

THE MONGOLS IN WORLD HISTORY

“Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire”
by John Masson Smith, Jr.

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Most Mongol rulers lived short lives. Those in the Middle East died, on average, at about age 38, and the successors of Qubilai (Khubilai) in the Far East at 33 (adding in Qubilai raises the average since he lived, atypically, for 78 years; Chinggis lived into his 60s; for the rest, few passed 50). Comparison of the Mongol and Manchu (Qing) dynasties shows the importance of longevity. In each of the Mongol realms of China, the Middle East and the Golden Horde, an average of eleven Mongols ruled for an average of about a century (107 years): Qubilai and nine successors ruled China for 110 years (1260-1370); the Golden Horde had twelve khans in 132 years (1227-1359); and nine Mongols held the Middle East for 80 years (1255-1335). Nine Manchus, with an average reign of 29 years, occupied the throne of China for over two and a half centuries (1644 -1908).

The Middle Eastern Mongol dynasty had further problems: high infant mortality and infertility. Ann Lambton considers that “the possibility cannot be ruled out that once the Mongols settled in Persia, they ceased to be good breeders.”¹ I suggest that the Mongols’ difficulties stemmed in large part from dietary inadequacies and improprieties.

The diet of pre-imperial Mongols was simple, calorically-sufficient -- and poorly balanced. Then as now (or until very recently) the average Mongol family possessed a herd consisting largely of sheep, with some goats, and a few each of bovines and camels.² Then, however, families kept more horses (ponies, actually) to maintain a military capability. For decent subsistence, a family required 100 sheep or the equivalent; for its military role, at least five (gelding) ponies; besides these, perhaps three more ponies and some oxen and camels were useful for transportation; and a mare or two for milking. From these animals the Mongols, like the other nomads of Inner Asia, obtained

¹ A. K. S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (Albany: State University of New York Press for Bibliotheca Persica of the Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 296.

² L. Krader, “Ecology of Central Asian Pastoralism,” *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 11/4 (1955): 301-326; page 309, profiled the (Outer) Mongolian domestic animal population as 55% sheep, 22% goats, 9% bovines, 10% horses, and 4% camels (I have rounded off his percentages). Ten sheep or goats may be taken as equivalent to one camel, and one horse or cow equal to five sheep or goats. The average herd suggested by H. H. Vreeland, *Mongol Community and Kinship Structure*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: HRAF Press, 1962), 31-32, for the Narobanchin Temple community had 193 sheep, and about half of the families owned between 200 and 300 sheep; most families kept rather few cows and horses.

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most of their food.³ In the words of John of Plano Carpini, who visited the Mongols in the 1240s: “[The Mongols] have neither bread nor herbs nor vegetables nor anything else, nothing but meat ... They drink mare’s milk in very great quantities if they have it; they also drink the milk of ewes, cows, goats and even camels.”⁴ Although many nomads exchange animal products for goods, including foods, from settled peoples, those of Outer Mongolia, where the Mongols under Chinggis Khan got their start, were (and still are) a long way from the nearest substantial farmlands, and for them imported food would have been an expensive, and for the average family, no doubt rare luxury.⁵

The Mongols’ main meat foods were mutton and lamb; although by all accounts, their favorite was horse-meat, it was a preference that the average family could seldom indulge. The other principal type of food was milk (in various processed forms), again chiefly from sheep, but mare’s milk by preference. The predominance of sheep in the herd and the importance of mutton and sheep’s milk in the diet, as well as the predilection for horse-meat, probably arose from the very high caloric value of these foods, a matter of central importance for practitioners of the hard -- and in Mongolia, cold -- nomadic life. Beef -- our meat mainstay -- has 1,073 kilocalories [kcal -- the same “calories” that we count when dieting] per lb; mutton has 1,834, and horsemeat 1,855. Likewise, cow’s (whole) milk provides around 400 kcal/lb, and sheep’s milk 511.⁶ Pound for pound, pint for pint, you get the best caloric return from sheep and horses.

Fat provides most of these calories: 89% of them in the case of mutton, which is 40% fat; and 67% with sheep’s milk (7.5% fat). One low-fat food was available. Since most of the Mongols’ animals provided milk for only about 5 months a year (cf. cows at 10-11 months), the Mongols had to process milk into forms that would keep well during the seven “dry” months. They rendered cow’s milk into a dried skim milk solid, the approximate equivalent of our non-fat milk powder. But they kept and ate the by-product, butter, off-setting the healthful effect of the dried skim.⁷

³ P. Buell, “Mongol Empire and Turkicization: The Evidence of Food and Foodways,” in *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy*, eds. R. Amitai-Press and D. O. Morgan (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 200-223; pages 206-208 consider game animals and vegetables to have provided important additional foods. I doubt that they were reliable, large-scale sources, as I have attempted to quantify in the case of marmots in “Mongol Campaign Rations: Milk, Marmots, and Blood?” in *Turks, Hungarians and Kipchaks: A Festschrift in Honor of Tibor Halasi-Kun* (1984), vol. 8 of the *Journal of Turkish Studies*, 223-228.

⁴ John of Plano Carpini, “History of the Mongols,” in *The Mongol Mission*, ed. Christopher Dawson (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 16-17.

⁵ Plano Carpini, 17: “[The Mongols] do not have wine, ale or mead unless it is sent or given to them by other nations.”

⁶ On horse-meat, see W. Martin-Rosiet et al., “Rendement et composition des carcasses du poulain de boucherie,” *Bulletin Technique, Centre des Recherches Zootechniques et Veterinaires de thelix* 41 (Beaumont, 1980); and [no author given] *Nutrient Requirements of Domestic Animals, Number 8: Nutrient Requirements of Dogs* (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 1974), 46. On milk and meat from Mongolian cattle, see H. Epstein, *Domestic Animals of China* (Farnham Royal, 1969), 2-3; I. Kh. Ovdienko, *Economic-Geographical Sketch of the Mongolian People’s Republic* (Bloomington: Mongolia Society Occasional Papers, No. 3, 1965), 65; G. Dahl and A. Hjort, *Having Herds* (Stockholm, 1976), 25, 170. Figures for the caloric value of cow’s milk vary considerably from region to region and breed to breed. On sheep, see Dahl and A. Hjort, 216 on milk (given a range of 1,050-1,200 kcal/kg, from African rather than Inner Asian sources in this case; cf. S.K. Kon, *Milk and Milk Products in Human Nutrition*, 2nd rev. ed. [Rome: FAO, UN, 1972], 3); and for meat, Epstein, 34 and Dahl and Hjort, 201 and 204.

⁷ William of Rubruck, *The Journey of William of Rubruck*, in Dawson 99. (Citations of Rubruck below will continue to refer to the translation in Dawson; the preferable translation by P. Jackson, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, eds. P. Jackson and D. Morgan (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), was not available to me when preparing this paper.)

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Interestingly, poor Mongols probably benefited from a better-balanced diet. After Chinggis’ father died, most of his family’s herds were stolen, so that his mother had to feed her children edible plants: wild pears, bird cherries, garden burnet root, cinquefoil root, wild onion, shallot, lily root, and garlic chives. Despite this diet of what the Mongols considered second-rate foods, Chinggis and the other boys “grew up into fine men” in the words of the *Secret History*.⁸

The Mongols, as mentioned, had (and have) a great liking for mare’s milk. Not on account of richness of the milk, which, by comparison with the milks of other domesticated animals, is virtually a diet drink at only 214 kcal/lb, but because mare’s milk (*qumis*) becomes alcoholic with fermentation.⁹ Not very alcoholic, however, ranging from 3.25% down to 1.65. Since, as Plano Carpini noted “Drunkenness is considered an honorable thing by [the Mongols],”¹⁰ they had to develop high-volume drinking habits and customs to offset its weakness. Plano Carpini again: “They drink mare’s milk in very great quantities if they have it. ...”¹¹ And Rubruck amplifies this: “In summer they do not bother about anything except [*qumis*] ... When the master begins to drink, then one of the attendants cries out in a loud voice ‘Ha!’ and [a] musician strikes his instrument. And when it is a big feast they are holding, they all clap their hands and also dance to the sound of the instrument, the men before the master and the women before the mistress. After the master has drunk, then the attendant cries out as before and the instrument player breaks off. Then they drink all around, the men and the women, and sometimes vie with each other in drinking in a really disgusting and gluttonous manner. ... When they want to incite anyone to drink they seize him by the ears and pull them vigorously to make his gullet open, and they clap and dance in front of him.”¹²

However, the pre-imperial Mongols were probably largely spared the perils of drink. Mare’s milk is generally available only in summer as Rubruck suggests, during three to five months of the mares’ lactation period, and most of it is imbibed at that time. To live exclusively off *qumis*, at, say, 2,000 calories a day, at least nine pints per person would have been needed: that is, the daily milk production of two mares (above and beyond the needs of their foals). Two mares would have been about as many as an ordinary family would have kept.¹³ They would have sufficed to enable the man

⁸ *The Secret History of the Mongols*, section 74. The plant names are from P. Buell, “Pleasing the Palate of the Qan: Changing Foodways of the Imperial Mongols,” *Mongolian Studies* XIII (1990): 60.

⁹ For the caloric value of mare’s milk, see Kon, 3. Fermentation works with any milk, but best on high-lactose mare’s milk (over 6%, while others are under 5%). The Mongols had little choice but to acquire a taste for *qumis* because as Plano Carpini observed (see note 4 above) other alcoholic beverages had to be imported. The high prices and problematic transportation of food imports are considered below.

¹⁰ Plano Carpini, 16.

¹¹ Plano Carpini, 17.

¹² Rubruck, 96-97.

¹³ Labor requirements markedly increase as a horse herd grows beyond the basic needs of the family for riding animals, which amount to one to three mounts per family, preferably geldings (which, in the good old days, could serve at need as war-horses); see Vreeland, 32-33, 40-42. In Chinggis’ youth, his family, headed by his widowed mother, Ho’elun, had eight geldings, and apparently at least two other mounts, even after thefts of their animals by former campmates; see *Secret History*, section 90.

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of the family to devote himself to *qumis* during the five milking months of spring and summer. (Observers of Inner Asian nomads have commonly re-marked that the men have nothing to do in peacetime.)

So far, then, we have the early Mongols on a high-fat and high-cholesterol diet, somewhat checked by food shortages; and with a penchant for drunkenness offset by the limited supply and low alcoholic content of the only available beverage.

Then came the imperial period. Over the course of about two generations (1206-1279), the Mongols conquered a good part of the known world, including China, Russia and much of the Middle East. From the proceeds of this empire, the Mongol rulers then tried to make more food available to their nomad subjects, and to provide for themselves all they could eat of their favorite dishes, plus a staggering supply of intoxicating drink.

At first, the Mongols relied on commerce to enlarge food supplies. This was very expensive. In 1221 a Chinese traveler encountered a caravan bringing food to Mongolia and reported that “Eight catties [about 100 lbs at 1-1/3 lbs/cattie] of flour here [in western Mongolia] cost as much as fifty pounds of silver, for it is brought on the backs of camels from beyond the [Tien] Shan, some two thousand *li* [one *li* is 1,364 feet or about a quarter-mile] away by foreign traders from the Western lands.”¹⁴ By 1234, such prices apparently came to be considered excessive even by Ögödei Qa’an, Chinggis’ spend thrift successor, since he established a state program to supplement the food supply of Outer Mongolia. “[H]e had issued [an edict (*yasa*)] to the effect that every day five hundred wagons fully loaded with food and drink should arrive [in Qara-Qorum (Khara Khorum) in central Outer Mongolia] from the [Mongols’ Chinese] provinces to be placed in stores and then dispensed therefrom. For [grain] and [wine] there were provided great wagons drawn by six oxen each.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Chih-chang Li, *Travels of an Alchemist*, trans. A. Waley (New York: AMS Press, 1979), 71. Commercially-supplied grain remained, or, possibly as a result of shortcomings in Ögödei’s public supply program, again became, expensive in Mongolia by comparison with China: five to seven times as costly in Qaraqorum (Khara Khorum) as in Ta-t’ung during Qubilai’s reign, according to Ch’ichi’ing Hsiao, *The Military Establishment of the Yuan Dynasty* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978), 60.

¹⁵ Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, trans. J. A. Boyle (New York: Columbia UP, 1971), 62-63. Notice that Ögödei, not Chinggis, instituted this program; obtaining food for the Mongols was an afterthought of conquest, not a motive for it.

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To calculate the amount of food supplied, we need to estimate the size of the wagonload.¹⁶ Among the Inner Asian vehicles described by Pegolotti, a Florentine trader with knowledge of commerce to East Asia, are a wagon drawn by one ox carrying about 1,000 lbs (10 Genoese *cantaras*), and a three-camel wagon with a load of about 3,000 lbs (30 *cantaras*); Pegolotti does not mention a six-ox wagon.¹⁷ If three camels could pull 3,000 lbs, it seems to me that six oxen might draw at least 4,000 lbs, in which case the supply of food and drink to Qaraqorum (Khara Khorum) could have amounted to 1,000 tons a day. If the loads were two-thirds food and one-third drink, most of the people of Outer Mongolia could have received each day two pounds of food (probably grain, flour or pasta), and a pint of drink a day.¹⁸

For their own consumption, the Mongol leaders arranged lavish supplies of horsemeat and *qumis*. Ibn Battuta, who visited the Golden Horde in Russia in the early fourteenth century, reports, for instance, that he “went one day to the audience of the [Mongol] sultan Uzbek [Ozbek] during the months of Ramadan. There was served horse-flesh (this is the meat that they most often eat) and sheep’s flesh, and *rishta*, which is a kind of macaroni cooked and supped with milk.”¹⁹ On another occasion, the Mongol commander Tughluk Timur invited Ibn Battuta to a religious ceremonial banquet: “The servants ... brought in the dishes, consisting of the flesh of horses, etc., and also brought mare’s milk. Afterwards they brought the *buz̄a* [fermented millet], and when the meal was finished the Qur’an readers recited with beautiful voices.” After this and other religious presentations, “more food was served, and they continued in this fashion until the evening...”²⁰ *Qumis* was no longer the only alcoholic drink available. Now that the conquered sedentary lands were paying tribute, much of it in kind, including drink (as we have seen in Ögödei’s provisioning

¹⁶ Other important characteristics of the supply-system may also be estimated: grain-wagons took four months for the round-trip between Ta-t’ung, the Chinese frontier city that was the starting-point for the Mongolian supply system, and Qaraqorum, according to Hsiao, pages 59-60. This was a distance, round-trip, of some 1,500 miles, thus covered at an average pace of 12.5 miles per day [mpd] -- not counting time for loading, repairs, etc. Compare the 17 mpd pace of commercial travel across Inner Asia, from Tana on the Black Sea to Kanchow in China, as listed by Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, *La Pratica della Mercatura*, ed. Allan Evans (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936), 21; this East-West transport probably moved faster because it used smaller wagons and faster draught animals. At this pace, the 900-odd miles between Beijing and Qaraqorum could have been covered in 53 days; the round-trip (without allowance for delays in turn-around) in 106 days. So that 500 wagons should arrive at Qaraqorum each day, 60,000 wagons would have been needed (without allowance for down-time), along with 360,000 oxen, at six per wagon (without allowance for replacements or relays), plus at least 60,000 teamsters (assuming a minimal one per wagon).

¹⁷ Pegolotti, 22. Assuming the Genoese *cantara* weighed 104.83 lbs (47.65 kg); a different value for this *cantara*, yielding a load of 1,250 lbs (presumably for the one-ox wagon) seems to have been used by R. S. Lopez and me. W. Raymond in *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York, 1955), 353 n. 43, 357-358.

¹⁸ Chinggis Khan’s army in 1206 numbered some 135,000 men, approximately the whole adult male population of Outer Mongolia, which implies, multiplying by five, a total population of perhaps 675,000; see J. M. Smith, Jr., “Mongol Manpower and Persian Population,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18 (1975): 271-299; pages 282-283: a pound of bread provides about 1,000 calories. The weight of the drink-containers has not been included in the calculation.

¹⁹ Ibn Battuta, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), 474. Buell, “Foodways,” pages 205, 208 and 211- 213, describe the new foodstuffs and recipes taken up, at least by Mongol royalty, after the attainment of empire and its resources.

²⁰ Ibn Battuta, 477.

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scheme), the imperial Mongols were also supplied with “rice mead”²¹ or “rice ale”²²; with “honey mead”, that is, fermented honey (*bal*)²³; with a fermented millet drink (*buza*)²⁴; and with a red wine “like the wine of La Rochelle,” according to Rubruck.²⁵ Most of these were surely stronger than *qumis* -- much stronger in the case of the red wine -- and they were available all year.²⁶ Wine, rice wine, fermented honey, and distilled *qumis* (*qara qumis*) were all served at the khan’s court in winter.²⁷ The Mongol rulers served up these drinks in some style. “At Caracorum,” says Rubruck, “[Mongke Khan (Chinggis’ third successor, 1251-1258)] has ... a large palace ... in which he holds his drinking festival twice in the year, once round about Easter when he passes by that way and once in the summer on his return ...” (Like their Mongol subjects, the rulers were nomads; they only occupied their misnomered “capitals” part of the year.) “At the entrance to this palace, seeing that it would have been unseemly to put skins of milk and other drinks there, Master William of Paris has made for him a large silver tree, at the foot of which are four silver lions each having a pipe and all belching forth white mare’s milk. Inside the trunk four pipes lead up to the top of the tree and the ends of the pipes are bent downwards and over each of them is a gilded serpent, the tail of which twines round the trunk of the tree. One of these pipes pours out wine, another [*qara qumis*], that is the refilled milk of mares [distilled *qumis*], another *boal* [*bal*], which is a honey drink and another rice mead. ... At the very top he fashioned an angel holding a trumpet; underneath the tree he made a crypt in which a man can be secreted, and a pipe goes up to the angel through the middle of the tree. ... Outside the palace there is a chamber in which the drinks are stored, and servants stand there ready to pour them out when they hear the angel sounding the trumpet. ... And so when the drinks are getting low the chief butler calls out to the angel to sound his trumpet. Then, hearing this, the man who is hidden in the crypt blows the pipe going up to the angel with all his strength, and the angel, placing the trumpet to his mouth, sounds it very loudly. When the servants in the chamber hear this each one of them pours out his drink into its proper pipe, and the pipes pour them out from above and below into the [silver] basins prepared for this, and then the cup-bearers draw the drinks and carry them round the palace to the men and women.”²⁸

For similar large-scale entertainments, seating as many as 40,000 guests, according to Marco Polo,²⁹ Qubilai Khan had “a very fine piece of furniture of great size and splendour in the form of a square chest, each side being three paces [about 8 ft] in length, elaborately carved with figures of animals finely wrought in gold. The inside is hollow and contains a huge golden vessel in the form of a pitcher with the capacity of a butt, which is filled with wine. In each corner of the chest is a vessel with the capacity of a firkin, one filled with mare’s milk, one with camel’s milk, and the others

²¹ Rubruck, 176.

²² Rubruck, 163.

²³ Rubruck, 154.

²⁴ Ibn Battuta, 477.

²⁵ Rubruck, 163.

²⁶ Paul Buell points out this important consideration in “Pleasing the Palate of the Qan,” page 78 (n. 24 for page 61).

²⁷ Rubruck, 154. On page 99, Rubruck characterizes *qara qumis* as “a very pleasant drink and really potent,” but says it was available only to the “great lords.”

²⁸ Rubruck, 175-176.

²⁹ Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. R. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958; reprint of 1980 [*n.b.* pagination varies among reprints]), 137f.

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with other beverages. ... From [the chest] the wine or other precious beverage is drawn off to fill huge stoups of gold, each containing enough to satisfy eight or ten men. One of these [stoups] is set between every two men seated at the table. Each of the two has a gold cup with a handle, which he fills from the stoup. And for every pair of ladies one stoup and two cups are provided in the same way.”³⁰

Qubilai, probably like the other Mongol rulers, provided such lavish service frequently: at the New Year’s festival; at the festivals for each of the thirteen lunar months; on assorted “festive occasions”; and on birthdays. The birthdays in particular must have added up to a lot of partying. Marco Polo describes only Qubilai’s in detail, but remarks that “all the [Mongols] celebrate their birthdays as festivals”³¹ -- and Qubilai had four wives and 22 sons by them (along with an unspecified number of daughters), plus a number of concubines and 25 more sons by them (and surely more daughters as well). And then there were his other relatives, his great commanders, their wives, children, and so on.

At these great banquets, the guests and hosts drank steadily. Plano Carpini attended the post-election and enthronement banquets for Guyuk Khan, and reported that “the chiefs held their [electoral] conference inside [a] tent. ... There they remained until almost mid-day and then they began to drink mare’s milk and they drank until the evening, so much that it was amazing to see. ... [Some days later] they placed [Guyuk] on the imperial throne, and the chiefs knelt before him and after them all the people, with the exception of us who were not subject to them. Then they started drinking and, as is their custom, they drank without stopping until the evening.”³²

Ibn Battuta participated in an imperial banquet of the Golden Horde, to which Mongol commanders of a thousand and above (perhaps 187 of these, assuming that the regular, nomad army of the Golden Horde consisted of 17 *tumens*, each of ten thousands³³), along with religious dignitaries and distinguished guests (like Ibn Battuta) were invited. Boiled horse-meat and mutton were served first. “After this, drinking vessels of gold and silver are brought. The beverage they make most use of is fermented liquor of honey, since, being of the Hanafite school of [Islamic] law, they hold fermented liquor to be lawful. When the sultan [Ozbek Khan] wishes to drink, his daughter takes the bowl in her hand, pays homage ... and then presents the bowl to him. When he has drunk she takes another bowl and presents it to the chief [wife], who drinks from it, after which she presents it to the other [wives] in their order of precedence. The sultan’s heir then takes the bowl, pays homage, and presents it to his father, then, when he has drunk, presents it to the [wives] and to his sister after them, paying homage to them all. The second son then rises, takes the bowl and gives it to his brother to drink paying homage to him. Thereafter the great [commanders] rise, and each one of [the 17 of] them gives the cup to the sultan’s heir and pays homage to him, after which the [other] members of the royal house rise and each one of them gives the cup to this second

³⁰ Polo, 136. According to the *American College Dictionary*, a butt equals two hogsheads, each of 63 to 140 gallons; a firkin is one-fourth of a barrel, and a barrel equals 31.5 US gallons.

³¹ Polo, 137f.

³² Plano Carpini, 62-63.

³³ Smith, “Manpower,” 289-290.

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son, paying homage to him. The [170] lesser [commanders] then rise and give the sons of the king³⁴ to drink. During all this [ceremony], they sing [songs resembling the] chants sung by oarsmen.”³⁵

After this feasting and drinking -- a celebration of the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting -- Ozbek Khan was supposed to attend prayers at the mosque. “The [khan] was late in coming, and some said that he would not come because drunkenness had got the better of him, and other said that he would not fail to attend the Friday service. When it was well past the time he arrived, swaying . . . We then prayed the Friday prayers and the people withdrew to their residences. The sultan went back to [his great tent]” and until the afternoon prayers, “continued as before” -- drinking, presumably.³⁶ Guests at Ozbek’s celebration received gifts in addition to hospitality: “To the limit of vision both right and left I saw wagons laden with skins of *qumis* and in due course the sultan ordered them to be distributed among those present. They brought one wagon to me, but I gave it to my Turkish neighbors.”³⁷ If this wagon was one of the one-ox type, it could have carried 131 gallons of *qumis*.

Consumption at one royal Mongol party may be quantifiable. On 24 June 1254, Mongke Khan hosted a “great drinking festival” supplied, according to Rubruck, with “a hundred and five carts laden with mare’s milk, and ninety horses [to be eaten] . . .”³⁸ Mongolian ponies weigh on average around 600 lbs, of which about 240 lbs is meat,³⁹ so 90 ponies would yield about 20,000 lbs of meat. Mongke’s view of rations appropriate for his guests may be estimated from his allowance for Rubruck’s traveling party of four: one sheep every four days.⁴⁰ This would have provided a daily ration of three pounds of mutton – 5,502 kcal -- for each man. At three pounds of horse-meat per guest, Mongke’s 90 horses would have fed about 7,000 persons with 5,565 kcal apiece. Assuming 1,000-lb loads on the carts carrying drink, each of the 7,000 would also have been served about two gallons of *qumis*, the approximate equivalent of 19 shots of 80-proof whiskey.⁴¹

A guest-list of 7,000 is plausible: the khan’s entourage consisted in large part of his Imperial Guard, the *kesig*, a force of 10,000 men drawn from the Mongols’ best families, and Mongke

³⁴ “Kings” in the translation.

³⁵ Ibn Battuta, 495-496.

³⁶ Ibn Battuta, 496. I have somewhat rearranged the elements of the last sentence of the quotation.

³⁷ Ibn Battuta, 496.

³⁸ Rubruck, 202.

³⁹ Epstein, 100; Martin-Rosset, “Rendement.”

⁴⁰ Rubruck, 206 in Dawson; clearer in Jackson’s translation, 253. An alternative, less lavish scale of provisioning -- and a much longer guest list -- may be estimated from Rubruck’s statement, page 98, that “[The Mongols] feed fifty or a hundred men with the flesh of a single sheep. . .” Mongolian sheep average 121 lbs in weight (Epstein, 34), of which about 44%, or 53 lbs, is edible, and provides 1,834 kcal/lb (Dahl and Hjort, 201, 204). At the more generous of these rates, the 90 horses could have served 20,000 guests -- and each of them could have had about 5 pints of *qumis*, assuming 1,000-lb loads on the carts carrying drink.

⁴¹ Lactating mares produce only about 2 quarts (4.5 lbs) of milk a day surplus to the needs of their foals -- see Epstein, 101 (cf. Vreeland, 40) -- so Mongke would have needed a sizeable herd of milking mares to provide the roughly 13,000 US gallons of *qumis* for this party, as well as for another, similar one he held five days later, on 29 June. Consider, for example, the 3,000 mares that supplied milk to Batu, the khan of the Golden Horde (Rubruck, 99).

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probably invited them all (Qubilai did so every month, as we are told by Marco Polo) save those on guard and catering duty.⁴² This duty fell to the night-guards and quiver-bearers, 1,000 of each, leaving as likely guests the 8,000 day-guards.⁴³

Mongol leaders drank not only at mealtime, but during business hours. Rubruck had several interviews with the Khan Mongke, and at the first he observed that Mongke “appeared to me intoxicated,”⁴⁴ while at the last, the khan “drank four times, I believe, “during the meeting.”⁴⁵ It is important to emphasize that the women of the Mongol ruling establishment drank as heavily as the men. Wives attended and drank like their husbands at the parties of Mongke and Qubilai mentioned earlier. “[S]inging and loud shouting in drunkenness ... is not considered reprehensible either in men or women.”⁴⁶ “[Mongol women] ... may get very drunk, yet in their intoxication they never come to words or blows.”⁴⁷ Rubruck and his party were entertained by one of Mongke’s wives, who served them “rice ale, red wine ... and [*qumis*]. The lady, holding a full goblet in her hand, knelt down and asked a blessing, and all the priests sang in a loud voice and she drank it all. My companion and I were also obliged to sing an-other time when she wanted to drink. When they were all nearly intoxicated food was brought [mutton and carp], and of this I ate a little. In this way they passed the time until evening. Then the lady, now drunk, got into a cart, while the priests sang and howled, and she went on her way.”⁴⁸

A generation later royal women still engaged in heavy drinking. Ghazan Khan, ruler of the Mongol Middle East (1295-1304), attempted to set limits to expenditures by princesses on purchases of clothing, animals and provisions; allowances for children, salaries for servants -- and the expenses

⁴² Polo, 140, for Qubilai’s entertainment of his *kesig*. Ration-data for the week-long feasting that followed the election of Mongke at the *kuriltai* in 1251 are also available, in Juvaini, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. J. A. Boyle, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1958), 573; and Rashid al-Din/Boyle, 207. The feasting Mongols, they say, were provided each day with 2,000 wagon-loads of drink: *qumis* and wine; and 3,000 sheep and 300 cattle and horses to eat. The liquid provisions must have consisted in large part of wine, since it would have required an enormous number of milking mares, giving about two quarts a day (surplus to their foals’ need), to provide the 1.75 million gallons of milk/*qumis* needed for the week’s feast. The number of animals eaten, equivalent to the property of 45 or fewer families, is a reasonable provision. The quantity of rations that so many animals would have yielded is huge, around 240,000 lbs of meat a day, but proportionate to the demand that can be projected from stated or suggested figures for the troops in attendance on the principals at the feast, Batu had provided Mongke with three *tumens* as guards: perhaps 21,000 by the customary seven-out-of-ten rule of thumb for calculating troop readiness. Then there were twenty princes and commanders named as attending; three are said to have brought a thousand troops with them, and probably the rest did too. And Mongke probably had his own guard *tumen*. Finally, if all these troops traveled with their families -- say a wife and three children per soldier -- the scale of the supply makes sense. By way of comparison Qubilai, on occasion, hosted parties with more than 40,000 guests (Polo, 136).

⁴³ *Secret History*, section 226 and 232. The numbers of day-guards present might have been diminished by the absence of some on the special duties that often fell to these picked men, or the rations might have been somewhat diminished, from three pounds of meat to two and a half, and from two gallons of drink to one and two-thirds.

⁴⁴ Rubruck, 155.

⁴⁵ Rubruck, 195.

⁴⁶ Rubruck, 167.

⁴⁷ Plano Carpini, 15. Plano Carpini was much impressed by the peaceableness -- among themselves -- of the Mongols in general.

⁴⁸ Rubruck, 167.

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of the *sharabkhana*, approximately “wine-cellar.”⁴⁹ Specification of wine supplies as an expense item distinct from “provisions,” and the need to control its costs, suggests that the Mongol princesses, like the princes, khans and indeed the Mongols in general, as far as they were able, were still drinking their heads off.

To the moral of the story. Regular and plentiful consumption of high-calorie foods -- especially horse-meat -- had predictable consequences. Gout, according to Ibn Battuta, was a common affliction among the Mongols of the Golden Horde.⁵⁰ In the Far East, Qubilai suffered from it for the last 27 years of his life; he also grew to be “grotesquely fat.” Nevertheless, he lived a very long life -- 1215-1294 -- for a Mongol ruler.⁵¹ Mongol men were not alone in overeating: in Rubruck’s view, the Mongol women were “wondrous fat.”⁵² Cardio-vascular problems, although not then subject to diagnosis, may be suspected as well.

Heavy drinking, in turn, often led to alcoholism. The Mongols recognized this early on, but were unable to deal with it, even given the warnings and example of Chinggis Khan. Chinggis drank, but in a controlled fashion, unwilling to suffer mental confusion; he knew the symptoms and consequences of binge drinking: dulled senses, impaired physical control, clouding of the mind, and addiction lead to impoverishment. He tried to set limits on indulgence: no more than three drinking binges a month, preferably fewer and best none.⁵³ But custom, holding drunkenness an honorable condition, won out, and, with the ready availability of strong alcoholic beverages augmenting the Mongols’ high-volume drinking practice, led many Mongol rulers to drink themselves to death. Ögödei, Chinggis Khan’s successor (1229-1241), “drank continuously and to excess,” and eventually died of it, despite the efforts of his brother, Chaghatai, who “appointed an emir ... to watch over him and not allow him to drink more than a specified number of cups ... [but] he used to drink from a large cup instead of a small one, so that the [amount was large although the] number [of cups] remained the same.”⁵⁴ Guytik, Ögödei’s successor, likewise overindulged, undermining a weak constitution and leading to an early death and a short reign, 1246 -1248 (perhaps saving Europe from a second Mongol invasion). Abaqa, ruler in the Middle East from 1265 to 1282, died in *delirium*

⁴⁹ “Approximately” because along the migratory Mongols the “wine-cellar” would have been a “wine-wagon.” Lambton, 293-294, translates *sharabkhana* as “pantry.”

⁵⁰ Ibn Battuta, 489: “We went to visit ... the sultan’s daughter. ... Her husband ... was present, and sat with her on the same rug. He was suffering from gout, and was unable for this reason to go about on his feet or to ride a horse, and so used to ride only in a wagon. ... In the same state too, I saw the amir Naghatay, who was the father of the second [wife of the sultan], and this disease is widespread among the [Mongols].”

⁵¹ M. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 98, 227.

⁵² Rubruck, 103. A portrait of Qubilai’s wife, Chabui, makes her appear distinctly chubby, supporting Rubruck’s appraisal; see W. C. Fong and J. C. Y. Watt, *Possessing the Past* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Taipei: National Palace Museum; Abrams distrib., 1996), 265, pl. 137.

⁵³ P. Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 192, citing *Yuan-shi*, 118, 10b; and Rashid al-Din, *Sbornik Letopisei*, Russian translation of the *Jami’al-Tawarikh/Collected Chronicles* by Yu. P. Verkhovski, vol. II *Moscow-Leningrad, 1960), 47.

⁵⁴ Rashid al-Din, *Successors*, 65.

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tremens and one of his later successors Oljeitu (1304-1318), expired, at age 35, of “digestive disorder brought on by the intemperate habits common to all the Mongol princes.”⁵⁵

General if less conspicuous overindulgence may also account for a decline in dynastic longevity. Chinggis and two of his sons lived reasonably long lives for the thirteenth century: Chinggis for at least 60 years (perhaps having acquired a taste for vegetables after having to eat them as a child), Chaghatai for some 57 years, and Ögödei, despite his drinking, for 55 years. Tolui, however, died at only about 42.⁵⁶ Of Tolui’s principal sons who died of natural causes (Mongke fell fatally ill on campaign, and Ariq Boke conveniently died in awkward political circumstances), Qubilai, as mentioned, lived for 78 years, but Hulegu, founder of the ruling Middle Eastern lineage, died at 48.⁵⁷ Most subsequent Middle Eastern rulers did not even approach Hulegu’s unremarkable standard. Abaqa also died at 48.⁵⁸ Hulegu’s third successor, Arghun, apparently already concerned about poor health when only in his early thirties, began to take a longevity-medicine made of sulfur and mercury -- and soon died.⁵⁹ Ghazan lived to only 32, Oljeitu to 35, and Abu Sa’id, the last real Middle Eastern sovereign, to 30.⁶⁰ The successors of Qubilai likewise declined rapidly in lifespan. Timur died at age 42, Qaishan at 31, Ayurbarwada Buyantu at 35, Yestin Timur at 35, Tugh Timur at 28, Irinjibal Qutuqtu at 7, and Toghon Timur at about 50.⁶¹

Male alcoholism complemented by heavy drinking on the part of Mongol women may have compromised fertility as well as longevity. Just as Qubilai’s long life of 78 years shows what might have been, so does his procreativity. He had, as mentioned, 47 sons (and probably about as many daughters), by four wives and numerous concubines. Hulegu had 21 children by 5 wives and some concubines. Abaqa fathered 9 children by 15 women. Arghun begat 8 children, one of whom died as a child, by more than 9 women. Ghazan had 7 consorts but only 2 children; one died in infancy. Of Oljeitu’s 12 women, 3 had no offspring, and of his 9 children by the others, 6 died as infants. Abu Sa’id had only one (posthumous) child by at least two wives.⁶² Given what we are now told about fetal alcoholism syndrome and the diminution of male fertility from binge drinking, we can perhaps understand this unimpressive record.

⁵⁵ J. A. Boyle, “Dynastic and Political History of the Il-khans,” *The Cambridge History of Iran, Vol. V: The Saljuq and Mongols Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968), 406.

⁵⁶ Rossabi, *Khubilai*, 8.

⁵⁷ Boyle, “Il-khans,” 354.

⁵⁸ Lambton, 251.

⁵⁹ Boyle, “Il-khans,” 371-372.

⁶⁰ Boyle, “Il-khans,” 396; Ghazan, 406, 412; Abu Sa’id. Cf. Lambton, 251-252. Those dying violent deaths (Ahmad, Geikhathu and Baidu) and Argun, done in by his longevity-medicine (incl. sulfur and mercury), are omitted; Abu Sa’id is included although it was rumored that he was poisoned.

⁶¹ For these ages at death, except Irinjibal’s, see R. Grousset, *The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1970), 320 -321: Grousset believes that their “lives were shortened by their hedonistic excesses.” For Irinjibal, see H. H. Howorth, *History of the Mongols, Part I* (London: Longmans, Green, 1876; rpt Taipei: Ch’eng Wen, 1970), 310. (*l.c.* The ages given by Howorth vary from Grousset’s in some cases, usually only one year.) Shidebala Gegen and Qoshila, who were assassinated, are not counted.

⁶² Lambton, 295-296.

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The corollary of short life spans was short reigns, as mentioned at the outset. Short reigns, in turn, made for frequent successions, which were often disruptive, since Inner Asian tribal peoples had no firm rules or principles governing the transmission of chiefly authority. Chinggis had insisted that successions should be settled at a leadership conference (*kuriltai*), but even his decree did not hold for long. After the death of Mongke in 1259 -- by which time the Mongols had clearly taken the measure of all their opponents and felt less compulsion to solidarity -- the Mongol princes increasingly resorted to force or the threat of force in claiming chieftaincy, and increasingly this armed competition led to military stalemate and political fragmentation. The corollary of infertility in the Middle Eastern lineage was dynastic extinction. After the death of Abu Sa'id, no reputable descendants of Hulegu could be found to replace him, except a candidate of desperation, his sister, Sati Beg, whose brief reign was not a success; other failed figureheads included four Huleguid nonentities, a distant nephew of Hulegu, a descendant of Chinggis' brother, Jochi-Qasar, an obscure individual awarded the great Persian royal name “Anushirvan,” and finally, a second “Ghazan,” known only from a few coins.⁶³ All of these ephemeral sovereigns were puppets of Mongol generals who, between them, pulled apart the Middle Eastern realm.

Had the descendants of Chinggis spent less time at the table, they might have lasted longer on the throne, and produced more stable, more capable, and even farther-flung government. But in enjoying too thoroughly the pleasures enabled by the vast empire they had seized, their even greater original intention, to conquer the world, became once again only the subject of drunken boasting, as it had been among Inner Asian nomads during the millennium before the coming of Chinggis Khan.⁶⁴

⁶³ For a brief account of most of these last Il khans, see Boyle, “Il khans,” 413-416. “Ghazan II” is the as yet unpublished numismatic discovery of Stephen Album (album@sonic.net); a gold dinar of Ghazan II, struck at Tabriz and dated 757 *hijri*, has been published and illustrated in Spink & Son, *Auction 27: Coins of the Islamic World* (June 1988), lot 360.

⁶⁴ Both the Huns and the Orkhon Turks employed a rhetoric of world-conquest; see C. D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1966), 59, 93; and T. Tekin, *A Grammar of Orkhon Turkic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Uralic and Altaic Series, vol. 69, 1968), 261, 263, 268 and *passim*.