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## Mapping the Mongols: depictions and descriptions of Mongols on medieval European world maps

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# Mapping the Mongols: depictions and descriptions of Mongols on medieval European world maps

*Emily Allinson*

We turn to a map to find where a place is, how to get to it, and what geographic and cultural features can be found there.<sup>1</sup> We trust that maps are accurate and offer us a true depiction of the world. When looking at historical maps, it is easy to let these assumptions affect our interpretation of them. However, maps are objects of their own time, created for a specific purpose, guided by a particular world view.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the author of each map has a unique perspective and motivation which affects the reader's viewing of the world.<sup>3</sup>

World maps made in medieval Europe seem at first glance incomprehensible. Most have East at the top, not North, and portray a vaguely circular mass of land in which it is difficult to locate the places or geographical features that are readily recognisable on today's maps. Looking a little closer, the maps are inhabited by illustrated creatures that seem utterly fantastical. Here and there, biblical events such as Noah's Ark leave the viewer wondering what time period the map represents. Decoding these visual clues, however, offers a rich resource for investigations into European imaginations of the wider world. This article looks specifically at the way Mongols were depicted and described on medieval European world maps.<sup>4</sup>

There is no single model for medieval world maps, nor one line of development. We cannot, therefore, trace a concrete progression in the depictions of the Mongols over time, particularly because of the scarcity of surviving maps. However, what we can do is chart the different ways in which the Mongols were depicted, and look for patterns and themes that arise from the images.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Prof. dr. J.L.L. Gommans and Dr. G.R. van den Berg of Leiden University for their feedback and help with this article.

<sup>2</sup> R. Talbert and R. Unger, *Cartography in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Leiden 2008) 6.

<sup>3</sup> M. Edney, 'Theory and the History of Cartography', *Imago Mundi* 48 (1996) 185-191.

<sup>4</sup> Other names used on European maps to describe a Mongol presence are 'Tartars' and 'Turks', and so I have also looked for these on the maps.

The first part of this article gives an overview of the depictions and descriptions of Mongols on each map. I have chosen ten maps and grouped them together as follows: pre-Mongol Empire; Mongols in Europe; the Mongol Empire; post-Mongol Empire; post-Columbus. Most are *mappae mundi*, medieval maps of the world governed by a religious view of the cosmos.<sup>5</sup> The second part outlines two prominent themes in these depictions that are illustrative of medieval European imagination of the Mongols. The first is the proximity of the Mongols to the fabled gate of Alexander the Great. At first, the Mongols are shown behind the gate, but over time they move outside the boundary. The second theme is the artistic focus in depictions of the Mongols. Over time we see a shift from images and texts that stress a negative foreignness focusing on the body, to those that stress positive foreignness, emphasizing the familiarity of the Mongols to Europeans through dress, interests, and buildings. This makes the Mongols on medieval European maps an extremely ambiguous group, at once barbaric and monstrous, but also familiar.

## Depictions and descriptions

### *Pre-Mongol Empire (twelfth to early thirteenth centuries)*

Despite the expansion of the Mongol Empire since the early 1200s, it was not until the 1240-1242 assaults on the eastern parts of Europe that the Mongols really became part of the European imagination of the wider world.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in maps from the twelfth and early thirteenth century, we can see how the spaces that would later be filled with Mongols were represented before the Mongol Empire.

Maps from this era are typically oriented with East at the top, and depict the three continents known to Europeans at that time: Europe, Africa and Asia. They show not only a geographical and spatial arrangement

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<sup>5</sup> In Latin, *mappa* means 'cloth', while *mundi* means 'the world'. Evelyn Edson writes that, interestingly, there was no one word which meant exclusively 'map' in the medieval period. E. Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers viewed their World* (London 1997) 2.

<sup>6</sup> P. Jackson describes the Mongols at this time as Europe's 'new neighbour'. See: P. Jackson, P. Linehan and J.L. Nelson, 'Christians, Barbarians, and Monsters: The European Discovery of the World Beyond Islam' in: P. Linehan and J.L. Nelson eds., *The Medieval World* (London 2001) 93-110: 99.

of place, but also history and cosmology, including biblical events and legendary happenings. There is a sense that time has stopped, as we see at once the beginning of time in the east, often in the form of an earthly paradise, and a hint towards the end of time in the sinister presence of Gog and Magog, ungodly races who, it was believed, would assist the antichrist in the biblical apocalypse.<sup>7</sup>



Figs. 1-3, left to right: Gog and Magog on the Munich 'Isidore' map (c.1130), 'Henry of Mainz' map (c.1190), and Ebstorf map (thirteenth century). All images in this article were hand-drawn by me.

Dating to more than one hundred years before the Mongol invasions of Europe, it is no surprise that no Mongols can be found on the Munich 'Isidore' map. Instead, what is noteworthy is an illustration of Alexander's Gate in the north-east (fig. 1). According to legend, on his travels through Asia Alexander the Great built a large gate or wall, which over time became associated in both Christian and Islamic tradition with Gog and Magog.

This bounded region appears again in the 'Henry of Mainz' map and the Ebstorf maps (fig. 1). On the Ebstorf map, there is an added illustration of the monstrous races devouring a white-haired person. The relevance of these barriers to the Mongols will become clear as we progress through later maps. This area, inhabited by the evil Gog and Magog, becomes the site of depictions of the Mongols.

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<sup>7</sup> E. Edson and E. Savage-Smith, *Medieval Views of the Cosmos* (Oxford 2004) 118.

*Arrival of the Mongols in Europe (mid-thirteenth century)*

Between 1240 and 1242 the Mongols carried out a series of assaults on Europe. The European horror at these attacks was due not only to their ferocity, but also to the fact that many in the European elite, who had been vaguely aware of Mongol presence in Central Eurasia in the previous decades, had imagined the Mongols in relation to the mythical Prestor John, Christian king beyond the Islamic world. They had hoped that the Mongols could become allies in the European Christian struggle against Islam.<sup>8</sup> The assaults proved otherwise. Now Mongols were widely interpreted as a scourge from God. They became known as 'Tartars', a corruption of the term 'Tatar' by which they had been previously known, linking them to Tartarus, the Hell of classical mythology.<sup>9</sup>

In line with many of his era, Matthew Paris (1200-1259), chronicler at St. Alban's Abbey in Hertfordshire, England, interpreted the Mongols' sudden aggression as a sign of the end of times, part of a grander religious narrative in Europe in the first half of the thirteenth century which anticipated an imminent apocalypse.<sup>10</sup> Paris described the Mongol assault in his *Chronica Majora* (1250):

In this year [1240], that human joys might not last long unmixed with lamentation, an immense horde of that detestable race of Satan, the Tartars, burst forth from their mountain-bound regions, and making their way through rocks apparently impenetrable, rushed forth, like demons loosed from Tartarus.<sup>11</sup>

The Mongols were new to the European imagination, with no established tradition by which to imagine them. It is no surprise that they therefore became identified with the familiar foes Gog and Magog.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, Linehan and Nelson, 'Christians, Barbarians, and Monsters', 98.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, 99.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, L. Chekin, *Northern Eurasia in Medieval Cartography: Inventory, Text, Translation and Commentary* (Turnhout 2006) 195, and P. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221-1410* (Harlow 2005) 147.

<sup>11</sup> E. Edson, *The World Map, 1300-1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore 2007) 92.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, *The Mongols and the West*, 138-139.

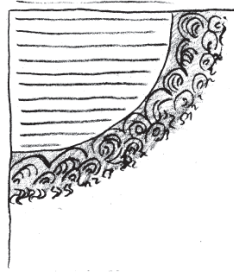


Fig. 4, Circular enclosure on the Matthew Paris map (1250).

Paris also created maps, including his maps of Palestine. In the top left-hand corner of one these maps (fig. 4), there is a circular enclosure with an inscription:

This land is far away towards the direction of Bize. Here remain the nine tribes whom King Alexander enclosed. Gog and Magog. From here came those people called Tartars, of whom it is said that they have shorn and cut so much of the mountains of hard rock that they managed to gain a passage through and have conquered many large territories and have destroyed what is called India.<sup>13</sup>

Gog and Magog have become conflated with the Mongols on Paris' map, which signifies the historical moment of the Mongol entry into European imagination. It is important to note that the description itself lies *within* the bounded region, despite the Mongols' supposed escape, visually connecting the Mongols to Gog and Magog. Although the Mongols have ventured outside, it can be interpreted as if they belong behind the barrier.

*Time of the Mongol Empire (mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth century)*

Genghis Khan ruled over his empire from 1206 until his death in 1227. The empire was then split into four khanates, each belonging to one of Genghis' four sons, but with Ögedei named successor to Genghis Khan and ruling over his brothers as Grand Khan. The Yuan court, established by Kublai Khan in 1271, based in Beijing, became nominally the seat of Mongol power. The Chagatai Khanate ruled to the west, the Golden Horde to the

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<sup>13</sup> Translation in Chekin, *Northern Eurasia*, 199-200.

north-west, and the Il-Khanate to the south-west. The Mongol Empire lasted until its dissolution in 1365 with the overthrow of the Yuan Dynasty.

The ease of travel through the empire, and the end of raids in Europe following the death of Ögedei in 1241, encouraged trade and travel from Europe. European geographic understanding of the world expanded as travellers' accounts began to trickle through via writers such as Marco Polo.<sup>14</sup> These, however, took time to reach a wide audience, not least because of the disastrous cultural impact of the plagues in the fourteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

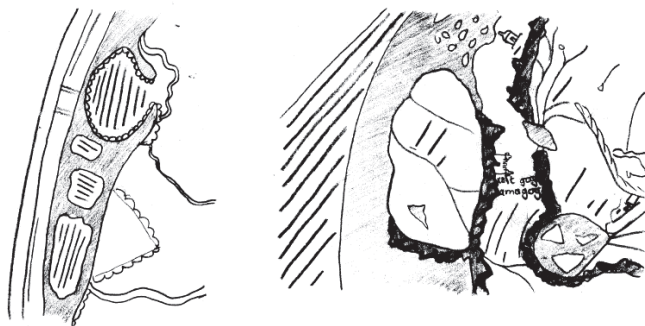


Fig. 5, left: Hereford *mappa mundi* (1300). The circular peninsula enclosing Gog and Magog can be seen at the top of the image, while the lowest, and largest, of the three islands below is *Terracontia*. Fig. 6, right: the Vesconte world map (1320-1321), with a small enclosure for Gog and Magog shown in the centre, in between two mountain ranges.

In the north-west of the Hereford *mappa mundi* is a peninsula, bounded by a barrier to the right and accompanied by an extensive description of the 'accursed sons of Cain', Gog and Magog, contained within (fig. 5). They are described as 'extremely savage people, who eat human flesh and drink blood.'<sup>16</sup> In the sea to the south lies the island *Terracontia*, 'where the Turks dwell, descendents of Gog and Magog; a barbarous and unclean race,

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<sup>14</sup> This included an introduction to areas outside the Mongol Empire such as India. Jackson, Linehan and Nelson, 'Christians, Barbarians and Monsters', 103.

<sup>15</sup> Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, 165.

<sup>16</sup> Translations in S. Westrem, *The Hereford Map: A Transcription and Translation of the Legends with Commentary* (Turnhout 2001) 141-142.



devouring the flesh of youths and abortions.<sup>17</sup> The Mongols, here referred to as Turks, have been moved outside the enclosure. However, proximity and the accompanying inscription remind the viewer of their monstrous origins.

The Vesconte world map was made by Pietro Vesconte for Marino Sanudo, a Venetian businessman with the political agenda of reviving the crusades in the Middle East (fig. 6). This map was part of the visual propaganda for this, and as such it is a rather sober map, compared to earlier maps such as the Hereford and later ones such as Fra Mauro's. Among the few illustrations on the map is a minute enclosure in the north-east alongside an inscription that reads 'Gog and Magog', showing the continuing importance of a visual image of a barrier. Around the map are descriptions of regions and peoples, including the Mongols. This is a more complex description than on previous maps, referring to *Cathay* (China) and a Great Khan, and to Tartars as a group in Asia. This shows that some knowledge about the formation of the Yuan Dynasty had trickled through to Europe.

In this era we start to see a more realistic depiction of the Mongols as a complex of peoples and power. No longer are they a homogeneous monstrous race, descended from Gog and Magog. They now seem to exist as 'real' peoples within the known world.

#### *Post-Mongol Empire (late-fourteenth and fifteenth century)*

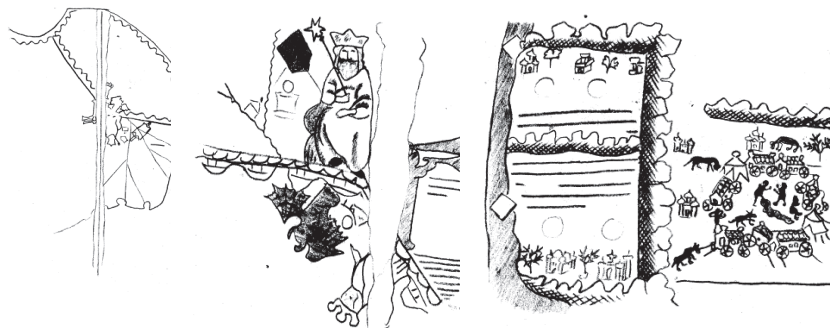
By the mid-fourteenth century Marco Polo's accounts dominate depictions of the Mongols. The orientation of maps from this era differs from previous maps. Some have north at the top, possibly reflecting influence from sea charts.<sup>18</sup> Others have south at the top. These maps have also been described as 'hybrid,' attempting to reconcile the familiar features of earlier *mappa mundi* with up-to-date geographical knowledge.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Translation in N. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm*, (Woodbridge 2001) 184-187. The idea of the Mongols as cannibals was not limited to the European imagination. Such rumours were also rife in the Islamic world in the early days of the Mongol Empire: Jackson, Linehan and Nelson, *The Mongols*, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Edson, *The World Map*, 231.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, 200.



Figs. 7-8, left and centre: detail from the Catalan Atlas (1375). The bottom right section depicts China, with the outlines of the Mongol capital and its waterways. Centre: 'The Great Khan' *Holubeim* (Kublai Khan). The line running through the centre represents damage on the map. Right: The Borgia XVI map (1430), with a Mongol encampment to the right and a bounded, mountainous region to the left.

The Catalan Atlas is the first surviving world map to extensively use Marco Polo as a source, and especially regarding the Mongols his influence is clear.<sup>20</sup> The divisions of the Mongol Empire are clearly shown, and we see here in a more concrete way than on the Vesconte map that the Mongols as a concept in European understanding had changed from a single (ungodly) people to a complex of peoples within an empire. China, unsurprisingly, given Polo's alleged meeting with Kublai Khan, is particularly rich in information. The Mongol capital *Chanbaletb* (Beijing) is described in detail:

This town [Beijing] has an extent of 24 miles, is surrounded by a very thick outer wall and has a square ground plan. Each side has a length of 6 miles, the wall is 20 paces high and 10 paces thick, has 12 gateways and a large tower, in which hangs a great bell, which rings at the hour of first sleep or earlier. When it has finished ringing, no one may pass through the town, and at each gate a thousand men are on guard, not out of fear but in honour of the sovereign.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Edson, *The World Map*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> [http://cartographic-images.net/Cartographic\\_Images/235\\_Catalan\\_Atlas.html](http://cartographic-images.net/Cartographic_Images/235_Catalan_Atlas.html), accessed 8 July 2012.

Also depicted is a Mongol alteration to the local landscape, in ‘the vertical waterway of the Grand Canal built by Kublai’, showing a focus on physical grandeur which is continued in the description of the Khan:

The most powerful prince of all the Tartars is named *Holubeim* [Kublai Khan] (...) The emperor is far wealthier than any other monarch in the whole world. This emperor is guarded by 12,000 horsemen.<sup>22</sup>

Kublai is illustrated as a European-looking king, with fair skin and golden, flowing locks and beard. Wearing a green robe and a large golden crown, he holds a golden sceptre (fig. 8). The depiction and illustration display Kublai as immensely wealthy and powerful, regardless of the fact that he had by then been dead for seventy years.

This image becomes complicated, however, when we notice that Kublai sits on a gate enclosing a mountainous region. This is Alexander’s Gate, made clear by the illustration of Alexander and Satan and an accompanying inscription. Perhaps surprisingly, given the other wonderful descriptions of the Mongols on the map, Gog and Magog are identified here as Tartars.<sup>23</sup> This may be because this map is transitional, including both older ideas and new empirical information.<sup>24</sup> However, as we shall see, Mongols continue to be depicted near barriers enclosing monstrous races. This represents not an aspect of one period of mapmaking, but a general theme in the depiction of Mongols on European medieval maps.

What marks the Borgia XVI map as different from the maps so far is a focus on the life-styles of non-European societies (fig. 9).<sup>25</sup> The depiction of the Tartars is particularly interesting. We see a Tartar camp, with tents and wheeled buildings arranged in a circle. Animals and people are active in what seems an attempt at an everyday scene. In the accompanying text, we are told that Tartars are so poor that they have to sell their children into

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<sup>22</sup> [http://cartographic-images.net/Cartographic\\_Images/235\\_Catalan\\_Atlas.html](http://cartographic-images.net/Cartographic_Images/235_Catalan_Atlas.html), accessed 8 July 2012.

<sup>23</sup> S. Conklin Akbari, A. Iannucci and J. Tulk, *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West* (Toronto 2008) 43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> P. Barber, ‘Medieval Maps of the World’ in: P.D.A Harvey ed., *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and their Context* (London 2006) 1-44: 39.

slavery, a stark contrast to the depictions of the Mongols on the Catalan Atlas.<sup>26</sup>

While China, depicted as Polo described it, seems ‘frozen in time, as it was at the end of the thirteenth century’, the Tartars represent a different part of the empire, and perhaps a more up-to-date account of the lives of tribes in the steppe after the dissolution of the Mongol Empire.<sup>27</sup> This further shows the variety in European imagination of Mongols.

The Fra Mauro map has been described as the first in a new tradition of maps that evaluated map sources based on direct experience, not hearsay. It relies on Polo’s accounts, and, as in the Catalan Atlas, different sections of the Mongol Empire are depicted. Its up-to-date historical information includes the activities of Tamerlane.<sup>28</sup>

China brims with information about the Mongols, giving an indication about European knowledge. The capital city, *Chambalech*, has tall towers, regal and intricate, if perhaps European-looking in terms of architecture (figs. 10-13). Next to it is a more stereotypical Mongol encampment designating the imperial summer camp. Together these make up a gigantic structure that is far larger than anything else on the map. In terms of size, the Mongol imperial capital dominates Asia.

The Mongol emperor is described according to Polo’s account, focusing again on wealth and power:

This most excellent and mighty emperor has sixty crowned kings under his dominion. When he travels, he sits in a carriage of gold and ivory decorated with gemstones of an inestimable price. And this carriage is drawn by a white elephant. The four most noble kings of his dominions stand at each corner of this carriage to escort it; and all the others walk ahead, with a large number of armed men both before and behind. And here are all the genteel pleasures and customs of the world.<sup>29</sup>

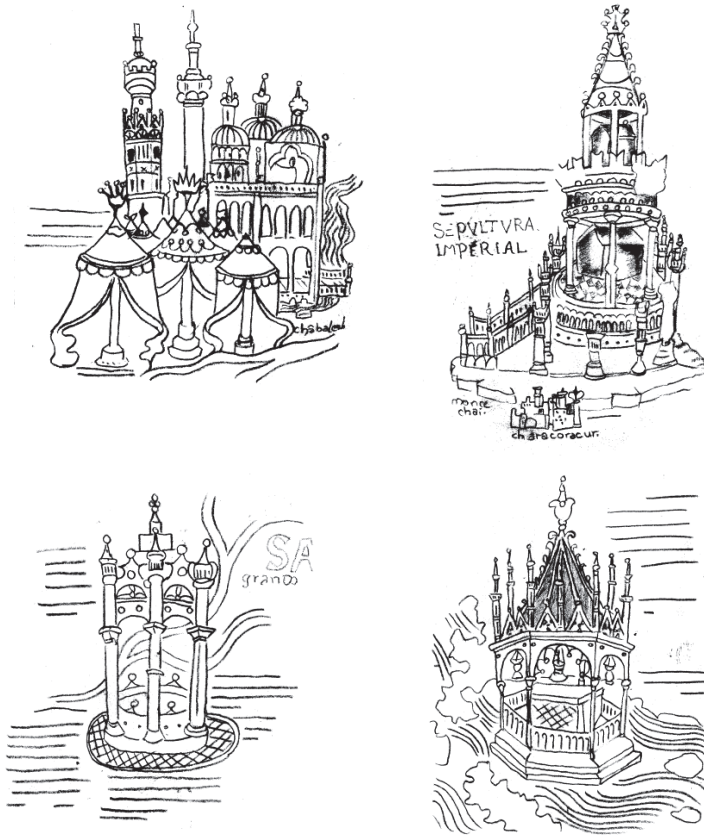
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<sup>26</sup> Edson, *The World Map*, 179.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 176.

<sup>28</sup> For example, in Russia there is a text which reads: ‘Here Tamerlane made great slaughter of these Tartars.’ Near the city of Saray in the north-west. Translations from CD-ROM attached to P. Falchetta’s *Fra Mauro’s World Map: With a Commentary and Translations of the Inscriptions* (Turnhout 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.



Figs. 10-13, detail from the Fra Mauro map (1450). Top, left to right: the capital city, and Genghis Khan's imperial tomb. Bottom, left to right: tomb built by Tamerlane, and the Temple of *Chataio* (China).

Monuments feature prominently within the Mongol Empire (figs. 10-13). Of the thirteen tombs in total spread across the map, four are within Mongol territories. There are only two (labelled) imperial tombs (*sepultura imperial*) known in the world, and both of these have connections to the Mongols: the enormous imperial tomb of Genghis Khan and his descendents, and Tamerlane's smaller tomb. In addition to the massive

temple of *Chataio*, with its ‘inestimable store of treasure’, the Mongols dominate the empire and Asia through their huge monuments and vast wealth.<sup>30</sup>

In the centre of Asia is an excavation and a nearby tunnel, twenty miles long, made by the Mongols in order to ‘shorten the route of the caravans that went to Chataio.’<sup>31</sup> As with the Grand Canal on the Catalan Atlas, the Mongols have left their mark on the Asian landscape.



Figs. 14-15, detail from the Fra Mauro map. Left: the region enclosed by Alexander's gate. Right: a close-up of the gate.

However, not too far from the imperial tomb, and within the empire, lies Alexander's gate. Fra Mauro explains that he has heard that Gog and Magog were enclosed here, but that he does not believe this. Nevertheless, the large illustration of the gate seems to show acceptance of it as part of a narrative connected to the area. This connection to the Mongols through proximity is further enhanced by his labelling of the enclosed area as '*Mongul*'. For the most part, this is inhabited by Tartars.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Translation on the CD-ROM attached to Falchetta.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

*Post-Columbus (after 1492)*

Post-Columbus maps included new information added at a much faster rate than previously.<sup>33</sup> With a focus on spatial organisation, these maps incorporated new discoveries and ideas, not least geographic information gained through European expansion into the Americas.<sup>34</sup> While these maps date from long after the dissolution of the Mongol Empire, depictions of the Mongols remain.



Figs. 16-17, detail from the Waldseemüller map (1516). Left: the Mongol 'Great Khan', with *Chambalech* to the right. Right: simplified image of the whole region under Tartar control. In the north are the mountainous regions that enclose monstrous races.

The Waldseemüller world map is one example of the continuing presence of Mongols on maps long after the empire had vanished.<sup>35</sup> The left side of the map is dominated by the 'New World', its east coast outline beginning to take form. For this reason, the world image in this map is drastically different to earlier maps, and the hazy outlines and empty space highlight the unknown. To the right, in the north-east, lies the past: a depiction of the Great Khan in his capital of *Chambalech* (fig. 17).

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<sup>33</sup> Edson contrasts Marco Polo's accounts, which did not appear on maps until almost a century later, to Bartholomew Dias' African voyage in 1488, which was recorded on maps only two years later, see Edson, *The World Map*, 227.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, 235.

<sup>35</sup> The map exists now in only one copy and its condition makes it difficult to read. Luckily, this map acted as a source for other maps from the time, and Fries' 1530 world map is a, slightly reduced in size, copy. For this reason, the images referred to in this section are from Fries' world map, which more clearly shows the detail found in Waldseemüller's.

Chambalech is shown as a European-looking castle, complete with turrets. Nearby sits, again, a very European-looking Great Khan with a beard and crown, sceptre and sword, and wearing fashionable stockings. The fact that there is a Mongol emperor *still* on the throne in Beijing, which was actually ruled at this time by the Ming Dynasty, is a remnant of tradition in the maps. The Mongols seem to have been retained purposefully. I will suggest some reasons for this in the next section. To the west in Asia lies Tartaria, and a Tartar king. A text explains that the area, controlled by the Great Khan, includes everything to the north, including a mountainous region enclosing monstrous races.<sup>36</sup> The Mongols remain in the past, but firmly outside of the barriers. However, the barriers containing monstrous beings are depicted within the Mongols' realm and under Mongol control.

## Barriers and bodies

### *Barriers in depictions of Mongols*

On medieval European maps Mongols are depicted near the fabled gate built by Alexander the Great to enclose Gog and Magog. The Alexander tradition was well-known in the medieval period, and with the pictorial form of the barrier established on earlier maps, the Mongols could easily be visually identified with Gog and Magog.<sup>37</sup> In both the Matthew Paris and Hereford maps, the Mongols are described as coming from the enclosed region. On later maps, the Mongols are no longer conflated with Gog and Magog, but are instead described as a people within the known world, and more and more information about them is added. However, despite the often glorious descriptions of the Mongols, the barrier remains ominously close.

On the one hand, Gog and Magog and the Mongols are, according to Christian tradition, neighbours in the north-east.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, this passage

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<sup>36</sup> C. van Duzer, 'A Northern Refuge of the Monstrous Races: Asia on Waldseemüller's 1516 *Carta Marina*', *Imago Mundi* 62.2 (2010) 221-231.

<sup>37</sup> According to Andrew Anderson, 'the term Gog and Magog has therefore become synonymous with barbarian, especially with the type of barbarian that burst through the northern frontier of civilization.' See: A. Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog and the Inclosed Nations* (Cambridge 1932) 8.

<sup>38</sup> Conklin Akbari, *Marco Polo*, 42.



from Ezekiel, one of the bases of the Gog and Magog Christian tradition, portrays an uncanny resemblance:

And thou [Gog] shalt come from thy place out of the uttermost parts  
of the north, thou and many peoples with thee, all of them riding  
upon horses, a great company and mighty army.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps then, Gog and Magog have little to do with the Mongols, other than accidental proximity and resemblance. On the other hand, the Matthew Paris and Hereford maps, which literally connect the Mongols and Gog and Magog would seem to suggest otherwise. Likewise, the continuation of a bounded region *within* Mongol territory, with monstrous beings (Gog and Magog or otherwise) under the control of the Mongols, points to a different reason for the continuation of barriers in depictions of the Mongols.

The barrier may have had a psychological or at least iconographic function. The Mongols' proximity to a barrier containing monsters may be a signal that the Mongols are likewise dangerous. This may point to uneasiness about the Mongols: their fierce reputation had not yet been extinguished by later, more positive accounts. On medieval world maps we see in action what historian Andrew Anderson describes: 'well into the second Christian millennium, the Gate had stood as a symbolic bulwark of the civilized world against the barbarians (...) against Gog and Magog interpreted as Turks, Tartars, Mongols.'<sup>40</sup> This might be why the Great Khan *Holubeim* on the Catalan Atlas sits on the Gate, signifying that he is intimately connected to Gog and Magog.

The placement of Mongols on the boundary between monsters and men points to their ambiguous character on medieval European maps, which can be seen more clearly if we turn our attention away from the Mongols' location on the maps, to how they are depicted.

#### *The body in depictions of the Mongols*

In Ingrid Baumgärtner's analysis of women in the Hereford *mappa mundi*, she discusses two strands of depictions of the foreign 'other'. Some depictions act as 'positive' reinforcements of European norms, through, for

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *Alexander's Gate*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 103.

example, tests of women's faithfulness. Others are 'negative' examples, which illustrate violations of European norms. These include things like societies ruled by women – a reversal of 'normal' social gender roles. Taking this interpretation as a starting point, I have grouped depictions of the Mongols into two categories of foreign 'other'. The Mongols are 'foreign,' never included as part of the 'civilised' European world on the maps, and they inhabit the steppe zone in north-east Asia, associated with barbarians since classical times.<sup>41</sup>

First are depictions that stress a negative foreignness, focusing on bodily actions, including monstrous forms of eating and drinking.<sup>42</sup> The Hereford map gives a clear example, with its gruesome description of the Mongols 'devouring the flesh of youths and abortions.'<sup>43</sup> Emphasising this cannibalistic behaviour, in the same sentence we are told that the Mongols are descendents of Gog and Magog, who 'eat human flesh and drink blood.'<sup>44</sup> We can also look to the illustration of the cannibal Gog and Magog on the Ebstorf map.

The second category focuses on positive foreignness. The clothes and the accumulation of wealth and power present the Mongols in a way that stresses their familiarity to Europeans. The Great Khan on the Catalan Atlas and the Waldseemüller world map is a European-style king, with European regalia and fashion, and pale skin, light hair and beard. The capital is likewise depicted with European-style architecture on the Fra Mauro and Waldseemüller maps. Descriptions of the Mongols in this category no longer focus on the body, but on displays of wealth: how many guards surround the capital, how splendid the royal procession is, or how enormous the buildings are.

These two categories follow a general chronological progression. We see a move from depictions concerning the body and monstrous bodily actions, to depictions focused on objects and buildings. Turning back to the connection between the Mongols and a barrier, however, we can see that

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<sup>41</sup> Jackson, Linehan and Nelson, 'Christians, Barbarians and Monsters', 94.

<sup>42</sup> This type of description is not limited to maps, and Jackson describes how writers such as Henry of Livonia and Thomas of Spalato wrote of the Mongol's un-Christian eating habits. The Mongols' diet was made up of items that were forbidden in Christianity, and this added to the sense of the Mongols as 'unclean.' Jackson, *The Mongols*, 139-140.

<sup>43</sup> Translation in Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, 184-187.

<sup>44</sup> Translation in Westrem, *The Hereford Map*, 141-142.

even when portrayed as extremely wealthy and powerful, and therefore one might assume ‘civilised,’ they are always placed near monsters. This, to some extent, marks them not only as foreign (no monsters exist in Europe on the maps), but gives them an unclear status in relation to monsters.

## **Conclusion**

The Mongols on medieval European maps are ambiguous figures. While over time their depictions and descriptions shift from a focus on unclean bodies to buildings of wealth and power, the Mongols remain near a barrier containing monstrous races. Perhaps this links to anxieties about the foreign ‘other’ in the medieval period. This would suggest why the barrier of Gog and Magog continues to appear in relation to the Mongols on later maps: we could read in this uneasiness about the construction of the world, as the European global imagination was continuously challenged by travel and discovery. The barrier also represents a visual mark of separation, a suggestion of the Mongols’ liminal existence on the boundary between the human and non-human worlds. Are they monsters, or at least slightly monstrous, by association?