

MOSCOW



# CALAMITIES & CATASTROPHES THE TEN ABSOLUTELY WORST YEARS IN HISTORY



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# Calamities and Catastrophes

DEREK WILSON



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## Chapter 1

# 541-2

Human societies may disintegrate for any one of a number of reasons - conquest, pestilence, internal strife or government incompetence. The tragedy which befell the civilisations of the Mediterranean world in 541-2 and undermined its two dominant empires was that all these woes fell upon them at the same time.

The empires in question were Rome and Persia. Both these mighty states could look back on a long and glorious past. They had increased their boundaries, built fine cities and established peace and firm government over their subject people. By the sixth century such achievements lay in a distant past, preserved only in imperial chronicles. But the tide of history had turned again - a fact that made the disasters of this year particularly poignant since they fell upon resurgent empires that were just beginning to recover part of their former glory.

In the second century AD the Roman Empire had constituted a continuous band of territory from what is now Portugal to Iran. But, by the 520s, under pressure from 'barbarian' tribes from central Asia and northern Europe, its borders had shrunk to an area bordering the eastern Mediterranean from the Adriatic coast to the Nile valley. In fact, strictly speaking, it was no longer a *Roman* empire. The Emperor Constantine, who had ruled from 312 to 337, had made two major strategic decisions. He had moved his capital from Rome to Byzantium, on the Bosphorus, which he renamed Constantinople. The new centre was a better place for guarding the empire's Danube and Euphrates borders. He had also replaced a welter of pagan religions with one official religion - Christianity. This gave the heterogeneous empire a philosophical/political unity. Henceforth Christianity and classical culture would constitute the ideological foundation on which European civilisation was built.

The empire was stabilised under rule from two centres, Rome and Constantinople. However, when, in 527, Justinian I came to the throne, the civilisation was looking far from secure. What had been the Western Empire had become a patchwork of barbarian kingdoms - Visigoths ruled what is now Spain, Vandals controlled North Africa, Burgundians and Franks had divided between them what is modern France. Scandinavian and north German tribes competed for Britain, and Ostrogoths were masters of Italy. The Eastern Roman Empire, usually called the Byzantine Empire, was hard-pressed by Huns in the North and the revived Persian Empire in the East. In 540 a Bulgar army raided right up to the walls of Constantinople. And as if that wasn't bad enough, the Byzantine Empire itself was divided by competing versions of Christianity.

Seen against this background, the achievements of Justinian seem truly remarkable. He completely turned the tide of Byzantine affairs. If he had not had

to face a variety of misfortunes which eventually proved to be overwhelming, he might well have restored the power and glory of ancient Rome. This emperor was as forceful and ruthless as he was intelligent. There was no area of life on which he did not set his stamp. After the Bulgar raid he completely rebuilt the fortifications along the northern border. He recodified the laws. He imposed uniformity on the feuding religious factions and made himself the supreme authority in Church as well as state. He outlawed heretics and homosexuals. He forced through administrative and financial reforms, improved the defensive fortifications of the empire and built several churches. The material symbol of his greatness can still be seen in the magnificent Church of Santa Sophia (now a mosque), with its huge dome, which still crowns the skyline of Constantinople (now named Istanbul).

Establishing strong government after years of corruption and administrative incompetence called for ruthlessness. The emperor was hard and uncompromising and he was aided in his reforming programme by some powerful advisers and agents. Foremost among them was his wife, the Empress Theodora. Theodora is one of the most extraordinary women in all of ancient history, and certainly the most important in the story of the Byzantine Empire. Before Justinian made her his mistress and later, his wife, she had been an actress and a woman of very dubious morality. But she was mentally strong and highly intelligent. She came to exercise considerable power and even had a pope deposed on her sole authority. Justinian relied heavily on her advice and she was at her best in times of crisis. On many occasions, the emperor would have abandoned his plans in the light of strong opposition had not Theodora provided an example of unflinching leadership.

Justinian was also fortunate in having in his service a talented administrator and legal adviser: John the Cappadocian. John was a born bureaucrat with a clear mind unclouded by compassion or human sympathy. Justinian's reforms would have been quite impossible without an administrator as single-minded as he was himself. It was John who helped to draw up the new legal code, and he imposed it without fear or favour. Justinian appointed him praetorian prefect of the Eastern Empire, with widespread powers to levy taxes and oversee regional government. John weeded out ineffective officials and men who were using their office to amass personal fortunes. As far as possible he replaced them with others chosen on merit. He was not afraid to stand up to the emperor or to attempt to dissuade him from policies such as foreign wars, which would deplete the treasury and divert funds from administrative reconstruction. Inevitably, his draconian measures aroused opposition. This diatribe by one of his enemies indicates how much he was hated:

...the villainous John the Cappadocian... proceeded to cause misfortunes that were felt by the general public. First, he set out chains and shackles, stocks and irons. Within the praetor's court he established a private prison there in the darkness for punishments that were inflicted upon those who came under his authority... There he shut up those who were being subject to restraint. He exempted no one, whatever his station, from torture. He has no compunction about stringing up, without holding an enquiry, those among whom the only information that had been laid was that they possessed gold... the were either stripped of all they possessed or dead before he let them go... A certain Antiochus, who was

advanced in years at the time when this happened, was named by an informer who told a tale to John that he possessed some gold. So John arrested him and strung him up by the hands, which were fastened by strong, fine cords, until the old man, who denied the charge, was a corpse.

Justinian's reign coincided with that of another great ruler in Persia. Khusro (sometimes spelled Chosroes), who ruled from 531 to 579, was the most outstanding king of the Sassanid dynasty. The Sassanian Empire, founded in 221, had, at its apogee, extended from what is now Turkey to Pakistan and from the Caspian Sea to both shores of the Persian Gulf. However, like the Roman Empire, it had passed its peak by the early sixth century. Enter Khusro I. He was, in many ways, similar to Justinian - forceful and ruthless, an administrative reformer and a builder who left behind several new palaces, fortifications and even towns. Khusro presided over a cultural renaissance. A Christian chronicler, John of Ephesus, wrote of him:

He was a prudent and wise man, and all his lifetime took pains to collect the religious books of all creeds, and read and study them, that he might learn which were true and wise and which were foolish.

Under Khusro, Sassanian art reached its peak of achievement. Everything from clay seals, silverware, pottery and glass to monumental palace architecture testified to the aesthetic refinement, wealth and power of the dynasty. When pagan philosophers were expelled from Athens, Khusro welcomed them to his own capital of Ctesiphon, a city as grand as Constantinople, but now vanished. At the same time he introduced from India the game of chess.

Khusro's political problems mirrored those of Justinian. His empire was beset by internal sectarian divisions within the national religion of Zoroastrianism and by political revolts. Persia faced the constant threat of Huns along its extended northern and eastern frontiers. In 484 they had ravaged the eastern half of the empire and slaughtered a whole Sassanid army, led by the Persian king. Khusro spent the early years of his reign concentrating on overhauling the tax system and imposing long-overdue military reforms. One of his first acts was to agree with Justinian a treaty of 'Endless Peace'. No less than Justinian, the Persian king needed to avoid distractions while he dealt with the empire's internal problems and while he secured his eastern frontier. But, again like Justinian, Khusro was a ruler with huge ambitions. His aim was nothing less than to obtain a stranglehold over all the land and sea routes along which flowed the precious cargoes of merchandise from India and China. Thus, while it was in the interests of both empires to put an end to their rivalry, such a respite could only be temporary.

One reason Justinian was pleased to be free of distractions in the East was his determination on territorial expansion in the West. His ambitions went far beyond establishing strong and efficient government in the Byzantine East. He had never accepted the loss of the western provinces and he was determined to bring together the two halves of the ancient Roman Empire. In this he was assisted by another talented servant, Belisarius. Belisarius was one of the great generals of antiquity, as imaginative and cunning as he was merciless. He also had the advantage of being married to a lady called Antonina, who was a close friend of Theodora. The first test of his loyalty and ability came in 532, when John the

Cappadocian's reforms sparked the first internal crisis of the reign. A revolt broke up in Constantinople and its leaders demanded the sacrifice of the most eminent imperial administrators. Some called for the deposition of the emperor. Justinian would have fled the capital had it not been for the steadfast example of Theodorus. She called upon the services of Belisarius and he put a swift and bloody end to the insurrection. He hoodwinked the rebels into a meeting in the hippodrome, ostensibly to present their grievances. Once he had them inside the arena, Belisarius had the entrances sealed and sent in his troops. According to contemporary accounts, 30,000 rebels were massacred that day. Thereafter, Justinian was free from internal discord.

Justinian now employed Belisarius to carry out his reconquest of the western half of the old empire. In a series of brilliant campaigns between 533 and 534, Belisarius crushed the Vandals and captured their capital of Carthage. North Africa was reconquered for the Roman Empire. The following year, Belisarius crossed the sea, occupied Sicily, then moved northwards through Italy, reaching the city of Ravenna in 540, where he captured the Ostrogoth king and sent him back to Constantinople in chains. Justinian was not best pleased with the humiliation of his enemy. According to his political calculation, the stability of the empire would have been better served by allowing the Ostrogoths to rule a client kingdom in North Italy, paying tribute to Constantinople, until Byzantine rule in the peninsula had been firmly established. The emperor wanted a friendly buffer state to protect his own territory against the Franks to the North. Nevertheless, this turning of the tide of history was a remarkable achievement and just might have led to the re-establishment of Roman rule through the Mediterranean. Byzantium had not been beset by a clutch of new problems.

Justinian had scarcely received the news of victory over the barbarians in the West when he heard of a crisis on the eastern frontier. The Persian king Khusro, urged on by the Ostrogoths, who wanted the Romans to divert their forces from Italy, decided that now was the moment to have a go at attacking Byzantium. The temptation was too great. By now he had energetically addressed his domestic problems, reorganised his army and was ready to confront the old enemy. So it was that, in 540, the two great empires once more went to war. Khusro marched through Syria, captured several Byzantine towns and made for the great prize of Antioch, one of the richest trading centres in Justinian's realm. Antioch, as Khusro knew, was vulnerable. Although it had stout walls, they had recently been severely damaged by an earthquake. The citizens were unable to prevent the Persian looting and burning their city and carrying off thousands of its inhabitants into slavery. Khusro settled them in a newly built town which he called 'Khusro's Better-than-Antioch'. Emboldened by easy victory, he then pressed home his advantage. In the next year's campaign he headed for the Black Sea province of Lazika (part of modern Georgia). Justinian sent Belisarius to repel the resurgent Persians and the region was subjected to months of raid and counter-raid.

For Justinian, the campaigns in North Africa, Italy and Lazika were ruinously expensive. He had inherited a full treasury but, by 541, it was virtually empty. What the emperor needed was a few years of peace in which to establish imperi-

administration in his newly won territories, so that, from taxes and the increase of trade, he could recoup the money expended in conquest. Khusro, too, would have benefited from a period in which to consolidate his gains. What neither ruler reckoned with was the appearance of a new enemy which would make a mockery of both of their calculations - bubonic plague.

This new disaster, which fell upon both great empires, and put their problems into a new perspective, was the outcome of a set of circumstances that had probably begun in 536. Severe meteorological disturbances occurred over the greater part of the northern hemisphere. Procopius, the contemporary Palestinian historian of the Roman Empire, recorded: 'a most dread portent took place... the sun gave forth its light without brightness... the beams it shed were not clear'. Instances of excessively low temperatures, crop failures and drought were recorded in Ireland, China, Peru and Europe. A devastating event affected life in Scandinavia, North America and Greenland. Over a vast area the light of the sun was filtered through a dust cloud, resulting in dramatic falls in temperature. There could be no contemporary explanation for these phenomena, but recent scientific speculation has come up with two possible causes. Some suggest that the dust cloud was the result of volcanic activity. Cataclysmic eruptions (though on a smaller scale) in recent centuries have spewed thousands of tons of sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere, giving rise to 'dry fog' and acid rain, which have been disastrous for crops, animals and humans. Could the Indonesian volcano Krakatoa, have been responsible for a veil which spread around the globe? The other possible cause is comet activity. Meteorite bombardment has long been suggested as a possible cause for the climatic change that brought to an end the age of dinosaurs. A large piece of debris from a comet tail striking the earth at several thousand kph. would have a force equivalent to over 1,000 atomic bombs and would throw up a plume of dust which would rapidly spread through the atmosphere and take months or years to disperse. One theory states that just such a dramatic event occurred in northern Australia in 536.

Whatever happened at that time was the result of the most destructive force to hit our planet in thousands of years; the effect on the climate was profound, with disastrous consequences for the ecological balance. Hitherto, plague had been confined to the tropical regions of Africa. The rat parasite that carries bubonic plague can only flourish at moderate temperatures. The heat of the desert and the semi-desert band that crosses the continent from modern Senegal to Sudan was a barrier it could not cross. The temperature drop caused by the dust cloud breached that northern African barrier long enough for the fleas to cross into the temperate Mediterranean zone. Procopius charted its spread:

It started from the Egyptians who dwell in Pelusium [near modern Port Said]. Then it divided and moved in one direction towards Alexandria and the rest of Egypt, and in the other direction it came to Palestine on the borders of Egypt; and from there it spread over the whole world, always moving forward and travelling at times favourable to it. For it seemed to move by fixed arrangement, and to tarry for a specified time in each country, casting its blight slightly upon none, but spreading in either direction right out to the ends of the world, as if fearing lest some corner of the earth might escape it.

Alexandria was a great mercantile entrepôt in the sixth century. In it



waterfront warehouses the produce of North Africa, 'the granary of the Roman Empire', was stored. It was the terminus of vital trade routes which avoided Persian territory and brought, by sea and overland caravan, African slaves, Chinese silks, Indian gems and Indonesian spices. Large fleets regularly plied across the eastern Mediterranean to Constantinople. By 541 they were carrying new and unwelcome cargo.

Today, we can describe clinically the symptoms of bubonic plague and how it spreads. The rat flea carries a bacterium, *Y. pestis*. As the rat moves through unsanitary and crowded towns and villages, the flea 'jumps ship', seeking a new host - animal or human. When the flea bites its latest victim, the bacterium, which does not harm the rat, is transferred to its new body, with disastrous results. Once in the bloodstream, *Y. pestis* makes its way to the lymph glands, which swell and rupture, appearing on the surface as painful, dark-coloured 'buboes' in the groin or armpits. The victim falls prey to shivering, fever and stiffening of the joints. He/she may experience delirium or fall into a coma. Once the lungs are infected, the plague takes on a new form - pneumonic. Miniscule droplets of sputum are exhaled with every breath, carrying the plague to new victims. The original sufferer has become a machine gun of highly infectious bullets. For several days the newly infected victims display no symptoms. The plague is, therefore, hidden, its real impact concealed. Half of the people catching bubonic plague, if they were reasonably fit and healthy beforehand, survive. Pneumonic plague is virtually one hundred per cent fatal.

It was not only the disease itself that killed people. Some, in delirium or sheer desperation, took their own lives. Some starved to death because there was no one to bring them food. Understandably, neighbours avoided houses where plague victims were lying. More compassionate people faced hardship caring for the afflicted, even if they did not contract the disease:

...when patients fell from their beds and lay rolling on the floor, they kept putting them back in place and when they were struggling to rush headlong out of their houses, they would force them back in, shoving and pulling against them. And when water chance to be near [the sufferers] wished to fall in it... because of... the diseased state of their minds.

People took to wearing name tags, so that they could be identified in the event of sudden death. The forums and public places were deserted.

At that time it was scarcely possible to meet anyone going about the streets of Byzantium; all who had the good fortune to be in health were sitting in their houses, either attending the sick or mourning the dead. If one did succeed in encountering a man going out, he was carrying one of the dead. And work of every description ceased, and all the trades were abandoned by the artisans... Indeed in a city which was simply abounding in all good things widespread starvation was running riot... so that with some of the sick it appeared that the end of life came about sooner than it should have because they lacked the necessities of life.

Fifteen hundred years ago, observers lacked the knowledge of human anatomy and epidemiology that would have enabled them to describe the pestilence objectively. Such medical science as they possessed was freely mixed with religious belief and superstition. Chroniclers, appalled by what they saw and fearful of what it might mean, prophesied the utter destruction of the empire, or

even of the entire human race. They readily reported portents in the heaven warning of imminent disaster. They passed on stories of visions and mystical experiences:

...many people saw shapes of bronze boats carrying passengers with their heads cut off... These figures were seen everywhere as frightening manifestations, especially at night. They appeared like gleaming bronze and fire, black and without heads they sat in their glistening boats, travelling rapidly across the water - a sight which made those who saw it almost drop dead.

Both the Byzantine and Persian empires possessed physicians and philosopher/astrologers whose understanding of the human condition was advanced by the standards of the day, but they were powerless to cope with the new and terrible visitation. The second-century physician, Galen, whose thinking had dominated medical theory and practice for centuries, made important discoveries about the nervous system and the 'flow' (not circulation) of blood, but his assertion that health was determined by the balance of four 'humours' which had their bases in blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile was of no value in combating plague. His disciples sought to achieve 'balance' in their patients by a combination of simple drugs, incantations, the application of saints' bones and other magical charms, diet and exercise. The only result of such clinical methods was that many doctors succumbed to plague as a result of close contact with the patients. Small wonder that Procopius was sceptical about the medical services available:

...the most illustrious physicians predicted that many would die, who unexpectedly escaped entirely from suffering... and declared that many would be saved, who were destined to be carried off almost immediately.

Potentially more valuable was the practice of isolating plague victims. Hospitals were the invention of early Christians in Palestine and, by the fifth century, they were to be found in many towns and cities of the Roman Empire. There were several in Constantinople, and Justinian provided state aid to them to cope with the new emergency, but these institutions were soon overwhelmed by the sheer size of the problem. Procopius and other chroniclers have left us a vivid and horrifying picture of life in the Byzantine capital during these dreadful months and the scenes they recorded must have been replicated in other towns and cities.

The most urgent problem was disposal of the dead. The city's cemeteries were soon filled, even when people were being buried three or more to a grave. Justinian commandeered waste or unused land to provide more burial ground, but these, too, were overflowing within weeks. The next location found for the cadavers was along the city walls. At regular intervals there were watchtowers designed to house soldiers to man the walls when Constantinople came under attack. These empty buildings were now used for a more gruesome purpose. The roofs were removed and bodies were thrown inside and stamped on in order to get as many as possible into the space available. The stench drifting over the city was appalling. The terrible reality presents a real challenge to the imagination, and another contemporary writer bewailed:

How can anyone speak of or recount such a hideous sight, and who can watch this burial, even though his soul remain in his body and not waste away from bitter lamentations over so much iniquity which would suffice to destroy the children of Adam? How and with what utterances and what hymns, with what funeral laments and groanings should somebody mourn who has survived and witnessed the witness and the press of the fury of the wrath of God?

There is no way of knowing exactly how many people died in the East Roman capital during this terrible visitation, but contemporaries claimed that between a third and a half of Constantinople's citizens succumbed and that this degree of mortality was replicated throughout the Eastern Roman Empire. The plague had no respect; it claimed victims at all levels of society. The emperor himself caught the disease. He was one of the lucky ones not to die but he was ill for several weeks. Had it not been for the vigorous efforts of the Empress Theodora and a small team of palace officials, the running of the empire might well have collapsed into chaos. While the emperor remained incapacitated, officials looked to Theodora for instructions, and it was she who masterminded the provision of aid to sufferers and maintained some semblance of law and order. John the Cappadocian was no longer there to apply his considerable administrative skills to overcoming the crisis. He had survived the mounting tide of criticism, but he could not surmount the opposition of Theodora. The empress was increasingly jealous of John's influence with her husband and eventually she had him stripped of office and sent into exile. Almost at once the Byzantine bureaucracy began to slip back into corruption and was quite unable to handle the effects of plague.

Death brought other grave problems in its wake. Because of the threat of invasion, Justinian had made sure that Constantinople's grain stores were full. But there were soon few bakers left to make bread, and those that were still in business charged inflated prices. There was famine in the midst of plenty and malnutrition kept pestilence company on the streets. The economic effects were no less disastrous than the loss of life. Slavery was the basis of Byzantine society and when the stock of slaves was drastically cut, all human activities were affected. Farm animals went untended. Shops remained closed. Businesses were out of production. Ships rotted in harbour for want of mariners to sail them and chandlers to equip them. Aristocratic households could not function without indoor and outdoor servants. The army was severely depleted. Government business came to a standstill. Inevitably, the costs of labour and goods rocketed resulting in rapid inflation. In a desperate attempt to stabilise the currency, the coinage was debased. This made matters worse since those who could afford to do so hoarded gold and silver, which drove down the value of coin, forcing producers to charge more for their goods and workers to demand higher wages. The government tried to halt the wage-price spiral by forbidding workers to raise the price of their labour. In March 544, Justinian issued the following edict:

Pursuant to the chastening that we have received in the benevolence of our Lord God, some people have abandoned themselves to avarice and demand double and triple prices and wages that are contrary to the custom prevalent from antiquity, although such people ought rather to have been chastened by this calamity. It is therefore our decision to forbid such covetous greed... In the future no businessman, workman or artisan in any occupation, trade, or agricultural pursuit shall dare to charge a higher price or wage than that of the custom prevalent from antiquity.

It is no surprise that this clumsy attempt to frustrate the laws of simple economics had little effect.

Inevitably, fear and grief drove people to ask the question: 'Why?' Procopius confessed himself baffled:

Now in the case of all other scourges sent from heaven some explanation of a cause might be given by daring men, such as the many theories propounded by those who are clever in these matters, for they love to conjure up causes which are absolutely incomprehensible to man... but for this calamity, it is quite impossible either to express in words or to conceive in thought any explanation, except indeed to refer it to God.

Later moralists, who saw the events of the 540s as precursors to the collapse of the Sassanian and Western Roman empires, had less hesitation. A seventh-century monastic chronicler interpreted the catastrophe in terms of divine judgement. God had sent his agents to punish the arrogant presumption and cruelties of the ancient empires:

The land of the Persian was given to Devastation for him to devastate it, sending its inhabitants into captivity and to slaughter; Syria was given to the sword of Devastation, its inhabitants to captivity and slaughter; the Roman empire was given to Devastation and its inhabitants to captivity and to slaughter.

By the time this writer recorded his view of history, he was able to see the plague as part of the long-term decline of Sassanian Persia and of Rome's empire in the West. To those who lived through these terrible times, matters were more complex.

The enemies of the Byzantine Empire were not slow to take advantage of its weakness. The Persians attempted to press home their advantage in the region between the Black Sea and Mesopotamia and laid siege to Edessa. The inconclusive war went on for months and ended in a truce under whose terms Khusro undertook to remove his troops from the area for five years, in return for a payment of 2,000 pounds in gold. It was a heavy price, but Justinian needed to buy time. Affairs were going badly in Italy. Under a new king, the Ostrogoths were mounting a fresh offensive, steadily reclaiming territory which the Byzantines had gained. Justinian had to send Belisarius back to the West in a desperate attempt to cling onto his conquests there. But the great general was woefully short of resources. The plague had decimated the Byzantine army and economic difficulties created shortages of equipment. Belisarius found himself bogged down in a long and, eventually, unsuccessful series of campaigns. The grand vision of recreating the glories of the Roman Empire had to be abandoned.

The debilitating effects of the plague cannot be described only in terms of economic and political decline. There was a widespread sense of fatalism. When Bulgars and other tribes displaced by the Huns raided into the Balkans and northern Greece, they encountered little resistance. The garrisons that should have defended the inhabitants were seriously undermanned and the people had no confidence in the government to protect them. They had to suffer the barbarian incursions, watch their homes being pillaged and their womenfolk raped. There was only one way to put an end to their ordeal: they had to pay the invaders to go away. Some wealthy citizens hid their treasures - and many never

returned to reclaim them. Numerous hoards of buried coins, silver plate and gold ornaments have been found throughout this region – graphic testimony to the turbulence of the times. Administration broke down and much of Justinian's reforming work was undone.

Yet, ironically, the pestilence that devastated the Eastern Roman Empire also saved it from more severe depredations. The plague took no account of territorial boundaries, as Procopius recorded:

...this calamity... did not come in one part of the world or upon certain men, nor did it confine itself to any season of the year, so that from such circumstances it might be possible to find subtle explanation of a cause, but it embraced the entire world, and blighted the lives of all men, though differing from one another in the most marked degree, respecting neither sex nor age.

When he described this catastrophe as one that 'embraced the entire world' Procopius was, of course, referring to the world he knew: Europe, the Middle East, northern Africa and the nearer parts of Asia. However, this outbreak reached well beyond the fringes of the known Mediterranean world and resulted in human mortality on an unimaginable and incalculable scale. It galloped over mountains, deserts and seas, striking down men, women and children as far away as Ireland, China and the African interior.

Thus, for example, raiders across the borders of the weakened Byzantine Empire often took back with them more than sackfuls of loot. When the Alemanni (a Germanic tribe) leader, Leutharis, led a raid into northern Italy, he was able to plunder at will but, when he turned for home with his laden wagons of loot,

He became deranged and started raving like a madman. [He] was seized with a violent ague and would fall over backwards, foaming at the mouth, his eyes glaring dreadfully... The plague continued to rage until his whole army was destroyed.

Unfortunately, no Persian records describing events in the 540s have survived but Byzantine writers recorded, in brief, the spread of contagion into the territory of the invader. John of Ephesus referred to this period in Persia's history as years of 'famine, plague, madness and fury'. Khusro had to give up the siege of Edessa when many of his troops succumbed to disease. *Y. pestis* travelled with Khusro's armies and along his trade routes. Antioch, Nisibis and other important centres were virtually depopulated. Khusro, victorious over his human enemies and confident of further military successes, had encountered a foe he could not beat. It was Persian weakness, not Byzantine strength, that prevented Persia advancing irresistibly westwards. Militarily, the mid-540s were years of stagnation. Two mighty empires stood like punch-drunk boxers, eyeing each other blearily, swaying from side to side and unable to land any telling blows.

Matters were little different in Europe, beyond the farthest Byzantine border. The plague is recorded as reaching Frankish territory in 543. Familiar, dreadful scenes were soon to be witnessed throughout Gaul (the land of the Franks):

...so many people were killed throughout the whole region and the dead bodies were so numerous that it was not even possible to count them. There was such a shortage of coffins and tombstones that ten more bodies were buried in the same grave. In St Peter's church [in Clermont-Ferrand] alone on a single Sunday three hundred dead bodies were counted. Death came very quickly. An open sore like a snake

bite appeared in the groin or the armpit, and the man who had it soon died of its poison, breathing his last on the second or third day.

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In terms of the long haul of history, the real impact of plague and war in the years 541-2 was on the size of populations. In the twenty-first century we face the problem of overpopulation. Fifteen hundred years ago societies that felt themselves just as secure as we do fell into the abyss of drastic population collapse. In the first two years of the pandemic it has been suggested that four million of the East Roman Empire's twenty-six million inhabitants disappeared and the decline continued as *Y. pestis* sought out more victims. Whole villages and towns vanished. Cities shrank. Crumbling walls left their citizens vulnerable to marauders. Farmland fell into disuse. Governments faced declining revenue and could no longer provide their people with the benefits of advanced civilisation. The same phenomena were to be observed in Persia and the other nations fringing the Mediterranean world.

These ancient societies were not allowed time to recover. Long before population levels, stable government and a measure of prosperity had returned, the Persians and Byzantines faced another foe. Within a century, the great civilisations that had shared the world of the Mediterranean basin found themselves facing a new, vigorous, expanding empire, bursting out of its Arabian heartland. Less than thirty years after the plague visitation of Constantinople, a boy was born in Mecca whose impact upon the lands where Christianity and Zoroastrianism flourished would, in its way, be as devastating as the earlier rabid-borne invasion. His name was Mohammed. When the armies of Islam marched out of Arabia carrying their new faith, at swordpoint, to all points of the compass, the older civilisations had been so weakened that they had no effective answer.

The circumstances under which the ancient Mediterranean civilisation collapsed present us with several 'what ifs'. What if court rivalries had not forced John the Cappadocian from office? What if Theodora had lived longer (she died in 548)? What if Justinian and Khusro had managed to agree a lasting peace? What if the bubonic plague had not struck when it did? These lead us to bigger questions. Could the empire of Rome have been recreated in the sixth century? Could the Sassanian and Roman empires have survived barbarian incursions? Impressive ancient ruins litter the lands from Spain's Atlantic coast to the River Indus. Valley-spanning viaducts, soaring pillars that once graced temples, wide amphitheatres scooped from the earth, the crumbling walls of beautiful palaces, javelin-straight highways along which the legions once marched - all such examples of vanished grandeur stir us to wonder and to reflect on the reasons why empires rise and fall.

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## Chapter 2

# 1241-2

The Mongol Empire was the largest empire of all time; larger, in fact, than all the world's other major empires put together. From their base in the region of Karakorum - east of the modern city of Ulaanbaatar in modern Mongolia - these remarkable nomadic warriors conquered many of the peoples of the Eurasian land mass and, with no sophisticated administrative system, held sway over a domain extending from the German frontier to Korea, and from the Arctic Ocean to the Persian Gulf. They even made seaborne assaults on Japan and Java. The Mongols came to rule most of the world that existed - as far as they knew. They clashed with older and technically more advanced civilisations in what are now China, Tibet, Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Hungary, Georgia, Armenia and Palestine. They incorporated in their empire devotees of three major religions - Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. But what they tolerated was vastly outweighed by what they rejected and overthrew. Farmland was torched, towns and cities were left as smouldering ruins. Whole peoples were uprooted and driven before the invaders, some obliged to become conquerors in their turn, in their quest for living space. They enjoyed a well-earned reputation for military might, bravery and violence. They wrought havoc wherever they went and struck fear into the hearts of all who lay in the path of their irrepressible expansion.

The Mongols found such success not because they *had* a great army, but because they *were* a great army. Reared on the poor grassland of the steppes where grazing was sparse, these people had to be constantly on the move, searching for pasture and, when necessary, driving off the existing inhabitants. They lived on horseback and were masters at handling their small, sturdy ponies which had as much stamina as their riders. The Mongols hunted with bow and arrow from horseback. They were, in effect - and were reared from childhood to be - a light cavalry. Theirs was a military culture. Their warrior bands possessed endurance, mobility and discipline. When other civilisations that had developed the arts of warfare in their own ways - perfecting armour, weapons and fortifications to suit their own needs - confronted these simply-accoutred fighting units, they were at a loss to know how to deal with them. This largely accounts for the devastation the Mongols wrought when they fell upon the armies of armoured knights who were the cream of medieval European society. The shock inflicted by the invaders in 1241-2 was as great as the devastation they caused. Outlandish, fearless, fearsome, these 'devils' threatened to put an end to a millennium of Christian civilisation and to sweep all before them until they reached the Atlantic. However, boldness and brutality alone would not have turned fighters into conquerors. What made the difference was the emergence among them of leaders

who were master strategists and tacticians.

The greatest of them was Temujin, who, in 1206, brought all the tribes under his control and was thenceforth known as Genghis Khan, or 'universal ruler'. We would today label him a psychopathic monster and recognise in his characteristics that have marked other dictators: he had an obsessive belief in his divine mission to rule the world. He was not restricted by any moral scruples in the pursuance of his vision, and he demanded from all and every one of his people unquestioning loyalty. But he was no fool; quite the contrary. He based his campaigns on carefully gathered intelligence and executed them with imagination and cunning. In 1211 he began his invasion of the Chin Empire of northern China. Three armies breached the Great Wall and attacked towns and cities lying along the route of their southward march. Genghis learned from his enemies the arts of siege warfare and used captives to build siege engines to destroy their own defences. He also forced captives to march in front of his own forces in order to face the missiles of the defenders. These were formidable indeed. Sophisticated Chin weapons included crossbows capable of launching arrows 500 metres, wagon-mounted catapults, gunpowder missiles and flaming naphtha. Genghis Khan collected information about all these unfamiliar techniques. Khanbaliq (modern Beijing), formerly considered impregnable, fell in 1215 after a year-long siege. Prisoners were of value only as sources of information, forced labour or 'cannon fodder'. The war against the ancient Chinese civilisations continued for seventy years - long after Genghis Khan's death (1227). But there was no stopping the impetus to conquest which he had begun. In 1235 the Mongols turned their attention to Europe.

Thirteenth-century Europe was a region with twin identities. From the secular viewpoint it was a conglomeration of feudal states whose rulers were frequently in competition with each other for territorial or economic gain. All central Europe from the Rhine valley to Vienna and from the Baltic coast to central Italy constituted the German Empire. Scores of semi-autonomous principalities, dukedoms and archdioceses lay under the overall rule of the Holy Roman Emperor. But these states, together with the rest of the continent, also had a common religious identity. They were Latin Christendom, under the spiritual rule of the pope in Rome. Church and state were closely intertwined. Because the rulers of Christian Europe were often at war among themselves, military training was an integral part of social life. The art and science of European warfare rested on two foundations: the castle and the knight. Kings and nobles dominated the lands and defended themselves within massive fortifications which, by the thirteenth century, had reached a high degree of sophistication. Much of medieval warfare centred on the siege, the attempt to storm or starve into submission the castle garrisons.

When a great man went forth to battle, the cream of his army was the mounted knight. This warrior rode a large, powerful horse, encased his body in chain mail or plate armour, wore a helmet sometimes surmounted by a crest or plume and carried a shield proudly blazoned with his personal heraldic device and sported an array of weapons, prominent among which were the lance and broadsword.



The charge of a massed body of knights was intended to and often did strike fear into the enemy. Once the adversaries' battle line had been broken, cavalry and supporting infantry engaged in hand-to-hand fighting.

Knighthood was surrounded by a pseudo-religious mystique known as the code of chivalry. Bards, minstrels and troubadours sang songs and told tales of brave and saintly deeds performed by such heroes as the legendary King Arthur. For two centuries and more this military culture had dominated western warfare and had never been confronted with a rival culture with different values and ways of fighting. That was about to change.

Ogodei Khan, who succeeded his father Genghis Khan as Mongol overlord in 1229, was determined to widen the borders of the territory he had inherited from his father. He summoned a military council at Karakorum in 1235 to plan a grand strategy. Batu, Ogodei's nephew, was allocated the westward advance, which he was to undertake in conjunction with the veteran general, Subedei. The immediate targets were to be Russian princes, whose territories lay south of the Baltic, and the peoples of the Hungarian plain. The Mongols had some knowledge of these potential victims but beyond lay unknown lands, said to be phenomenally wealthy and offering enticing prospects of considerable booty. In 1236 an enormous dust cloud moved across central and western Asia, raised by more than 100,000 horsemen. News of this terrifying military juggernaut reached Vienna, Rome, Paris and London - and was dismissed as ludicrous exaggeration. As the Bishop of Winchester remarked casually, if these barbarians are on the move, what concern is that of Christian civilisation: 'Let us leave these dogs to devour one another.'

In Russia the approach of a large army did not provoke undue dismay because the towns and cities of the region were protected by dense forest, which would slow down and dissipate the Mongol horde. What a shock it was to hear that the invaders were hacking wide swathes through the trees and advancing steadily with carts carrying siege engines. The princes had not combined their forces to confront the threat and their settlements fell, one after another. The merciless slaughter and destruction were on an epic scale. It was a Mongol custom to keep a tally of their victims by cutting an ear from each enemy corpse. By the time they had finished with the Russians, their haul amounted to 270,000 ears.

While his warriors moved into winter quarters to divide up their loot, Batu sent spies ahead into Europe to gather information in preparation for his next campaigns. He also despatched envoys to King Béla IV of Hungary and Pope Gregory IX, demanding unconditional surrender. Béla did call on the emperor for support but Gregory, who considered himself to be God's viceroy in ruling the entire universe, paid no attention to threats from what one theologian called 'the detestable people of Satan'.

Rome was far enough away to be safe. The same was not true of the capital of Russian Orthodox Christianity, Kiev. Russia's grandest city boasted a magnificent cathedral and 400 churches. When the Mongols surrounded it in 1240, it must have seemed that the maw of hell had belched forth a demonic pestilence against the people of God. As the invaders encircled it, one chronicler described the fear

of the intimidated citizenry: 'The rattling of their innumerable carts, the bellowing of camels and cattle, the neighing of horses and the wild battle cries were so overwhelming as to render inaudible conversation within the city.' Kiev was utterly destroyed and never regained its former ascendancy.

In the winter of 1241 Batu's marauders crossed the frozen Ukrainian grasslands towards Poland, the last barrier to central Europe. Lublin fell to them then Cracow. The people of Wroclaw fled to safety, leaving their homes in flames rather than allowing the Mongols to violate them. The great city of Breslau successfully resisted and, instead of wasting the advantage of their impetus in a long siege, the Mongols passed it by. Now it was clear that these savages would have to be faced with a superior force of the world's finest mounted warriors: the Christian knights. Among the European elite there was no doubt that their iron-clad champions would wipe the floor with the wild-eyed nomads from the uncivilised wastes of the Asian steppes. So, at last, national leaders girded themselves to defend Christian culture.

The enemy they so seriously underestimated was as clever as he was violent. Subedei's strategy would stand up to comparison with that of Caesar, Napoleon or any other great Western general. In 1241 his smashing of Poland was a massive diversionary tactic to draw potential enemy forces away from his principal objective, Hungary. Subedei divided his host into three armies. A northern wing of 20,000 men was committed to the advance through Poland and started out first. He was kept fully informed of the progress of his men by an extremely efficient pony express service. The post riders covered long distances through difficult enemy country at remarkable speed so that the commander-in-chief had news of significant events within hours. After two weeks, when he knew how successful the assault on Poland had been, Subedei launched the rest of his horde. Subedei led the main army of some 30,000 warriors directly into Hungary while a smaller contingent was despatched across the Carpathian mountains to ensure that the Mongols would not be surprised by an attack on their southern flank.

Why were Batu and Subedei particularly intent on the conquest of Hungary? The basic answer was that it was an easy target offering rich pickings. Hungary was the leading state of south-western Europe, boasting fine cities, churches, cathedrals and the well-filled houses of nobles and merchants. Mongol chiefs needed constant victories. Their support depended on keeping their followers supplied with booty. Any ruler who settled for an easy life, enjoying the fruits of earlier successes, would not remain ruler for long. Mongol expansionism generated its own momentum. Conquest was the only necessary justification. But Batu had, or claimed to have, specific grievances with the Hungarians. In earlier conflicts Mongols had clashed with another nomadic tribe, the Cumans. They had fled, en masse, into Hungary and had been given asylum to settle on the plain. Batu demanded the return of his 'servants' and warned Béla that failure to comply would be severely punished. The Cumans, he observed, lived in tents and would find escape relatively easy, but the soft Hungarian city-dwellers would be like sitting ducks to his warriors. Béla not only failed to heed this warning, he also

murdered the envoys. Honour and revenge demanded that King Béla and his people should pay a heavy price for their 'treachery'. The Cumans might have been a considerable asset to the Hungarians in their forthcoming conflict. They were experts in the kind of fast-moving, versatile battle tactics at which the Mongols excelled. Unfortunately, internal rivalries deprived Béla of their services. A rumour was circulated that the Cumans were secretly allied to the Mongols and were only waiting for their moment to turn on their hosts. This was the kind of misunderstanding that was almost inevitable when such completely different cultures were forced to live alongside each other. It resulted in a civil war, after which the Cumans moved on southwards, raiding and pillaging the Hungarians as they went (and thus seeming to justify the prejudice against them). This racial motivated conflict played into the hands of Batu and Subedei; the land into which they were marching was in a state of chaos before they had fired a single arrow.

Thus, in April 1241, three alien forces were converging on the Christian West. Within the space of forty-eight hours two great battles were fought which had shattering consequences for Europe. In the North the feudal leaders of an area now covering parts of Poland, Germany, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were gathering their forces to face the Mongol threat. The plan was to merge two armies led by Duke Henry II of Lower Silesia (known as 'Henry the Pious' or 'Henry the Bearded') and his brother-in-law, King Wenceslas I of Bohemia. As well as having their own soldiers under their command, they were joined by contingents of the Teutonic Knights and the Knights Templar. These were military orders of fighting monks, whose origins had been in the crusades to the Holy Land, men whose whole lives were dedicated to the defence of Christendom from incursion by Muslims, pagans and any other peoples who were enemies of the cross they wore on their tunics; men committed to the highest standards of discipline and professional prowess. These were God's household cavalry. In addition Duke Henry had a contingent of gold miners (of whom more later). His total force numbered some 30,000 and Wenceslas would provide a further 50,000. That, they felt sure, should have been more than enough to see off 20,000 pagan nomads, for all the reputation they had gained. Probably it would have been, had the two European armies managed to combine.

Henry's fatal mistake was giving way to impatience, or perhaps nervousness. He was waiting at Liegnitz (modern Legnica), some seventy kilometres west of Breslau, for his brother-in-law to arrive. Had he had the benefit of a courier service comparable to Subedei's, he would have known exactly where Wenceslas was. Apparently he did not. So, instead of waiting in the safety of Liegnitz, he led his army south towards Jawor, in the hope of meeting the Bohemians on the road. Subedei knew exactly where Henry's reinforcements were - less than two days' march away. He, therefore, ordered an extra turn of speed from his host and intercepted Henry's army in an open plain called the Wahlstadt, on 9 April.

Henry disposed his forces as he would have done for any conventional European battle. They were drawn up in four squadrons of armoured cavalry with the gold miners attached to the front squadron. They were the expendable 'pocket bloody infantry', who might absorb something of the first shock of an enemy

charge. According to the 'rules' the Mongols should have launched a frontal attack with blood-curdling screams and the blare of trumpets and settled to hacking and thrusting at close quarters. Unfortunately, the Asiatic warriors had not read the rule book, or, rather, they had written their own. They galloped forward in small groups which were highly manoeuvrable, the only sound to be heard being the jingle of harness and the pounding of hooves. Because their army was split into numerous units, there was no target for the European knights to focus on, nothing against which to launch their ponderous charge. The enemy seemed to be a disorganised rabble of horsemen who dashed forward, fired their arrows from the saddle, then wheeled away. In fact, they were far from disorganised; they used pennants to signal to each other across the battlefield and were able to change tactics rapidly.

The first of Henry's squadrons, badly mauled by the barrage of arrows, pulled back and Henry sent in the second and third squadrons. They were much more successful - or so it seemed. But again they were outwitted by their enemy's tactics, which were designed to confuse the European horsemen. At first the Mongols retreated in apparent disorder, drawing Henry's cavalry after them in headlong pursuit. The dust created by thousands of hooves made visibility difficult. So when, out of the dust cloud, a rider came galloping towards them shouting in Polish: 'Retreat! Retreat!' they did not recognise this as a trick to frighten the Polish-speaking knights. They turned back while their comrades wondered what was happening.

Duke Henry still had his fourth squadron, his reserves. These he now led forward in person, in order to restore some sense of order to the European ranks. This time he managed to come to grips with the enemy and hold them to man-to-man combat. His scattered horsemen recovered and joined in the fray, their superior numbers, at last, beginning to tell. Before long they had put the Mongols to rout, or - once again - so it seemed. Henry charged in pursuit across the plain. But the 'retreating' enemy now wheeled to right and left and began to pour deadly arrows on the European flanks. Not only that; they burned bundles of brushwood which sent clouds of smoke across the battlefield. The advancing knights had left their foot soldiers behind and now the two parts of Henry's army were invisible to each other. The only element in the knights' favour was their heavy armour, which was in some measure impervious to arrows. But the Mongols had an answer for that. They simply shot the horses, then hacked at the unwieldy knights as they struggled to fight on foot. Having disposed of the horsemen, it was a simple matter to turn their deadly attention to the unprotected infantry.

The carnage at Wahlstadt was terrible. Duke Henry was slain as he tried to flee from the battle and his severed head was paraded through the streets of Liegnitz on a lance, as a trophy. With him fell 25,000 men, the greater part of his entire army. The professional Knights Templar put up the stiffest resistance and were cut down to the last man.

And the Battle of Liegnitz was only a sideshow to the main confrontation. While Henry and his motley army were being slaughtered, King Béla was preparing for a showdown with the main Mongol army. He was not in the strongest of positions.

to face a new external threat because his own nation was in a state of political turmoil. In 1235 Béla IV had inherited from his father, Andrew II, a divided country. The nobility had forced Andrew to make considerable political concessions to his leading subjects and to make large grants of Crown land to them. Béla was determined to restore the power and dignity of the monarchy. He dismissed all his father's advisers and reversed several of his laws. To drive home his authority, he had all chairs removed from the council chamber so that dignitaries and petitioners were forced to stand in his presence. What made the king even less popular was his alliance with the Cumans. Béla used these nomads as a private army and this was one of the reasons for the frequent clashes between them and the Hungarian nobles.

When Béla attempted to gather his forces in Pest, his capital, to see off the coming invasion, he had only limited success. The Cumans had gone and several Hungarian nobles refused to raise troops for the king's army. Some actually wanted to see him defeated and killed. Duke Frederick of Austria and Styria offered his support - for a price - but proved to be unreliable and took his men home before the real fighting began. An advance guard of Mongols reached the suburbs of Pest in March and pillaged the area but Béla's forces were not yet ready to engage them. It was not until the end of the month that he was able to set out north-eastwards in search of the main Mongol army. The enemy retreated and seemed content to carry out skirmishing raids on the ponderously advancing European knights and infantry. What Béla did not know was that what he was chasing was only part of the Mongol horde. Batu and Subedei were waiting with most of their army in wooded land beyond the River Sajó, near the town of Mohács.

On 10 April 1241 Béla set up camp near the river, drawing his wagons into a circular stockade. A detachment of Hungarian cavalry advanced to the only river bridge and gave the defending Mongols a serious mauling as they tried to cross. However, as dawn broke on the 11th, the main Mongol army emerged from the wood on the opposite bank, equipped with stone-throwing catapults. They regained the bridge and streamed across. The Hungarians were caught almost completely unawares and hurriedly formed up to defend their position. Hours of hard fighting followed and the battle might have gone either way. However, Subedei had taken a force southwards along the river to seek another crossing point. Working through the night, his men constructed a bridge and crossed it to appear on the Hungarians' flank as the battle was at its hottest. Béla called his army back into the safety of the stockade. This was soon surrounded by the enemy.

The Hungarians found themselves hemmed in and subjected to a terrifying bombardment. The Mongols fired boulders, flaming arrows and incendiaries whose main ingredient was naphtha (a trick probably learned from the Chinese). This created panic throughout the camp. There was no way for the army to move out and form up to face the foe and Béla's men could only think of escaping. Someone noticed that there was a gap in the Mongols' ring and men scrambled to get through it. But Batu had not left this opening by accident; he wanted to draw the enemy into the open so that his mobile horsemen could cut them down.

mercilessly as they fled. Béla's army was totally destroyed. Thousands upon thousands were killed. The numbers of combatants and casualties given in the records vary widely and there is no means now of assessing the figures involved. It seems likely that the two armies were fairly evenly matched numerically. Mongol losses were heavy but Hungarian fatalities were on a far worse scale. Hungary as a military power simply ceased to exist. More than that, the kingdom of Hungary ceased to exist. Béla IV escaped and did not stop running until he reached the Adriatic coast of Dalmatia, where he took refuge on an offshore island. The Mongol forces reconverged and made their leisurely and devastating way through the country. Some Hungarians shut themselves up in well-fortified cities and castles which the invaders did not bother to attack. But elsewhere they treated the inhabitants with utter ruthlessness. Where people offered resistance they were slaughtered. In one Dominican priory, where thousands of civilians had taken refuge, they slaughtered every man, woman and child, then piled the bodies on one bank of the Danube as an intimation to those beyond the river who might be considering evading capture. Those whom the Mongols did not kill they took as slaves. Between twenty and forty per cent of the Hungarian population perished either at the hands of their enemies or from the famine that Mongol rapine created.

Having stamped their authority on Hungary, Poland and Russia during the summer and autumn of 1241, and established a basic administrative system, Batu and Subedei swept onwards during the following winter. In determined pursuit of Béla they crossed the Danube, overran Croatia and only stopped when they reached the Adriatic. The borders of greater Mongolia were now a mere day's march from Vienna. Some of Subedei's scouts were actually captured in woodland close to the city. There was now little more than a thousand kilometres between the invaders and Rome or Paris or the new Brandenburg capital of Berlin. Considering the distances the Mongols had already covered, such centres of Christian civilisation were well within target range. There was no army that could have resisted them and these Christian civilisations were so absorbed in their own feuds and rivalries that they could not grasp the magnitude of the threat now facing them. When Béla IV appealed to his erstwhile ally, Frederick of Austria, the duke took him captive and demanded a large ransom for his release.

In fact, the western lands had no cause to worry. In the spring of 1242 the Great Khan, Ogodei, died in Karakorum. The great men of the empire had to gather to choose his successor - and to compete with each other for the crown. Batu ordered his men home, having first slaughtered thousands of prisoners. It may have been this that saved western Europe from the fate of eastern Europe. Or, possibly, Batu had no interest in pushing his boundaries still farther. He had discovered that one feature of life among these 'soft', settled, town-dwelling Christians would make it difficult to turn swift conquest into long-term occupation: his nomadic warriors were not equipped to deal with castles and fortified towns and cities. They were not experts in siege warfare. Hungary, Poland and the lands of their western neighbours were studded with such strongholds. They would always be centres of resistance. In fact, minor victories

had been inflicted on the invaders by bands of Hungarian knights sallying forth from their fortresses. Cultural difference had enabled the Mongols to surprise and overwhelm their enemies, but there were clearly elements of western life that were more resistant.

For whatever reason, the lands over which Batu's horde had poured like an acid flood were saved further devastation. But what they had suffered came close to total obliteration. Thousands upon thousands of square kilometres of territory were depopulated and in ruins. Forest and semi-desert reclaimed land that had once been rich with cultivated crops. For several generations during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these deserted settlements would have looked something like those images of ghost towns in the American "Wild West" that kept appearing on TV in the 1960s.

Béla IV spent the rest of his reign organising the partial recovery of Hungary. He learned some of the lessons of 1241-2. He re-established the Cumans. He applied the latest ideas about defensive architecture in building new castles and strengthening old ones. In 1261 he even defeated a Mongol raiding party. But when he died in 1270 the reconstruction of Hungary was still a work in progress.

The reason why an army of Europe's most experienced mounted troops was overwhelmed by a smaller force of Asiatic tribesmen was that they had not studied the battle tactics of their adversaries. 'Know your enemy' is a basic axiom of good generalship, but those who led Christendom's armies against the marauding 'devils' in 1241-2 completely underestimated the Mongols' military prowess, their tactical skill, their battlefield organisation and their courage. Much of this can be put down to the rudimentary means of communication available to them. Life within the cultural enclaves of what, in European chronology, we call the Middle Ages was self-contained in a way we can scarcely conceive now. Most people never travelled outside their own villages, let alone their own countries. In the popular imagination the world beyond the mountains, forests and oceans that fringed their own familiar reality was peopled by monsters, demons and freaks as weird and frightening as the aliens with which today's sci-fi film-makers populate distant galaxies. The Mongols, like the Chinese or the black tribesmen who lived beyond the African desert, were different, separate and obviously inferior. Why would one want to cultivate their acquaintance? They were not objects for colonisation. There were no commercial advantages to be gained by setting up trading connections with them. Even Christian missionaries, ever eager to spread their faith, were not falling over backwards to introduce the Prince of Peace to these warlike unbelievers.

But Europe's leaders cannot be completely exonerated for their ignorance of the newcomers pouring across their eastern borders. No diplomatic overtures were made towards them until 1245, when Pope Innocent IV sent envoys to Ogodei's successor. The messages that came back were crystal clear:

From the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject to the Great Khan. You must say with a sincere heart, 'We will be your subjects; we will give you our strength.' You must come with your kings all together, without exception, to render us service and pay us homage... And if you do not follow the order of God and go against our orders, we will know you as our enemy

Béla IV, who knew better than anyone what the Mongols were really like, sent warning messages to other rulers. They fell on deaf ears. One German prince who did take the situation seriously called upon his peers to unite in repentance and urgent, concerted action: 'Hear O islands and all the people of Christianity who profess our Lord's Cross, howl in ashes and sackcloth, in fasting, tears and mourning'. No one took any notice. To the modern reader it seems inconceivable that popes, emperors and princelings could fail to be spurred into concerted action by the horrors that had befallen their neighbours in 1241-2. But we should perhaps, remind ourselves that even in the 1930s - a devastating world war still alive in the memory - the leaders of the democratic West persuaded themselves that totalitarian fascism and communism posed no real threat to their way of life.

Batu's armies certainly had their limitations. They were ill-equipped for mounting and sustaining sieges. They were far from home and their lines of supply and communication were extended. Such weaknesses could have been exploited by united and intelligent military leadership. Instead of this, the Mongols were, all too often, allowed to dictate the terms on which they fought. In open battle they could, literally, run rings round their opponents. This was not only because their ponies were small and fast and their armour light; the command structure was based on units of ten or so warriors working individually or in consort with other groups. The Mongols were not hidebound by old tried and tested tactics. Subedei displayed the imagination and flair that had given the Mongols victory over numerous foes - qualities manifestly lacking in the European generals who faced them in 1241-2. Perhaps the fundamental secret of Mongol success was that promotion depended on merit. In the tough school of nomadic warfare, a young warrior had to prove himself. There was no old-boy network providing easy access to the upper echelons of the military.

In thirteenth-century European society there were two classes: the military élite and everybody else. In peacetime the knight was a landowner who had an army of feudal dependents maintaining his household, tilling his fields and serving him in various other ways in exchange for his protection and permission to dwell on his land. When he went to war it was as the member of a military brotherhood united by the rules and conventions of chivalry. He rode a fine charger, carried a shield emblazoned with his coat of arms, was cocooned in thirty or forty kilograms of mail or plate armour, wore a helm that might be topped with a plume or heraldic device and was equipped with fearsome weapons - lance, broadsword and mace. It was all very splendid and the charge of a body of knights was certainly impressive. But there was no guarantee that the man inside the armour was as awe-inspiring as his outward show proclaimed. Admission to the ranks of the knightly class was on the basis of landholding, not military skill.



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