

Introduction

Imagine a job search run by Toghhan-Temür, who was Mongol Great Khan and Yuan dynasty emperor from 1333 to 1370. He wants someone to run the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), an allied kingdom of some strategic importance for his empire. The initial job advertisement (actually lightly revised from a recent advert for a CEO position in the United States) might look something like the following:

Ruler of an allied kingdom: job brief

We are looking for a promising ruler to supervise and control all strategic and political aspects of the kingdom. You will be the first in command in the kingdom and responsible for giving the proper strategic direction as well as creating a vision for success that harmonizes with the empire's perspectives. We will consider candidates as young as four years old. Only males need apply.

To thrive as an allied ruler, you must be a prudent manager and a competent leader. The ideal candidate will have a flexible mindset and will be able to see the “big picture” in a variety of settings. He will take actions to enhance the empire's interests while preserving order at home.

Requirements:

1. Ability to supply material, human, and spiritual resources whenever, wherever, and however long required
 2. Ability to accept close instruction and rigorous criticism
 3. Ability to work independently in consultation with outstanding advisers
- Proficiency in mounted archery, hunting, and polo preferred.

In face-to-face interviews, Toghhan-Temür would assess candidates' social skills, judgment of character, and personal commitment to the empire. The Great Khan would no doubt also probe the prospective ruler on his views of hierarchy and order, loyalty and devotion. Toghhan-Temür would listen closely to responses about how candidates would balance the empire's interests with the demands of local custom and preference.

Of course, the Great Khan never circulated written job descriptions, nor did he sit across a desk from candidates vying to win a position as head of an allied kingdom. Nonetheless, Toghhan-Temür and his advisers knew what they wanted in allied rulers, and there was a selection process to determine which man (or

2 Introduction

boy) in a given pool was best suited for the task. The Mongol elite evaluated potential candidates based on their behavior during their extended stay at the Yuan court, interactions with their advisers and family members, and assessments offered by a variety of political actors from the Yuan and Goryeo dynasties. Few harbored any illusion that choices were guaranteed to turn out well, and the Yuan throne repeatedly intervened in the selection and deposition of Goryeo kings.

But how did things look from the other side of the desk? What was it like to be a Mongol ally? Using the experiences of Wang Gi, King of Goryeo, as a guide, this book considers the greatest geopolitical transformation of the fourteenth century – the disintegration of Mongol rule across Eurasia and the rise of a constellation of new powers. In the late fourteenth century, the kingdom of Goryeo was poised between two empires, in both a temporal and a physical sense. By the time Wang Gi took the throne in 1351, the Goryeo dynasty had been an integral part of the Mongol empire, which in East Asia was dominated by the House of Qubilai Khan (one of Chinggis Khan’s grandsons) and was often called the Yuan dynasty, for nearly a century.¹ After decades of episodic but destructive warfare on the peninsula, the Goryeo dynasty in 1259 had submitted to the Mongols, and from then on Wang Gi’s family had supervised the extraction and delivery of people and objects to the Chinggisid ruling house (Chinggisid refers to Chinggis Khan and his descendants). The Goryeo court supplied a long list of things ranging from military labor and matériel, food and lumber, hunting falcons, fish-skin boots, and exquisite illustrated Buddhist sutras to accomplished monks to pray for the Great Khan’s longevity and eunuchs and young girls to work in the halls and harems of the Yuan imperial palaces. The Goryeo ruling family sent its sons to serve in the Great Khan’s personal guard, both a burden and an honor. Inter-marriage among the ruling elite was common, and the most influential marriage alliance was between the Chinggisid and Goryeo ruling houses.² After a century of extensive and intimate ties, in 1370 the Goryeo royal family transferred its allegiance to a newly risen power, the Ming dynasty, which had supplanted the Mongols in East Asia. The Ming dynasty depicted itself as simultaneously successor to the Mongols and proud defender of classical Chinese tradition. On both counts, the Goryeo dynasty owed the Ming throne its obedience and allegiance, or so insisted the brash and often violent founding Ming emperor.

¹ For insightful reviews of Korean scholarship on Goryeo–Mongol relations and Goryeo’s selective appropriation of Yuan institutions and policies, see Lee Ik-joo, “Trends and Prospects” and Lee Kang Hahn, “Shifting, Political, Legal Institutional Borderlines,” respectively.

² Hsiao Ch’i-ch’ing, “Yuan-Li guanxi”; Gim Hodong, *Monggol jeguk*; Gim Hyewon, “Yeo Won wangsil tonghon”; Morihira, *Mongoru hakenka no Kōrai*, pp. 22–59, 105–46.

For the Goryeo court, however, that choice appeared neither obvious nor absolute. It had quietly cultivated ties with the fledgling Ming regime before it became a dynasty in 1368, but Wang Gi took nearly two years before formally acknowledging the Ming emperor's status as Heaven's Son, and even then he maintained close connections with the Yuan court, which had abandoned nearly all its Chinese territories for the safety of the steppe. In fact, in 1374, the Goryeo court reversed course and offered a formal pledge of loyalty to the Yuan emperor while simultaneously attempting to preserve a relationship with the Ming dynasty. In 1385, the Goryeo and Ming thrones achieved a rapprochement, but just seven years later, in 1392, Wang Gi's family lost power. It would not be until the early fifteenth century, with a different Ming emperor and a new Korean dynasty, that relations really stabilized.³

Point of Departure: Allies in Times of Crisis and Change

In times of crisis and change, what becomes of the vast and complex network of alliances that undergird all empires? Rather than focus on the major powers or "great states," the most common way to think about the rise and fall of empires, here is the story of "the little guy" or the lesser power, the experiences of Wang Gi and his court as ally first to the Chinggisids and later to the Ming dynasty. As a young Goryeo royal serving in the Great Khan's personal guard and later as a king ruling Goryeo, Wang Gi witnessed firsthand the Mongol polity in growing upheaval. Indeed, much of his reign was devoted to navigating the churning waters generated by a faltering empire and a striving new power, both of which demanded his loyalty and obedience. The unsettled times threw up both danger and opportunity, and far from passively reacting to the actions of the Great Khan and the Ming emperor, Wang Gi and his advisers actively pursued their interests through diplomacy, military action, and domestic reform. Their efforts failed as often as they succeeded, and if their story reveals the underappreciated initiative and influence of alliances' junior partners, it also makes clear that stark imbalances of power cannot be waved away by invoking the agency of lesser states.

Exploration of alliances in the context of the Yuan, Ming, and Goryeo dynasties helps contextualize Korean history in broader Eurasian developments and offers insights into developments elsewhere in Eurasia. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, ambitious men and women from Anatolia to Kyushu, from Moscow to Delhi, were all grappling with the Mongols' long, chaotic collapse and its consequences. Taken together, the Yuan, Ming, and Goryeo dynasties produced among the most detailed bodies of private and official historical materials anywhere in Eurasia in the fourteenth century. That

³ Clark, "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations"; Ye Quanhong, *Mingdai qianqi Zhong Han guojiao*.

4 Introduction

corpus, which includes poems, letters, commemorative essays, miscellanies, technical manuals, stele inscriptions, diplomatic correspondence, and imperial chronicles, remains little-known outside a circle of specialists, whose excellent work itself deserves much wider attention. This is especially true of sources and research related to the kingdom of Goryeo. Scholars familiar with those materials most commonly approach them from the perspective of Korean history or Sino-Korean relations. Fuller exploitation of those historical sources and scholarship provides a rare level of detail into a major transition in Eurasian history, and the experiences of the Goryeo court offer insights into the fate of alliances in an age of deteriorating Chinggisid power.

Experience during the fourteenth century's first half shaped expectations for the following five decades, and patterns of interactions that developed between the Mongol and Goryeo courts directly influenced the Ming court's ideas about "normal" relations with the Goryeo court and its successor, the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910). A century of extensive, often intensive, interaction between two ruling houses bled easily into social and political life. The Yuan court invested Goryeo rulers as kings, granted honorary titles, assigned posthumous titles, and issued physical tokens of authority like tablets and letters of appointment. The Yuan throne also gave titles and offices to Goryeo ministers, scholars, and newly made men and women who had risen through direct and indirect ties to the Yuan throne. The Yuan and Goryeo rulers regularly exchanged envoys and provided information about important political, military, and family events. Gyrfalcons, sable pelts, and other expensive gifts were useful as statements of devotion to the Great Yuan nation, loyalty to the person of the Great Khan, and affirmation of family ties. Simultaneously, presents to the Korean king and favored Goryeo ministers were ways to acknowledge and encourage service to the Great Yuan. Gift exchanges both grew from and deepened cultural practices and lifeways, such as the royal hunt and Buddhist devotion, shared by both the Yuan and Goryeo ruling houses. Banquets too provided opportunities to stake claims to power: who, for instance, hosted the banquet and where, who sat in the seat of honor, and who drank first. The titles, gifts, and banquets simultaneously offered ways to forge new alliances, resolve tensions, and develop a sense of common purpose and shared identity.

The Ming dynasty's emergence as the region's most powerful polity disrupted this dense weave of ties between the ruling Mongol and Goryeo elites. In the late fourteenth century, no one in the Goryeo dynasty had any direct, personal knowledge of a time when their kingdom and sovereign had not been deeply bound to the Yuan dynasty and Chinggisid ruling house. In the face of shifting power and demands by both the Ming and Yuan dynasties, the Goryeo ruling elites turned to historical texts, historical memory, and personal experience for guidance in a rapidly changing and deeply uncertain world. All who played a role in the establishment of the succeeding Joseon dynasty came

of age during the Yuan dynasty's fading days, which did much to establish their political and diplomatic expectations.⁴ Likewise, the early Ming throne perceived the fledgling Joseon regime largely through the prism of its experiences with the Goryeo dynasty.

As the Mongol empire deteriorated, new political actors emerged and old alliances frayed. Contemporaries confronted the challenge of creating a new diplomatic order and redefining the objectives, parameters, and protocols of alliances, which in turn was inseparable from assessing the Mongol legacy. Dynastic rulers, court ministers, regional officials, and local people all figured in the complex process of determining which institutions, relations, and perspectives would survive the Mongols' implosion. What was to be adapted and what jettisoned? The answers to those questions had implications for the nature and form of alliances. In this dual consideration – the Mongol empire's impact on later history and successor states' appropriation of the Mongol empire's legacy – Korea, despite its deep ties to the Chinggisids, remains curiously absent.⁵ This book argues that approaching Korea as an integral part of the Chinggisid world offers insight into both Korean history and Eurasian history.⁶

Rulers like Wang Gi devoted great attention and resources to major powers like the Yuan and Ming dynasties, but they remained acutely aware that no one alliance would resolve all issues. Maintaining ties to multiple allies required considerable energy – just securing and assessing accurate, timely information about developments in many places required constant work – but there was no real alternative. Even the most powerful polities never exercised anything approaching complete control over all neighbors, so Wang Gi and others like him had little choice but to simultaneously cultivate ties to a spectrum of local leaders. In relations with Jurchens to the north and the inhabitants of Tamna Island 耽羅 (today's Jeju Island) to the south, the Goryeo court often played the role of patron, bestowing titles and gifts on designated local leaders, without ever abjuring military force.

In the broadest sense, the Goryeo throne's alliance making extended to the domestic sphere. The Wangs were one among many aristocratic lineages on the Korean peninsula, and Goryeo's ruling house strove to win their support through marriage alliances and preferential access to government office and the advantages it conferred, such as emoluments, land, social status, and

⁴ Yun Eunsuk ("14 segi mal Manju") depicts the Joseon founder, Yi Seonggye (1335–1408), and his family as products of the Mongol empire. Robinson (*Seeking Order in a Tumultuous Age*, pp. 1–36) makes a similar argument regarding men like the scholar Jeong Dojeon (1342–1398).

⁵ Welcome recent contributions include work by Jeong Donghun, Yun Eunsuk, Gim Gyeongnok, and others who have much improved our understanding of Goryeo's experiences during the disintegration of Mongol rule.

⁶ Halperin ("Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective" and "Russo-Tatar Relations in Mongol Context") similarly argues the advantages of approaching Russia's relations with the Golden Horde from a comparative perspective of the entire Mongol empire.

6 Introduction

avored legal standing. In exchange, aristocratic families not only mobilized local resources in labor and products; they also helped actualize dynastic rule outside the capital down to the county level. Aristocratic women who married into the Goryeo royal family were important political actors at court, and when a young son was named king, his mother sometimes had the strongest – even if not loudest – voice in the room. Beyond lineages with long-established pedigrees, Goryeo kings also cultivated support among the “newly emergent scholar-officials,” who rose to prominence through command of the classical canon and success in the state-administered civil service examinations. Sharply contrasting these newly emergent scholar-officials with long-established “powerful lineages,” scholars sometimes suggest that they represented different social classes and distinct worldviews, with the former being self-made men of ability and ideals committed to vigorous socioeconomic reform and the latter being pampered scions, deeply if unreflectively wedded to the status quo, who rose to power exclusively through family connections. Careful attention to genealogies, careers, and marriage patterns suggests that those two categories overlapped extensively.⁷ If we were to think about their relationship in terms of a Venn diagram, the intersection is likely larger than the symmetric difference.

Goryeo kings did, however, reach beyond elite native sons in the search for allies. Goryeo sovereigns appointed men of foreign descent to posts in their government, and this was especially true during the Mongol age when talent more readily crossed dynastic borders.⁸ Men of Chinese, Mongolian, Turkic, and Jurchen descent served in Wang Gi’s government, and some were found within his inner circle. Wang Gi also attracted those of truly humble background to his side; historians have been unable to trace anything about the family of several of those Wang Gi named as merit ministers for their service in his Daidu entourage, suggesting that they were of modest origins. In this case, silence is telling. Genealogies, funerary inscriptions, and lengthy recitations of forefathers’ offices – preferably in writing – were standard strategies to display family status. Likewise, royal eunuchs, who enjoyed close contact with Wang Gi, were typically recruited from among poor families of little social standing. Finally, as a result of incessant coastal pirate raids, major incursions by Chinese rebel armies, and repeated expeditionary wars, military men gained prominence and influence at Wang Gi’s court, representing a source of both support and danger. In sum, through their production of written records, literati elite males tend to dominate our view, but Mongolian and Goryeo noblewomen, officials and boon companions of foreign descent, men of humble social background, and military officers all had a voice at Wang Gi’s court.

⁷ Duncan, *Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty*.

⁸ Yun, “Mongols and Western Asians in the Late Koryŏ Ruling Stratum.”

That rich diversity, combined with contrasting perceptions and agendas, contributed to differences of opinion and objective. It is often difficult to reconstruct those divergences with much accuracy or nuance, because surviving sources variously silence, simplify, or contort contending voices. Both contemporary writers and the fifteenth-century editors who used their work regularly omit the opinions and influence of even aristocratic women – even when context shows they often played a decisive role – to say nothing of men of foreign descent or humble origin. Policy debates are often cast in overtly normative, moral terms pitting defenders of principle and virtue against corrupt (and corrupting) schemers, each struggling to win the king’s ear. Rather than an autocrat making decisions in isolation, Wang Gi was constantly engaged in discussion and debate, even if the details of which advisers suggested what measures for what motivations are often also well-nigh impossible to reconstruct with any confidence. Discontent and resentment against Wang Gi, his policies, and his current favorites repeatedly erupted in spectacular political violence; abortive *coups d’état* and purges were such a regular feature of Wang Gi’s reign that worried residents of the capital at one point mistakenly concluded that the horns and drums of a lavish Buddhist ceremony resounding from the royal palace evidenced yet another putsch.⁹ Nearly all decisions faced resistance and incurred wrath in at least some quarters. Perhaps the most telling evidence of concealed contention was that as soon as Wang Gi was dead, the Goryeo court abandoned its new alliance with Zhu Yuanzhang and recognized anew the Great Khan as liege and lord. In fact, some historians argue that Wang Gi’s assassination was orchestrated by men who opposed the Ming alliance and felt that only Wang Gi’s death would open the way to needed policy change.¹⁰

The Mongol Empire and Its Allies

Chinggis Khan’s storied rise to power has been told many times.¹¹ In a time of political, military, and environmental crisis in the late twelfth century, he rose from the margins of the steppe nobility.¹² Through alliance building and military conquest, he unified most of the steppe by 1205.¹³ Until his death in 1227, he continued to expand his control over lands and peoples far beyond the steppe.¹⁴ Drawing on the economic resources, military technologies, administrative expertise, and manpower of newly incorporated subjects, Chinggis Khan’s successors would come to control most of east Eurasia, from the

⁹ GS 132.10.3979. ¹⁰ For review, see Yi Jeongsin, “Gongminwang ui jukeum.”

¹¹ May (*Mongol Empire*, pp. 18–74) is a useful point of departure.

¹² Di Cosmo, “State Formation”; Pederson, “Pluvials,” p. 4376; Fletcher, “Mongols.”

¹³ Buell (“Role of the Sino-Mongolian Frontier Zone”) briefly discusses the creation of new tribal units and federations that preceded Chinggis Khan’s unification of the steppe.

¹⁴ May, *Mongol Conquests*.

8 Introduction

Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea, from semi-tropical south China to wintry Russia (see Map 0.1). Winning the empire had been an arduous, multigenerational task, and governing such a vast, diverse territory would prove at least as daunting.

The Mongols' collection of human talent is widely and justly celebrated. The Chinggisids sought out renowned religious figures, wrestlers, musicians, weavers, metalworkers, physicians, military technologists, hunters, and horse trainers from across Eurasia.¹⁵ To extract resources and maintain a modicum of social stability, the Mongols and their polyethnic administrative corps drew broadly from bureaucratic traditions from East to West Asia. They established tax regimes, developed transportation infrastructures, redistributed wealth among the ruling elite, and maintained military preparedness.¹⁶

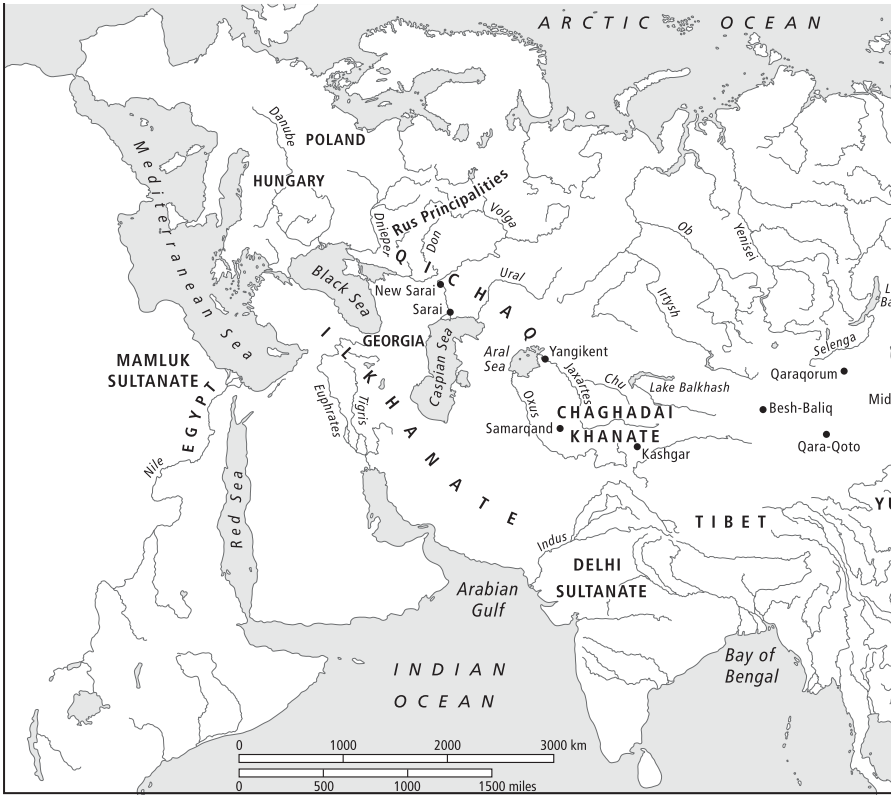
Essential to all this was the Chinggisids' vast network of client states or allies, which exponentially expanded the Mongols' ability to extract resources in all forms. Alliance building among nomadic pastoralist groups had been a necessary precondition to unification and the spread of Mongol power beyond the steppe. The Chinggisids later destroyed many foes, from the Khwārazmian state (which ruled much of today's present-day Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Iran) and the Xi Xia kingdom (which governed parts of today's Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Mongolia), to the Jin dynasty in northern China and the Abbasid Caliphate with its capital at Baghdad. Yet the Chinggisids worked hard to forge dependable alliances with scores of local leaders from today's Hungary to today's Korea. Oftentimes these local leaders were rulers of what we might term second- or third-tier powers. They ranged from Russian princes and Kartid princes to the Uyghur and Goryeo ruling houses, which, while significantly weaker than the Chinggisids, nevertheless exercised regional power.¹⁷ Their populations varied from tens of thousands to several million. In other cases, the Mongols' new allies were parvenu dynasties and nouveau arrivistes, men of humble background who had seized power in the midst of destruction and uncertainty resulting from the collapse of established polities.¹⁸ In yet other cases, heads

¹⁵ Allsen, "Command Performances"; *Commodity and Exchange; Culture and Conquest*, esp. Table 1, "Personnel exchanges."

¹⁶ Allsen, "The Circulation of Military Technology," "Guard and Government," *Mongol Imperialism*, "Sharing Out the Empire," "Technologies of Governance," Brose, "Uyghur Technologists"; May, *Mongol Empire*, pp. 76–93.

¹⁷ Allsen, "Yüan Dynasty and the Uighurs." The Kartid, Russian, and Goryeo examples are discussed below. Dashdondog (*Mongols and the Armenians*) details another important case study from West Asia. May ("A Mongol–Ismā'īlī Alliance?") suggests that the Mongols formed an alliance with the Ismā'īlīs of northern Iran in the early decades of the thirteenth century before smashing them in 1256.

¹⁸ For instance, the Qutlughkhanids. See Jackson, *Mongols and the Islamic World*, pp. 246–47. Jackson describes the Kurtid (or Kartid) rulers of Herat as "in some degree a creation of Mongol patronage."



Map 0.1 The Mongol empire

of religious communities placed their spiritual efficacy at the Mongols' disposal in exchange for tax exemptions and protection against local rivals.¹⁹ Parlaying their ability to secure food, supplies, and labor for the Mongols – or “to exchange their wealth and services for security,” as Allsen aptly puts it – such men gained standing and influence, which they passed on to their descendants.²⁰

“Alliance” here does not mean a freely formed partnership of equals. Nor did it necessarily involve common commitment to shared culture or religion – “ideological solidarity,” as political scientists sometimes put it. Instead “alliance” here denotes a manifestly hierarchical relationship between superior and subordinate, master and servant, which conformed to political and social expectations in much of Eurasia.²¹ The Mongols typically demanded incontrovertible evidence of submission, including overt declaration of personal devotion to one's lord, usually accompanied by oaths that disobedience and disloyalty would call down catastrophic punishments.²² The *Secret History of Mongols*, an insider's view of the Mongols' rise, for instance, calls for the severing of sinews above the heel, slicing of the liver, and trampling of the heart (among other things) for those who betray their lords. Rulers of larger polities, particularly those with substantial sedentary populations, were required to submit maps of their lands and tax registers, report in person to the Great Khan's court, deliver hostages from the royal family, maintain postal relay stations, and supply military labor and war matériel as demanded.²³ The Ming court did not articulate such explicit punishments or obligations, but its rhetoric left little room for a partnership between equals. In contrast to common usage today, when “alliance” or “alignment” usually refers to relationships between nation-states, alliance in fourteenth-century Eurasia was a family affair with a strong expectation that sitting rulers would honor the bonds and obligations

¹⁹ Consider, for instance, Ilkhan Abū-Sa'īd's 1320 decree settling a succession dispute between two descendants of the renowned shayk Tāj al-dīn Ibrāhīm Zāhid (1218–1301). See Minorsky, “A Mongol Decree of 720/1320.”

²⁰ Allsen, “Population Movements,” p. 126. Charles Maier (“Empire's Past . . . Empire's Future,” pp. 6, 8) defines empire as “a transnational cartel of elites, which gave local hierarchies security in return for their recognition of the hierarchies at the center as supreme,” and observes that empire is “an arrangement, whether negotiated voluntarily, or by force, in which elites in the so-called periphery accept the ultimate control of elites in the metropole in return for securing their own domination.” Dashdondog (*Mongols and the Armenians*, p. 71) uses similar language, observing that some Georgio-Armenian princes chose to recognize Mongol authority “to secure their rights and lands.”

²¹ Commonly translated as “slave,” the Mongol term *boghol* often connoted individuals or communities integrated into the Chinggisid polity that were subordinate and bound to the Great Khan but still enjoyed privileged social, political, ritual, and economic status. See Skrynnikova, “Boghol.”

²² Voegelin, “Mongol Orders of Submission to European Powers, 1245–1255.”

²³ Jackson (*Mongols and the Islamic World*, pp. 250–55) describes the burdens shouldered by Mongol allies.