

First half of the 14th century

Al-'Umārī's description of the Golden Horde

Klaus LECH, Al-'Umārī's Bericht über die Reiche der Mongolen in seinem Werk Masālik al-absār fī mamālik al-amsār, Asiatische Forschungen, 22 (Wiesbaden, 1968), pp. 69–70, 72–3 (German trans., pp. 137–8, 140–1). The English translation is ours (RA & CC).

[. . .]

Subjected to the rule of the Golden Horde (*fī sultān hādīhi l-mamlakati*) are Circassians (-*Ġarkas*), Russians (-*Rūs*) and Allans (-*Ās*). They are people of flourishing and populated cities and wooded and fertile
5 mountains. Agriculture flourishes and pasturage thrives, the rivers have abundant water, and (manyfold) fruit is harvested there. Yet these people are unable to resist the ruler of this country (*sultān hādīhi l-bilād*, i.e. the khan) and are subject to him even though they are ruled by their own kings. As long as they flatter him by submissiveness and by
10 (sending him) presents and precious gifts, he leaves (*kaffā*) them to live peacefully, otherwise he wages war against them and afflicts (their cities) with siege. How often has he slaughtered the male population, taken women and children away in captivity and sold their slaves [i.e. the slaves from among them] into all the lands on earth!

15 The peoples united under his rule (*ġanāh*) also include the Turkish tribes in the far north of the empire. They live in utmost misery, since they are not sedentary people who practice agriculture and the extreme cold destroys their herds. They are irrational barbarians and savages, who keep no religion. Their living conditions are extremely hard. If
20 anyone obtains some meat, he will cook it, but not until it is fit, and first drink only the broth, keeping the rest for another meal. Later he will even collect the bones, cook (out the marrow from) them and drink the water. Imagine the rest of their lifestyle from that.

As the merchant, *al-Sadr* [= the honorable] Ġamāl ad-Dīn 'Abd Allāh
25 al-Hisnī reported to me, those nomads usually walk about in furs, not caring whether they come from animals (properly) slaughtered or from carcasses, whether they are tanned or not, or whether the animal was pure or impure. When eating, they do not distinguish between disgusting and tasty food, between what is allowed and what is forbidden.
30 In times of dearth, when circumstances for them are particularly

difficult, they sell their children in order to survive on what they obtain for them. They say that it was better that they and their children live than that they would perish together.

35 During a conversation with -*Sadr* Zain ad-Dīn ‘Umar b. Musāfir about this country, I inquired concerning the report from ‘Abd Allāh al-Hisni, and I learnt that what he said fully conformed to the truth.

And I may add: The Turks of this land are among the best of their race due to their conscientiousness, courage and fidelity, their perfect bodily complexion, their beautiful faces and their prudence. From them
40 the major part of the Egyptian army is recruited, since the sultans and emirs of Egypt stem from their ranks. [This development began,] when Malik as-Sālih Nağm ad-Dīn Aiyūb b. al-Kāmil desired the acquisition of mamluks from the Qibğaq. Since they have come to power, their rulers have demonstrated ‘racial solidarity’ (*jinsiyya*) and [thus] sought
45 to increase their numbers, so that the provinces of Egypt are now populated, and its frontiers defended by them. They constitute the moons of the festive parades, the leaders (-*sudūr*) of the assemblies, they are commanders of the armies and the magnates of the land. The Muslim world praises their determination (*mawāqif*) in defending the
50 faith and their *ğihād* for God against (even) the members of their own families and tribes, bearing no feelings of sympathy for them; no rebuke can turn them away from (the cause of) Allāh.

[. . .]

55 The light of Islam has now spread among the Tatars (*fihim*), and the light of faith shines above their lands. Barka b. Ğūğī b. Ğinkiz Hān was the first of their princes (*mulūk*) to confess to the true religion. In his time, the sun (began to rise) over their horizons; now it is bright day (*duhan*), and the veils of darkness have vanished among the major part of the population, with few exceptions.

60 Even though they are superior to the armies of the Circassians (-*Ğarkas*), Russusians (*Rūs*), Magyars (-*Māğar*) and Allans (-*Ās*), those peoples rob their children and sell them to the (slave) merchants.

Even though Islam has spread among this people and it believes in Allāh and his messenger, it still acts against the laws (of Islam) in many
65 respects. While from the first to the last of this people they do no longer adhere to Ğinkiz Hān’s *yāsa* in every respect, as the other (Mongols) do, they still punish deceit, adultery, breach of treaty and contract most harshly.

When their princes (*mulūk*) are angry with one of their retainers, they
 70 usually confiscate his property and sell his children. When anyone
 commits a theft, the damaged party has a right to the thief's property
 and children, whom he will then sell.

If someone woos for a girl, he will obtain it in marriage for a small
 gift and will never be asked about her again. We have already reported
 75 likewise concerning the Khanate of Ġaġatāi.

All the population, says *-Maulā al-Fādil* Nizām ad-Dīn Abū l-Fadā'il
 Yahyā b. al-Hakīm, must pay taxes to the ruler (*sultan*) of the land.
 Sometimes the dues are demanded even in a bad year, when famine has
 afflicted the herds, heavy snows have fallen and harsh frosts have
 80 prevailed, so that the people, in order to be able to pay up, (are forced
 to) sell their children.

The merchant *al-Šarīf* [i.e. a descendent of Muhammad] Šams ad-Dīn
 Muhammad al-Husainī al-Karbalā'ī reported to me in the month of
 Rajab of the year 738 of the *Hiġra* [Jan.-Feb. 1338], immediately after his
 85 return from that land. He had travelled there and had come as far
 westwards as Aqġā Karmān and the land of the Bulgars [in the Volga
 region]. According to what he told me, he had acquired boys and girls
 from their parents on his way. They had been forced to sell their
 children because an order (*yasaq*) had been issued by the ruler (*malīk*) to
 90 advance against Persia (and money was needed for that). This was how
 he was able to bring good and valuable slaves from there.