citation of comparative examples), see Zilivinskaia, 2011, where her discussion of Volga Bulgaria is on pp. 12–16, 39–40, and 64–70. Specifically on the Friday Mosque, see Aidarov, 1970, 39–56, which includes a detailed plan of the remains and evocative reconstruction drawings of the building in its 13th- and 14th-century phases. A much expanded treatment by him and others is in the richly illustrated Fedorov-Davydov, 2001b, the fourth volume in the publication of the archeological study of the city undertaken in the second half of the 20th century.

\(^{28}\) A descriptive listing of Golden Horde settlement sites, one in need of updating and correction now, is in Egovor, 1985 (Ch. 3). Egovor identified 110 sites for which remains have been found and noted another 30 so far attested only in written sources. He did not include in his list cities in the Russian principalities which existed prior to the coming of the Mongols, though he did include key cities on the Black Sea, where the merchants of Italian city-states held sway, if under the aegis of the khan.

\(^{29}\) The place to start learning about them is in the books by Fedorov-Davydov cited above in footnote 29.

\(^{30}\) See Nadashkovskii, 2010, reviewed by me in The Silk Road, 9 (2011), 159–61. The idea of “peri-urban” areas has been applied to the study of the settlement sites in the Orkhon River Valley in Mongolia outside of the Mongol capital Karakorum. See Shiraiishi, 2004, 103–19. A great deal of new scholarship is addressing the question of the function of cities within “nomad” polities. See, for example, Durand-Guédy, 2013, reviewed by me in Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi, 20 (2013), 249–62.
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