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Chinggis-Khan: Sein Leben und Wirken by Paul Ratchnevsky. Münchener Ostasiatische Studien, band 32; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1983.

Normally when a "new" biography of a historical figure as noteworthy as Chinggis Khan is published, some measure of justification is called for: either startling new data are offered, or a radically new interpretation of events is promised. In the case of Chinggis Khan, however, no such rationale is necessary, for, surprising as it may seem, Paul Ratchnevsky's study is the first extended, scholarly biography of the Mongolian conqueror to appear in a Western language. Although the works of his predecessors—Vladimirtsov, Grousset and Hambis—were certainly serviceable in their day, none were directly grounded in the primary sources. This is not meant as a criticism of these authors (all of whom were fine scholars); their books were clearly intended for a general audience and were therefore written in a semi-popular vein, which precluded the use of frequent citations and the attendant critical apparatus.

This lack has now been remedied in Professor Ratchnevsky's book that is based upon an impressive array of sources much of which he has read in the original (principally the Chinese and Mongolian materials) and some of which he uses through translation (the Persian, Arabic, and Armenian chronicles). Of equal importance, the author squarely and systematically confronts the numerous contradictions and anomalies found in these sources and forthrightly offers his own solutions to a series of perplexing chronological and textual problems. As one who has occasionally tried to sort out the discrepancies of fact and dating encountered in the principal narratives of the rise of the Mongolian Empire, i.e. Rashid al-Din, the Yüan shih, and the Secret History, I can only applaud Ratchnevsky's industry, courage, and scholarly acumen.

He opens his study with a discussion of the ethnography and economy of the Eastern steppe and then briefly describes the rise of the first Mongolian "state" under Qabul Khan and its collapse in the 1160s. He next addresses the long-debated question of Temüjin's birth date. After surveying the data bearing on the issue in all the contemporary and near-contemporary sources, he comes to the sensible conclusion that while the available indications point to the mid-1160s, no precise date can as yet be assigned.

In his treatment of Temüjin's youth, Ratchnevsky continues his efforts to establish a workable chronological framework for the major episodes in the future khan's life. In some cases, the best that can be done is to indicate Temüjin's approximate age at the time of particular events; for example, he was eight when betrothed to Börte and fourteen or fifteen when he killed his brother Bekter. In other cases, an absolute date can be provided; for example, the march of To'oril, Jamuqa and Temüjin against the Merkits occurred in 1184. In addition to his concern for the chronology of events, Ratchnevsky is equally alive to the problem of their historicity. He argues that the murder of Bekter is historical, but that the grisly account of Jamuqa's execution of the Chino'a chieftains in kettles of boiling water is a folkloristic addition to the text of the Secret History.

Our understanding of Chinggis Khan's rise to political prominence in the last decades of the twelfth century and his astounding conquests in the early thirteenth century rests on a somewhat more secure factual foundation, but here too there is

no shortage of problems to resolve. Ratchnevsky provides a full discussion of the Baljuna covenant and reaffirms its historicity. More controversial is his argument that To'oril (Ong Khan), young Temüjin's Kereyid mentor, was not a participant in the 1196 campaign against the Tatars. According to Ratchnevsky, at the time of this confrontation To'oril was on his way back from the Qara Kitai territory, whither he had earlier fled, and only rejoined Temüjin following the latter's defeat of the Tatars. The Chin, the author further explains, granted To'oril the title of Ong Khan not for his services against the Tatars, as is reported in the Secret History, but because the Jurchen were anxious to prop up the Kereyid leader's shaken authority among his own tribesmen. Ratchnevsky's handling of this episode is ingenious, but to me not fully convincing.

In general, the discussions of the campaigns of conquest launched after 1206 represent the least original sections of the book for the very good reason that this facet of Chinggis Khan's career has been subjected to extensive and careful scrutiny by modern scholars. Ratchnevsky nonetheless makes some useful additions to our knowledge of this period. He untangles, for instance, the chronology of Jochi's punitive expedition against the forest peoples—the Oyirad, Khirghiz, and others. In his formulation this operation occurred in 1217-18 and not in 1207-08 as the Secret History states. This source telescopes the initial and peaceful submission of the forest people in 1207-08 and their subsequent rebellion in 1217-18 into a single event. The two episodes, he quite rightly concludes, must be clearly separated, as they are in Rashid al-Din's accounting.

In his treatment of the administrative measures introduced by Chinggis Khan in the wake (c. 1224) of the Khwarazmian campaign, Ratchnevsky turns to paragraph 263 of the Secret History for his basic data. Here it is stated, among other things, that Chinggis Khan placed the Khwarazmian Mas'ud Beg in charge of Central Asia and Mahmud Yalavach in charge of North China. In my opinion, the accuracy of this particular assertion is open to question. To begin with, none of the extant sources—Arabic, Persian, or Chinese—mentions such an appointment at this time. Moreover, these same sources place the posting of Mahmud Yalavach to China and his son, Mas'ud Beg, to Turkestan in 1240, that is at the end of Ögödei's reign. Admittedly this chronological tangle is not readily resolved, but the issue itself might usefully be raised.

Ratchnevsky ends the narrative portions of the study with an account of Chinggis Khan's last campaign against the Tanguts and a brief but interesting discussion of the location of his tomb. The remaining chapters are thematic, treating more general questions of the military and administrative structure of the realm, Chinggis Khan's personality, and his historical legacy.

The lengthy section on Chinggis Khan "der Mensch" is both solid and sensible. In Ratchnevsky's portrayal Chinggis Khan emerges as a complex individual with a powerful and attractive personality, a man able to recognize and make use of the talents of others whatever their social or ethnic backgrounds. He was a demanding leader but was always prepared to reward service and loyalty and to acknowledge the assistance of others. Throughout his life, the author states, Chinggis Khan avoided luxury and remained a "child of the steppe" who mixed easily with his officers and men. In his drive for power he was absolutely ruthless, destroying

all who stood in his way. With enemies he was hard and unforgiving, a man who remembered wrongs for years and never failed to exact vengeance when the opportunity arose. Ratchnevsky is right, too, in maintaining that the great conqueror sincerely believed in Heaven's (Tenggeri's) blessing of and support for the Mongols' imperial mission.

In accounting for Chinggis Khan's military success, Ratchnevsky notes, as have many others, that his armies were well-led, disciplined and coordinated, but points out that victory was not only a matter of military prowess: the warfare of the Mongols had as well a psychological and political dimension. Diplomacy and subversion were frequently used to exploit tensions within the enemy camp in order to induce capitulation with a minimum of military effort. As a general proposition, I agree with the author that Chinggis Khan was a perceptive and pragmatic politician; yet, it seems to me there are episodes in his life when a personal affront or the thirst for revenge overrode calculation and practicality. The needless destruction of the cities of Khurasan falls into this category. This dissent aside, Ratchnevsky's portrait of Chinggis Khan the man remains far and away the best characterization we have of the Mongolian leader.

In the section on the structure of the realm the author discusses the organization of the subject populace into military-administrative units of 10,000 (tümen), methods of taxation, and the role of darughachis (imperial legates) and jarghuchis (judges) in the Mongolian system of governance. The functions of the imperial guard (keshig) are briefly mentioned, and while Ratchnevsky recognizes its importance as a "Machtinstrument," he provides little illustrative detail on the activities of this key institution which, arguably, acted as the central government during the period of the early empire.

Chinggis Khan's famous law code (jasag), as it has come down to us in a variety of sources, is nicely summarized, as are his policies toward the various religions of Eurasia. Ratchnevsky stresses the Mongols' general tolerance in matters of faith, but he also calls attention to Chinggis Khan's frequent use of sectarian strife to further his own ends.

The work concludes with a discussion of the Mongolian ruler's legacy in which three major themes are developed. Ratchnevsky argues, as have several Soviet specialists, that to Chinggis Khan belongs the credit for consolidating the Mongols' ethnic identity. This thesis should gain wide acceptance, for among the steppe nomads ethnogenesis and state formation are closely related if not identical processes. His second point, which he again shares with Soviet historians, is that while the establishment of the empire initially brought wealth to the Mongolian people, later on it produced much poverty, especially for the lower classes. Although I would not deny that imperial policies at times caused the Mongolians themselves considerable hardship and misery, the evidence often cited for impoverishment has to be handled with great care. Nomadic peoples and their herds are very susceptible to ecological pressures in the form of epizootics, drought, overgrazing, spring storms, and so on, any of which can bring sudden ruin to a prosperous herdsman. Thus while the Yüan shih provides unequivocal evidence for the existence of an indigent stratum in Mongolian society, the cause of this poverty—government policy, class exploitation, or natural calamity—is more

difficult to determine.

Finally, Ratchnevsky takes note of the Mongols' role in the diffusion of technology throughout Eurasia by means of trade and the massive deportation of craftsmen and artists. This is a suggestive and challenging hypothesis. I hope Ratchnevsky and other scholars will investigate the problem further using both literary sources and archeological data.

The text contains relatively few misprints, and only one, so far as I am aware, is likely to cause confusion. This occurs on page 33, line 26, where it is stated erroneously that in 1184 To'oril, Jamuqa, and Temüjin campaigned "against the Kereit." Here, Kereit is an obvious slip for Merkit, who were the actual target of this attack.

In conclusion, I would emphasize once again that Professor Ratchnevsky has rendered a signal service to the field. Although I disagree with his interpretation of some of the data and believe certain issues deserve more attention than they receive, this is not intended to deprecate his contribution in any way. he has tackled a most difficult subject and produced a book which should serve in the years to come as a point of departure and guide for all serious research into the rise of the Mongolian Empire.

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