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THE ORGANIZATION OF THE MONGOLS' WAR EXPEDITIONS IN THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

The causes of the Mongols' exceptional war successes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a complex blend of numerous factors. The effectiveness of their military activities, which eventually led to the creation of the largest empire in history, was a result of their outstanding ruler, Genghis Khan's unusual talent for commanding an army as well as the advanced military arts they employed. The war strategy of the Mongol army, their tactics and highly functional equipment turned out to be surprisingly effective.

The organization of the Mongol army was an important factor in respect of its effectiveness. Surviving written sources provide information about the main rules observed by the warriors. Undoubtedly, the richest source is the *Secret History of the Mongols*. The chronicle was written in the Mongol circles which were closest to Genghis Khan about, most probably, 1240.¹ It deals mainly with contemporary political affairs and the events which occurred soon after the ruler's death. The work also contains numerous comments on the material culture of medieval Mongols, their customs and norms of everyday life. Undoubtedly, Rashid ad-Dina's *Chronicles* are worth mentioning here too.² The author of this book, a historian and the court physician of the Mongol rulers of Persia, carefully collected material for his chronicle, which he wrote at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He dealt with the history of Persia, and the Turkish and Mongol tribes, which were closely intertwined, and discussed a number of issues connected with the organization of the Mongol army and the Mongol state. Some interesting material for studies into Mongol military arts can be found in numerous European

accounts as well. The Mongol invasion of Europe was a frightful event for the attacked communities but it was an amazing experience for them at the same time. European people wanted to learn the customs, strategy and tactics of the strange invaders. They were well aware of the fact that a knowledge of their ways would make it easier for them to fight the attackers or form an alliance with them against a common enemy (for example, the Turks, who ruled the Near East at that time). This situation brought about the appearance of several accounts of the steppe invaders' military activities in the attacked European countries and a number of reports of envoys' expeditions to the Mongol khans. The accounts connected with Pope Innocent IV's envoys' expedition to the Mongol Khan which took place in the years 1245-1247 (John of Plano Carpini, Benedykt of Poland and C. de Bridia) and the mission sent to Khan Möngke by Louis IX, King of France, in 1253-1255 (Wilhelm Rubruk) seem particularly valuable.³ Modern researchers are surprised at the accuracy of description and the reasoning found in the above-mentioned works by Carpini and Rubruk. Marco Polo's account is probably the best-known and a very useful source too. His *Description of the World* was written when the author traveled to China in 1271-1292.⁴ Some

³ A. Wyngaert van den, *Intinera et relationes fratrum minorum seaculi XIII et XIV (Sinica Franciscana I)*, Quaracchi near Florence 1929, pp. 147-332; F. Risch, *Johann de Plano Carpini. Geschichte der Mongolen und Reisebericht 1245-1247*, Leipzig 1930; N. P. Šastina, *Džiovanni del' Plano Karpini. Istorija mongolov. Gill'om de Rubruk. Putešestvie v vostočnye strany*, redakcija, vstupil'naja stat'ja, primečanija N. P. Šastinoj, Moskva 1957; *History of the Mongols by John of Plano Carpini* [in:] Ch. Dawson, *Mission to Asia*, Toronto-Buffalo-London 1987; *Hystoria Tartarorum C. de Bridia Monachi*, ed. A. Önnersfors, Berlin 1967.

⁴ Marco Polo, *The description of the World*, translated by A. C. Moule, P. Pelliot, London 1938.

¹ *Secret History of the Mongols*, translated by S. Kałużyński, Warszawa 1970.

² Rašid ad Din, *Sbornik letopisej*, vol. I, parts 1-2, Moskva-Leningrad 1952; vol. II, Moskva-Leningrad 1960; vol. III, Moskva-Leningrad 1946.

interesting, though less fundamental, comments on the strategy, tactics, arms and armour of Mongol forces can also be found in other European works, for example, in Thomas of Split's *Chronicle*.⁵

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the main aim of Mongol expeditions was to invade new territories, to destroy the enemy forces and commanders, and finally to directly or indirectly incorporate the area into the Khan's realm.

These ends were to be achieved by organizing military expeditions and conquering new territories. The fundamental rules obeyed by the leaders of such missions were as follows:

- anticipate all potential attacks on the part of the enemy;
- control the march speed;
- move secretly;
- provide the army with permanent, continuous command;⁶

The success of particular war expeditions and entire campaigns depended, to a large extent, on the organization and passage of the armies.

Genghis Khan inherited from his ancestors a traditional system of army organization based on family ties and ancient family-clan-tribe relations. Particular units differed in size. The warriors were divided into so-called circles (Mongol "küryen"), which were, in all probability, groups composed of members of one or more clans having one commander. The term is derived from the way their defensive camp was formed. The men, their animals and possessions were surrounded by wagons joined together. The vehicles created one or more circles of defensive lines. The wagons were connected so that they formed a maze of "streets" hindering the enemy's passage through the camp. This defensive technique, stretching back into antiquity, was very popular in the Eurasian Steppe, because it had proven to be useful and functional. It had survived to modern times and was used by the Cossacks coming from the steppes of the Black Sea region, who fought against Polish, Russian and Tatar armies in the eighteenth century. The system could not, however, be adopted in the new, powerful Mongol army and had to be replaced with a new type of organization.

According to national tradition, Genghis Khan introduced the decimal system in his forces. The khan gave his elite warriors, called nukers (the word "nökör" means a comrade in Mongol languages), a number of auls (a group of yurts). In return, they provided approximately ten, a hundred or a thousand soldiers.⁷ As a result, the decimal system was used not only in the Mongol army, but in all Mongol clans and tribes. The stages of the process of the introduction of the above system are described in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. It should, however, be noted that the Mongol ruler did not invent the decimal system himself. He only introduced a type of organization which had been known in the Eurasian Steppe before. It was successfully used by, for example, the Huns as early as the close of the old era.⁸

Thanks to Genghis Khan's reorganization of his army, consisting in dividing his troops up on the decimal system, both the army itself and the system of command became more efficient. What is more, the reform was a defeat for the complex, traditional division of forces based on clan and family bonds as well as for social and economic connections of particular warriors. It was not accidental that the reorganization took place shortly after the ruler's first spectacular victories when the number of soldiers grew after the warriors belonging to the tribes conquered by the Mongols had been incorporated into the khan's troops.

Genghis Khan's army was divided up on the decimal system: there were units composed of ten warriors ("harban"), units composed of a hundred men ("dzhaun") and units composed of a thousand soldiers ("mingan"). After another series of military successes, especially after the seizure of Naimans, the number of warriors went up again and the army was over 100.000 strong. As a result, another type of unit, composed of 10.000 men, called a tümen, was introduced.

The introduction of the decimal system in the organization of troops brought about the appearance of a simple system of hierarchy. A harbanu noyan commanded a unit composed of ten men, a centurion ("dzhaunu noyan") was in charge of a hundred men, a mingan's commander was responsible for a thousands warriors and a tümen's commander led ten thousand soldiers.

⁵ Tom a Arhidakon, *Kronika*, Split 1960; *Der Mongolensturm. Berichte von Augenzeugen und Zeitgenossen 1235-1250*, Übersetzt, eingeleitet und erläutert von Hansgerd Göcckenjan und James R. Sweeney (*Ungarns Geschichts-schreiber*, 3), Graz-Wien-Köln 1985.

⁶ Chajnzangijn Šagdar, *Vojsko Čingis-chagana: sozdanie, stroitel'no-organizacionnaja struktura, taktičeskie dejstvija (1178-1206)*, Ulaanbaatar 1994, pp. 20-21.

⁷ B. Ja. Vladimircov, *Obščestvennyj stroj mongolov*, Leningrad 1934, pp. 103-104; B. A. Grekov, *Kievskaja Rus'*, Leningrad 1953, p. 316.

⁸ Ju. S. Chudjakov, *Vooruženie srednevekovykh kočevnikov Južnoj Sibiri i Centralnoj Azii*, Novosibirsk 1986, p. 49.

The whole army was commanded by the khan and all the officers of high rank were members of Genghis Khan's family, his most faithful warriors or their sons. The commanders of lower rank were usually men who belonged to the steppe aristocracy, but some of them came from the most poor families. The commanders holding the highest ranks did not take part in battle, but commanded their troops from a distance.

The nomads' army was also divided according to the units' position. There were the front, the main and the rear forces, as well as units responsible for special tasks.

While the army was on the march, the main forces were preceded by the front units, called the "forehead" (Mongol "manglay"). The best and most experienced warriors (Mongol "bolgaul") belonging to the front units were sent to reconnoiter the enemy position. Patrol positions were also manned with front unit soldiers, who were called watchmen ("karaul"). They were responsible for warning the army in advance of an approaching danger.

According to Marco Polo, the troops sent to reconnoiter an area were often quite big, even 200 strong. The aim of this technique was to avoid unexpected attacks launched by the enemy. The scouts set off two days before the departure of the main army and operated in front of, behind and at the wings of the main force on the march. Carpini supports this hypothesis and says that these selected warriors "were sent far away, to the right and to the left." They "took nothing but their yurts, horses and weapons with them." The author precisely describes the scouts' tasks: "These warriors do not plunder or set homes on fire. They never kill animals. They only wound and kill people and if they fail to do anything else they force them to run away. But they prefer killing people to making them escape. They are followed by the army and the soldiers take away everything they can find. If they meet any people, they take them captive or kill them." C. de Bridia describes the scouts' practices in a similar way: "When Tatars (that is to say, Mongols) start to approach their enemy, they send very fast scouts in front. These men frighten the people they meet and kill them unexpectedly so that no enemy army can gather in front of their forces."

The main force was composed of three parts: the center (Mongol "gol/gar"), the right wing (Mongol "baraun gol") and the left wing (Mongol "dzhungar"). This division cannot have been invented by Genghis Khan. The above technique had been employed since antiquity and the division of an army into three parts might have been a Chinese

invention. According to Sun Tzu's famous work *The Art of War*, it was used in the Chinese army from the first half of the first century B.C. onward.⁹

The centre was the main part of an army. It was commanded by Genghis Khan himself and subsequently by his successors. Traditionally, the right wing was composed of warriors from the western lands of the empire and warriors from its eastern part formed the left wing. The triple division was usually employed in big armies, but it also turned out to be tactically useful in smaller units.

In the case of larger armies the rear was the most complex part. The unit guarding the main force at the back was called "chagdaul" (the guards). There were also special groups of warriors protecting the sides. These "surrounding" units were called "kumbul".

The rear unit was followed by the reserves, called the nape (Mongol "gedzhige").

There were also separate, highly specialized troops composed of warriors called nekeül (chasers). Carpini writes, "In order to look for people and cattle, the commanders of the [Mongol] army send plunderers who are very clever and good at trailing." These men thoroughly searched the invaded territory and it was almost impossible to find shelter. After the Mongol invasion of Poland in 1241, one of the Cistercian abbots wrote, "the land of Sandomierz has been destroyed, Cracow district has been deserted and the people exterminated. No one has survived in their hiding place. Few people managed to leave forests and find shelter in a fortress before the Mongols set about searching the mountaintops and woodlands."¹⁰

The guides ("gadzharchi") played an important role too. Their task was to lead the army through a foreign territory, to inform them of the best trails and fords as well as of obstacles. The guides were often recruited from among the locals willing to cooperate.

In addition, big Mongol armies had groups of men who specialized in concrete areas, such as engineering. Thanks to these units, Mongol troops successfully coped with all sorts of natural obstacles, artificial defensive lines blocking the track or fortified, defensive places. The military activities of the Mongol troops attacking the Kingdom of Hungary in 1241 are a spectacular example of their usefulness and efficiency. King Béla IV expected the Mongol attack would come soon and

⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Warszawa 1994.

¹⁰ *Kodeks dyplomatyczny Małopolski*, vol. II, ed. F. Piekosiński [in] "Monumenta Medii Aevi Historica", vol. IX, Kraków 1886, no. 457.

ordered defenses to be built in the main Carpathian passes in the eastern part of the kingdom. He supervised the construction himself to make sure they were strong enough to withstand the attack. The Mongol forces destroyed the obstacles within three days! Thomas of Split, the author of the account of the Mongol invasion and conquest of Hungary writes, "They [the Mongols] had at their disposal over 40.000 men armed with hatchets, who marched in front of the army. They cut down forests, prepared the roads and removed all obstacles blocking the frontier passes. They forced the frontier defences erected by the king [King Béla IV] as easily as if they were made of straws not of piles of huge oaks and firs. The abatises were destroyed and burnt within a very short time and no obstacle hindered the passage of the troops." When they entered the Hungarian Plain, the same specialists built a bridge over the Sajó River. The Mongol army walked over the bridge and defeated Hungarian forces near the village of Muhi. In addition, the invaders used the bridge to transport their engines of war, which were throwing boulders at the Hungarians. According to Thomas of Split, the stones "caused extensive damage to the Hungarian army." Chinese sources confirm that siege machines and engines of war which threw stones, large arrows and pots with incendiary mixtures were frequently used by Mongol forces in battle. They could be dismantled and transported on wagons.¹¹

Wagons called "koytuul" (the rear) followed an army on the march. They never took part in actual battle but provided shelter at night or after a fight. The wagons carried the warriors' possessions, sometimes their families, the camp and siege equipment, the arms and armour, the horses, and the farm animals belonging to the invaders or looted. After a successful campaign, the wagons were full of booty as well as slaves. Such laagers were often large in size. C. de Bridia writes, "Whenever the Tatars [that is to say, the Mongols] intend to conquer a new territory, their army is accompanied by the warriors' families, including their wives, children and servants, their tents

and equipment, as well as their cattle and sheep. The wagons and the horses move carefully, because they carry large quantities of weapons, bows, quivers and arrows."

The herds of animals that traveled with an army were often quite numerous. According to Marco Polo, before a war expedition every Mongol man had to bring with him about 18 male horses and mares. Undoubtedly, this mention should not be taken literally. The number of animals must have depended on a warrior's financial situation. Nonetheless, the above regulation means that Mongol troops had many horses, which could have resulted in lack of forage. Mongol forces, however, did not usually find it difficult to feed their animals. They employed their traditional techniques and grazed the livestock in the fields of the conquered lands. Being nomads, they neither stored nor transported any forage. These nomadic people never mowed grass nor stocked their wagons with fodder for the horses and the other animals. Their flocks were used to grazing only in vast pastures. The commanders of high rank were responsible for dividing land into parts. Each part was used by a unit to build an encampment.

The numerous wagons must have hindered the passage of troops. Some researchers argue that a Mongol unit without any wagons was able to cover up to 90 km a day. Ponces de Aubon, master of the French Templars, expresses the above opinion in his letter of June-July 1241 to King Louis IX the Saint.¹² Some modern historians seem to agree with this hypothesis.¹³ Troops with wagons could travel at a speed of 50-60 km a day. In one of his letters describing Mongol troops' expedition from Silesia via Moravia to Hungary organized in the spring of 1241, Václav, king of Bohemia, estimates that the Mongol army could cover 40 miles a day.¹⁴ If the wagons were loaded up with heavy equipment, they might have moved even more slowly and the train of vehicles might have been very long. Ponces de Aubon, the above mentioned master of the Templars, wrote that the Tatar [Mongol] army was 18 miles long and 12 miles wide.¹⁵ Therefore the lost source used by C. Gromann may have contained true information. The passage of Mongol troops through

¹¹ U. G o n g o r ż a b, *Mongolčuudyn galt eevseg che-regledeg bajsan tuuchijn asuudal*, "Archeologijn sudlal. Studia Archeaeologica Instituti Historiae Academiae Scientiarum Reipublicae Populi Mongolici", VII, fasc. 10-18, Ulaanbaatar 1979, p. 114; A. Š k o l j a r, *Kitajskaja doognestrel'naja artillerija*, Moskva 1980; A. D a m - d i n - s u r e n, *Mongolyn zevsgijn tovè tuuch*, Ulaanbaatar 1990; W. Ś w i ę t o ś l a w s k i, *Arms and Armour of the Nomads of the Great Steppe in the Times of the Mongol Expansion (12th-14th Centuries)*, Łódź 1999, p. 69.

¹² M. G o l i ń s k i, *Templariusze a bitwa pod Legnicą – próba rewizji poglądów*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny", Y. XCVIII, 1991, no. 3, p. 11.

¹³ G. L a b u d a, *Zaginiona kronika z pierwszej połowy XIII wieku w Rocznikach Królestwa Polskiego Jana Długosza. Próba rekonstrukcji*, Poznań 1983, p. 268.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ M. G o l i ń s k i, *Templariusze a bitwa ...*, p. 11.

territories near the town of Racibórz during the nomads' first invasion of Poland in 1241 may have lasted 8-10 days.¹⁶ It should also be noted that the Mongol army not only marched forward but frequently plundered the invaded lands too. The detailed inspections carried out after the Tatar attacks of 1618-1620 on Red Ruthenia are a useful source of evidence in this respect. As a result of this campaign, 77 percent of the towns and 82 percent of the villages were destroyed.¹⁷ According to an account of another attack, they left behind a trail of destruction, 30 km wide. Thus they attacked areas lying 15 km away from the route.¹⁸ Although the data refers to an event which occurred a few centuries later, our situation was similar, because in both cases the invaders were steppe peoples and both their lifestyle and military arts were characteristic of the steppe.

The encampments were sometimes surrounded by circles of wagons joined together to form the defensive circle or encampment (*küryen*) mentioned above. The warriors found shelter there if the enemy army began its counter-attack.

As I said before, the wagons carried, among other things, the arms and armour needed during an expedition. Part of the equipment belonged to the state, that is to say, the khan. The *Secret History of the Mongols* mentions that in Genghis Khan's state there were a number of warehouses where suits of armour, bows, quivers and arrows were kept. The night guards were responsible for the maintenance and distribution of the stocks. However, the majority of the weapons used by Mongol troops were private property. Written sources do not provide sufficient information regarding the existence of any strict regulations governing a warrior's individual equipment. Foreign envoys and travelers visiting steppes countries left accounts of the nomadic warriors' standard equipment, arms and armour. According to Chinese sources, men between 15 and 50 years of age joined the army of the Mongol tribe called the Khitans. Each warrior had to possess three horses, iron armour, four bows, four hundred arrows, a short spear and a long one, a hammer, an awl, a small penon, a tinderbox and, if the expedition was a long one, they had to provide horse armour as well.¹⁹

Carpini writes that a thirteenth century Mongol warrior "had to have at least two or three bows or at least one good bow and three quiverfuls of arrows, an axe and ropes for towing the engines of war. The wealthy men, on the other hand, had slightly curved, pointed swords with only one cutting edge, an armoured horse, leg defences, helms and armour." Thomas of Split argued that Tartar warriors "had helms made of iron and ox skin, curved swords, quivers and bows fixed to their belts." According to Marco Polo, each Mongol warrior was equipped with "a sword, a club, a bow, sixty arrows: thirty small arrows with a short, iron point used for piercing remote targets and thirty larger ones with broad arrowheads which were tossed at people who were very near in order to injure their faces, shoulders, cut the bow strings and cause damage."

The above descriptions are very similar, but they differ in detail. They do not provide sufficient evidence of the existence of concrete regulations concerning the arms and armour of particular soldiers. They can, however, be considered descriptions of the most typical sets of military accessories.

The issue of the standard equipment of an individual, Mongol warrior is connected with the question of army division. Was the Mongol army divided into units equipped with a given type of weapon corresponding to light and heavy cavalry frequently mentioned in the European literature? One can assume that the division did not exist in the Mongol army and that each battle unit was composed of warriors equipped with different kinds of defensive and offensive arms.

The rules of command are also of vital importance to an army. Genghis Khan considered them as highly significant and his decisions are surprisingly consistent with the present days norms and practices. The ruler realized that a commander's personality, characteristics, experience as well as his ability to communicate with the soldiers and the technique of giving commands he employed influenced his value as a commander. According to Rashid ad-Din, Genghis Khan issued concrete regulations stating that "a commander could only be a man who knew what hunger or thirst was and could say how much a man could endure; a man who cared about his men while leading them into battle and would not let his soldiers suffer from thirst or hunger and would prevent the cattle from getting scraggy." Genghis Khan was of the opinion that "all commands must be clear and understandable. They were to be repeated so that the subordinates knew what they were to do. There had to be a briefing before each

¹⁶ G. L a b u d a, *Zaginiona kronika ...* p. 279.

¹⁷ M. H o r n, *Skutki ekonomiczne najazdów tatarskich z lat 1605-1633 na Ruś Czerwoną*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1964, table II.

¹⁸ B. K o c o w s k i, *Wyprawa Tatarów na Węgry przez Polskę w 1594 r.*, Lublin 1948, p. 38.

¹⁹ A. D a m d i n s u r e n, *Mongolyn zevsgijn ...*, p. 89.

raid and the commanders who failed to hold one were to be punished.”

According to family tradition, Genghis Khan strictly obeyed these rules. The *Secret History of the Mongols* mentions that he praised his eldest son, Jöchi, for “conquering woodland peoples without losing too many men and horses and without exhausting the army.”

Genghis Khan kept strict discipline in his army and thus made his warriors carry out his orders. The soldiers had to be absolutely obedient to their commanders both in battle and during breaks in military activities. The warriors could not get bored while an army was not on the march. They had to clean and mend the equipment, arms and armour, because the commanders would check whether they were in perfect condition, the thread and needle included.

When Mongol forces set off on a war expedition, the commanders were obligated to keep absolute discipline. The death penalty was a common form of punishment and the principle of collective responsibility was adopted. The death penalty was imposed on soldiers who escaped from the battlefield, deserted from the army or changed units without permission. Carpini writes that “If the whole army does not retreat, the ones who

escape are killed. If one or two brave warriors attack the enemy and the other men do not follow them, the latter are killed too. If one or more soldiers out of ten are taken captive and the other men do not free them, they are killed as well.”

Discipline in the army was enforced not only through severe punishment but also through rewards. Promotion played a major part here. An experienced and efficient warrior could get promoted and become a commander of middle rank even if he came from the lower class. All the warriors who took part in a campaign had the right to participate in the division of the loot, but of course the shares were proportional to their status.

According to Mongol tradition, the author of most of the regulations concerning the organization of the Mongol army and state was Genghis Khan himself. However, it is difficult to say which elements of the organization of the army and which ways of fighting wars were Genghis Khan’s original inventions. Undoubtedly, some of the techniques must have been traditional practices appreciated and successfully employed by the ruler. Nonetheless, all his decisions contributed to the amazing achievement of the nation and its khan.

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