Mongol Eurasia and Its Aftermath, 1200–1500

I. The Rise of the Mongols, 1200–1260
   A. Nomadism in Central and Inner Asia
      1. Mongol groups were a strongly hierarchical organization headed by a single
         leader or khan, but the khans had to ask that their decisions be ratified by a
         council of the leaders of powerful families. Powerful Mongol groups demanded
         and received tribute in goods and in slaves from those less powerful. Some
         groups were able to live almost entirely on tribute.
      2. The various Mongol groups formed complex federations that were often tied
         together by marriage alliances. Women from prestigious families often played
         an important role in negotiating these alliances.
      3. The seasonal movements of the Mongol tribes brought them into contact with
         Manicheanism, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. The Mongols
         accepted religious pluralism. Mongol khans were thought to represent the Sky
         God, who transcended all cultures and religions; khans were thus conceived of
         as universal rulers who both transcended and used the various religions of their
         subjects.
      4. Nomads strove for economic self-sufficiency, but they always relied on trade
         with settled people for certain goods, including iron, wood, cotton, grain, and
         silk. When normal trade relations were interrupted, nomads tended to make
         war on settled agriculturalists.
   B. The Mongol Conquests, 1215–1283
      1. Between 1206 and 1234, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his
         successors, the Mongols conquered all of North China and were threatening the
         Southern Song.
      2. Kublai founded the Yuan Empire with its capital at Beijing in 1271; in 1279 he
         conquered the Southern Song. After 1279, the Yuan attempted to extend its
         control to Southeast Asia. Annam and Champa were forced to pay tribute to the
         Yuan, but an expedition to Java ended in failure.
      3. Historians have pointed to a number of factors that may have contributed to
         the Mongols’ ability to conquer such vast territories. These factors include
         superior horsemanship, better bows, and the technique of following a volley
         of arrows with a deadly cavalry charge. Other reasons for the Mongols’
         success include their ability to learn new military techniques, adopt new
         military technology, and incorporate non-Mongol soldiers into their armies;
         their reputation for slaughtering all those who would not surrender; and their
         ability to take advantage of rivalries among their enemies.
   C. Overland Trade and the Plague
      1. The Mongol conquests opened overland trade routes and brought about an
         unprecedented commercial integration of Eurasia. The growth of long-distance
         trade under the Mongols led to significant transfer of military and scientific
         knowledge between Europe, the Middle East, China, Iran, and Japan.
      2. Diseases including the bubonic plague also spread over the trade routes of the
         Mongol Empire. The plague that had lingered in Yunnan (now southwest China)
         was transferred to central and north China, to Central Asia, to Kaffa, and from
         there to the Mediterranean world.
II. Mongols and Islam, 1260–1500

A. Mongol Rivalry
1. In the 1260s the Il-khan Mongol Empire controlled parts of Armenia and all of Azerbaijan, Mesopotamia, and Iran.
2. At the same time, Russia was under the domination of the Golden Horde, led by Genghis Khan’s grandson Batu, who had converted to Islam.

B. Islam and the State
1. The goal of the Il-khan State was to collect as much tax revenue as possible, which it did through a tax farming system.
2. In the short term, the tax farming system was able to deliver large amounts of grain, cash and silk. In the long term, over-taxation led to increases in the price of grain, a shrinking tax base, and, by 1295, a severe economic crisis. Thus the Il-khan domains fragmented as Mongol nobles fought each other for diminishing resources and Mongols from the Golden Horde attacked and dismembered the Il-khan Empire.
3. As the Il-khan Empire and the Golden Horde declined in the fourteenth century, Timur, the last Central Asian conqueror, built the Jagadai Khanate in central and western Eurasia. Timur’s descendants, the Timurids, ruled the Middle East for several generations.

C. Culture and Science in Islamic Eurasia
1. In literature, the historian Juvaini wrote the first comprehensive account of the rise of the Mongols under Genghis Khan. Juvaini’s work inspired the work of Rashid al-Din, who produced a history of the world. The Timurids also supported notable historians including the Moroccan Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406).
2. Muslims under Mongol rulership also made great strides in astronomy, calendar-making, and the prediction of eclipses.

III. Mongol Domination in China, 1271–1368

A. The Yuan Empire, 1279–1368
2. When the Mongols came to China, it was politically fragmented. The Mongols unified these states and restored or preserved the characteristic features of Chinese government.
3. The Mongols also made some innovations in government. These included tax farming, the use of Western Asian Muslims as officials, and a hierarchical system of legally defined status groups defined in terms of race and function. Under the Yuan hierarchical system Confucians had a relatively weak role, while the status of merchants and doctors was elevated.
4. Under Mongol rule China’s cities and ports prospered, trade recovered, and merchants flourished. Merchants organized corporations in order to pool money and share risks.
5. In the rural areas, cotton growing, spinning, and weaving were introduced to mainland China, and the Mongols encouraged the construction of irrigation systems. In general, however, farmers in the Yuan were overtaxed and brutalized while dams and dikes were neglected.
6. During the Yuan period China’s population declined by perhaps as much as 40 percent, with northern China seeing the greatest loss of population, while the Yangzi Valley actually saw a significant increase. Possible reasons for this
pattern include warfare, the flooding of the Yellow River, north-south migration, and the spread of diseases, including the bubonic plague in the 1300s.

B. Cultural and Scientific Exchange
   1. Exchange of scientific, technological, and mathematical knowledge was especially common between Iran and China, as the Yuan and the Il-khan regimes enjoyed good relations and had similar economic policies and a similar interest in sponsoring intellectual pursuits. China imported Il-khan science and technology; the Il-khans imported Chinese scholars and texts.
   2. During this period Iranian astronomical knowledge, algebra, and trigonometry, and Islamic and Persian medical texts, seeds, and formulas were brought to China.

C. The Fall of the Yuan Empire
   1. In 1368 the Chinese brought an end to years of chaos and rebellion when they overthrew the Mongols and established the Ming Empire. The Mongols continued to hold power in Mongolia, Turkestan, and Central Asia, from which they were able to disrupt the overland Eurasian trade and threaten the Ming dynasty.

III. The Mongols in East Asia
   A. Korea from the Mongols to the Yi, 1231–1500
      1. Korea’s leaders initially resisted the Mongol invasions but gave up in 1258 when the king of Koryo surrendered and joined his family to the Mongols by marriage. The Koryo kings then fell under the influence of the Mongols, and Korea profited from exchange with the Yuan in which new technologies including cotton, gunpowder, astronomy, calendar making, and celestial clocks were introduced.

   B. Political Transformation in Japan, 1274–1500
      1. The first (unsuccessful) Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274 made the decentralized local lords of Kamakura Japan develop a greater sense of unity as the shogun took steps to centralize planning and preparation for the expected second assault.
      2. The second Mongol invasion (1281) was defeated by a combination of Japanese defensive preparations and a typhoon. The Kamakura regime continued to prepare for further invasions. As a result, the warrior elite consolidated their position in Japanese society, and trade and communication within Japan increased, but the Kamakura government found its resources strained by the expense of defense preparations.