

Drinking Traits and Culture of the Imperial Mongols in the Eyes of Observers and in a Multicultural Context

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Modern scholarship is actively engaged in the study of “Mongolian-inspired” cultural exchanges that took place across Eurasia. These exchanges prove that a history of relationships between the medieval East and West cannot be limited to just diplomatic, ideological and economic interactions.

The extensive use of regional and foreign ties and resources is expressive of unique, multicultural social aspects of the Mongol Empire. Along with aspects of material culture, there was a broad transmission of knowledge and intellectual culture among the various inhabitants of the Empire. Included were such things as language, history and literature, as well as agriculture, construction techniques, medicine, food, etc.

This paper looks at one relevant area of this so-called “Genghisid exchange” and examines the aspects of the drinking habits and drinking culture of the medieval Mongols and how the traits of the Mongols in this area were viewed in different historical sources, by different observers, namely by Kirakos Gandzakets’I (1200–1271), John Di Plano Carpini (d. 1252), William of Rubruck (c. 1220–c. 1293), Hu Sihui 忽思慧 (fl. 1314–1330) and Ibn Battutah (1304–1368/1369).

Mongol Genes and the Drinking Habit

There is a tendency to blame the Russians or “big brothers”, the terminology that was in circulation during the Soviet era in Mongolia, for transmitting the drinking habit to modern Mongols; however, the Russians take the opposite view.

Vladimir Nuzhny from the National Narcological Research Centre of Russia states that almost half of the Russian population has inherited a Mongol gene having the effect of causing more alcohol to be absorbed by the blood. He assumed that this particular gene was at fault after conducting the

first research on the effects of alcohol on Russians with Mongol genes.¹ According to him, his findings can be explained by evolution.

In the course of his research, scientists paid 12 student-volunteers to consume 350 grams of vodka in an hour. Their behaviour was then closely monitored. [...] At first, the students thought everything was fine: they were getting paid for drinking! Afterwards, however, they realized they had been mistaken.

While intoxicated, each of the students had to complete certain tests. These included answering questions, and driving in a video game. They were also asked to blow into special tubes in order to measure levels of alcohol in the breath. Scientists even paid close attention to how fast students stood up from their seats.

After some rest, the students were given breakfast and had to undergo another set of tests in order to measure hangovers. It turned out that those students with Mongol genes absorbed 50% more alcohol and digested it significantly more slowly than the rest of the students. They tended to experience a different sensation while being intoxicated.

According to Nuzhny

they are more susceptible to aggressions or depressions. They do not necessarily resemble Mongol facial features. However, they do have this Mongol gene.²

Mongols ruled Russia for nearly 300 years. Interracial marriages were quite common between Mongols and peoples of other nations. Scientists already knew that people of Mongol descent, but including Chinese, Koreans and Japanese, possessed an intestinal ferment responsible for alcohol digestion which was not as strong as that of Europeans who used to consume rather strong alcoholic beverages made of grapes and wheat.

Airag or Kumiss

It is interesting to explore whether Mongol drinking habits have their own roots. Mongolian nomads knew alcohol in the form of fermented horse milk, *airag*, called *kumiss* in many historical sources and in the secondary literature. In the *Secret History of the Mongols*, it is said that Bodanchar, the ancestor of the Golden or Genghisid clan, was fond of *kumiss*.³ Another early source is a

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1 Pravda 2004.

2 Pravda 2004.

3 Onon 2001, 45 (§ 28).

biography of Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1115–1234), who was of Khitan ethnicity according to the *Yüanshi* 元史 (History of the Yuan Dynasty). He was a statesman during the times of Genghis Khan (born 1162, r. 1206–1227) and Ögedei Khan (born 1186, r. 1229–1241) and carried out administrative reforms in North China. The source mentions that Yelü got drunk feasting with Mongol nobles and fell asleep in a cart outside of yurt. Genghis Khan noticed this next morning and offered Yelü a *kumiss* presumably to ease his hangover.⁴

It was not only drinking but also drunkenness that was common. The sources for the Mongols are replete with stories illustrating this.

Kirakos Gandzakets'i, the Armenian cleric and historian wrote a key source *Patmut'iwñ Hayots'* (History of the Armenians), which has 65 chapters. It reviews the political history of Armenia from its Christianisation until 1266/1267.⁵ The work has several thematic sections, such as political history, and includes biographical accounts of clerics in Greater and Cilician Armenia as well as in Caucasian Albania. Much of this work is devoted to the events of the historian's own day: the Mongol invasion and Mongol domination. Kirakos Gandzakets'i provides an extensive and in-depth account of the Mongols, starting from the time of first the appearance of the Mongols in the lands of Greater Armenia, Georgia and then in Cilician Armenia. One major reason for this is that, in 1236, Kirakos was captured along with his teacher Vanakan Vardapet (1180–after 1251)⁶ by the Mongol commander Molar in a village called Lorut, south of Tavush fortress. They had taken shelter there from the Khwārazmian onslaught. On Molar's order, Kirakos was taken to serve the Mongols' secretarial needs, writing and reading letters during the whole of the summer of 1236.⁷ This gave him a certain understanding of the history and religion of the Mongols as well as knowledge of Mongolian.⁸

4 Munkuyev 1965, 199.

5 In 1961 K. Melik' Ohanjanyan published a complete critical edition of the work. The work was translated into French by E. Dulaurier in 1858 (extracts only), by M. Brosset in 1870, into Russian by T. Ter-Grigorian in 1946 and by A. Khanlarian in 1976, and into English by R. Bedrosian in 1975/1986. For details on various editions and translations, see Thomson 1995, 141f; Greenwood 2007, 245f.

6 Vanakan Vardapet or Yovhannēs Tavushets'i was a scholar and teacher of Kirakos Gandzakets'i, Vardan Arevelts'i and Grigor Aknerts'i, and the author of the *History of the Tatars' Invasion*, which has been lost; Galstyan 1962, 118, n. 127.

7 In the autumn of 1236, Vanakan and Kirakos were taken to the fortress of Gag, where only Vanakan Vardapet was allowed by the Mongols to be bought by the local people for eighty

According to Kirakos, Awag (d. 1250), the son of Iwanē Zak'arian (d. 1234), was the first Caucasian noble to submit to the Mongols. Kirakos Gandzakets'i gives a detailed account of how this happened.⁹ Mongol Commander Chormaghan received Awag in 1236. When the Mongol commander ordered a meal in Awag's honour, he positioned the latter below all his nobles. Awag was offered a large quantity of meat 'both from clean and unclean animals' and *khmuuzs* (*kumiss*), fermented mare's milk, but Awag said that the Christians were not accustomed to eat such food or to drink such a beverage; they ate meat from permitted animals and drank wine.¹⁰ Therefore, the Mongol commander Chormaghan gave an order to bring what he requested. The next day, Awag was seated above many nobles, and day after day he was honoured more and more until he sat among the ranks of the great lords.¹¹ The plausibility of this conversation is contentious, but surely, Kirakos wants to highlight the pride and bravery of the Armenian prince and the details of his submission through cross-cultural moment.

For us the banqueting details are more important, because they provide more insight into the Mongol lifestyle. In this context, Kirakos tells that "whenever possible they ate and drank insatiably."

Among the European accounts, Friar John di Plano Carpini who travelled to Mongolia between 1245 and 1247 stated the following:

Their [the Mongols'] victuals are all things that may be eaten; for we even saw some of them eat mice [presumably marmot]. They drink milk in great quantity, but especially mare's milk, if they have it.¹²

dabekans. Kirakos escaped captivity. Vanakan Vardapet and Kirakos Gandzakets'i were in Mongol captivity for about one year; Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1961, 244-252.

8 Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1961, 271-275.

9 Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1961, 254-257.

10 Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1961, 256. Friar William of Rubruck gave the same answer to the Mongol host's offer, namely that the Christians do not drink *kumis*, and that having drunk it they would renounce their Christian faith; Rubruck in Komroff 1926, 77. The same answer was given by al-Kāmil Muhammad, the Ayyubid ruler of Mayyāfāriqīn to Mönkge Khan; Raverty 1970, 1266.

11 Kirakos Gandzakets'i 1961, 254-257.

12 "The Journey of Friar John of Pian de Carpini to the Court of Kuyuk Khan 1245-1247 as Narrated by Himself", in: Komroff 1926, 6.

Carpini noted that

drunkenness is honourable among the Mongols, and when someone drinks a great deal he is sick right on the spot, and this condition does not prevent him from drinking more.¹³

A companion of the friar added that the Mongols were more given to drunkenness than any other people on earth, and their drinking sessions were not limited to one occasion but occurred several times throughout the day. Carpini stated that

[The Mongols] do not have wine, ale, or mead unless it is sent or given to them by other nations.¹⁴

Alcohol and Royal Ceremonies

Drinking is one of traditions involved in any royal ceremony. Thus Carpini observed at Batu Khan's (born 1205, r. 1227–1255) court that drinking was accompanied by the playing of music and singing.¹⁵ The most picturesque narration of a royal reception Carpini provides for Güyük's (born 1206, r. 1246–1248) coronation ceremony. Prior to the coronation there was a *quriltai*, a great assembly of nobles. He saw a huge tent of white cloth able to receive more than two thousand men. The official assembly lasted at least for four days; the Mongols chiefs' robes changed in colour each day. They were white on the first day, scarlet on the second, blue on the third day, with the richest robes of all on the fourth day.¹⁶ The chiefs, when communing to consult about the election of their emperor began to drink mare's milk and continued until evening; however, they called the Carpini embassy to the tent and offered them mead instead of *kumiss*, knowing that they could not drink mare's milk.¹⁷ The *quriltai* continued for four weeks and after Güyük was established on the throne, the newly elected khan received the various ambassadors. According to Carpini, the kneeling and drinking procedures were the most difficult actions for the foreigners. They could not endure them but must follow their hosts.

13 Hildinger 1996, 51.

14 Hildinger 1996, 51.

15 Komroff 1926, 35.

16 Komroff 1926, 40.

17 Komroff 1926, 41.

Marco Polo (1254 – 1324), the Venetian merchant and traveller, gives an account of the *White Feast*, the Mongolian Lunar New Year celebration. The nobles and their subject-guests from different countries were obliged to wear white garments, a sign of good fortune. On this day the inhabitants of all the provinces and kingdoms subject to the Great Khan sent him valuable presents of gold, silver and precious stones as well as white horses.¹⁸ Presumably it was a great burden for those subjects since the horses were not common, and the number of white horses should be nine times nine or eighty-one. The Great Khan received at this festival no fewer than a hundred thousand horses.¹⁹ As Marco Polo testifies, Qubilai Khan (born 1215, r. 1260–1294) needed 10,000 mares daily to satisfy his *ordu*'s demand for *kumiss*. No one except the direct descendants of Genghis Khan were allowed to drink the white mare's milk.²⁰ This is how Marco describes the feast of Mongol khan's court:

When the Great Khan sits at meals, in his hall of state, [...] the table which is placed at the center is elevated to the height of about eight cubits, and at a distance from it stands a large buffet, where all the drinking vessels are arranged. Now, by means of their supernatural art, they caused the flagons of wine, milk, or any other beverage, to fill the cups spontaneously, without being touched by the attendants, and the cups to move through the air the distance of ten paces until they reach the hand of the Great Khan.²¹

The plausibility of magic is unlikely but the story does give an indication of the scale of feast and the range of drinks offered at the meals of Mongol rulers.

Alcohol and Lifespan

Alcohol consumption is often regarded as responsible for a relatively short lifespan. The biography of the Mongol rulers shows that in their short-lived lives drinking was a common habit. A daily consumption of *airag* or *kumiss* except in spring season can be observed in modern times as well. So perhaps genetic research might prove whether or not this trait was a part of the Mongols' genetic legacy later transmitted to the subject peoples of the Mongol Empire.

18 *The Travels of Marco Polo*, ed. Komroff 1930, 141.

19 Komroff 1930, 142.

20 Komroff 1930, 107.

21 Komroff 1930, 108.

Genghis Khan himself was not a heavy drinker, one can conclude. In his maxims it is cautioned that when a ruler is addicted to drinking it is easy for him to lose his own land, and country; an addicted minister his position and authority; an addicted layperson his livestock, thereby becoming a beggar. It may be for that reason that Genghis lived into his 60s. Although Qubilai amazingly reached the age of 78, later Mongol rulers were not noted for their longevity, rarely living beyond 50, and the cause of their truncated lives has usually been attributed to overindulgence in alcohol. The Great Khans: Ögedei, Güyük, Möngke, and even Qubilai, were not the exceptions, just the most prolific. A declining longevity was evident among the Il-Khans of Persia. While Hülegü and his son Abaqa lived to 48, Ghazan died at 32, Oljeitu at 35, and Abu Sa'id died without an heir at 30. [The deaths of the other Il-Khans were caused by direct human intervention rather than their apparent lifestyle]. A similar pattern can be seen with the successors of Qubilai in China. Timür made it to 42, Qaishan reached only 31, Ayurbarwada Buyantu died at 35, Yestin Timür died at 35, Tuq Timür died at only 28, Irinjibal at 7. Only Toghon Timür lived to 50.

Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318), the Persian historiographer, indicates that Ögedei, was drunk continuously.²² And he died after a night of heavy drinking. However, before his death, Ögedei Khan admitted that in addition to his four great accomplishments, he had four faults, among them his addiction to alcohol.²³ However, interestingly enough, the sources did not mention violence on account of excessive alcohol consumption.

Airag and Its Making

William of Rubruck, who traveled to the court of the Great Khan Möngke (born 1209, r. 1251–1259) between 1253 and 1255, and on his return sent a full account of his journey to King Louis IX of France (born 1214, r. 1226–1270), was an unwitting initiate to the pleasures of *kumiss*. Upon swallowing it for the first time, he was induced to a sweat of “alarm and surprise.” However, he admitted to finding the drink very palatable.²⁴ In pre-imperial times, *kumiss* was the sole alcoholic drink available to the Mongol tribes.

22 Boyle 1971, 65.

23 Rachewiltz 2004–2013 (§281).

24 “The Journal of Friar William of Rubruck”, in: Komroff 1926, 132.

Rubruck devoted a short chapter of his travelogue to the making of *kumiss*.²⁵ He describes how the foals of the tribe's horses were tethered to a stretched rope. The mares would seek out their young and then stand peacefully beside their offspring and allow themselves to be milked. If any mare should prove intractable, the foal would be allowed to initiate the milking process. The collected milk, "sweet as cow's milk while it is fresh," would be poured into a bag or large skin and then churned with a specially made club "as thick at the lower end as a man's head and being hollow within" until the mix began to bubble "like new wine" and to turn sour and ferment. Churning would continue until butter could be extracted. It was considered ready for drinking when the *kumiss* was moderately pungent. The taste had a sting on the tongue like sour wine but a very pleasant aftertaste like the milk of almonds, which went down "very pleasantly intoxicating weak brains."²⁶ In contrast, Ibn Battutah, a Moroccan explorer traveling across the lands of the northern Golden Horde, was served *kumiss* at Uzbek khan's Khatun's *ordu* for the first time and disliked it.²⁷

As well as this ordinary *kumiss*, sometimes dismissively described as white, cloudy, and sour tasting, a superior mare's milk beverage was also fermented. This was known as *qara kumis*, or black *kumiss*, and has been described as an "agreeably sweet and wholesome liquor."²⁸ Because their mares' milk did not curdle, the churning process was continued until everything solid in the milk sank to the bottom and the liquid that remained on top was very clear. The dregs, which were very white, were then separated and given to the slaves, and according to Rubruck, they had a highly soporific effect on them.²⁹ The clear liquid, "black *kumiss*" was presented to the Mongol lords for their consumption. This drink was very sweet and very potent. Distilled mare's milk is also popular in both Inner and Outer Mongolia today.

The Mongol khans, although living far away from their homeland, used to follow a nomadic lifestyle. Thus Batu Khan, lord of the Golden Horde of Russia and the Ukraine, was supplied with black *kumiss* by 30 men stationed one day's ride away from his *ordu* (camp). Each rider would supply the produce of 100 mares, which means a total of 3,000 mares daily servicing the

25 Jackson and Morgan 1990, 81ff.

26 Komroff 1926, 65.

27 *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, ed. Mackintosh-Smith 2003, 126f.

28 Komroff 1926, 65.

29 Komroff 1926, 65.

needs of this Mongol prince. This figure does not include those mares producing the ordinary *kumiss*.³⁰

Marco Polo has claimed that Qubilai Khan kept thousands of mares to satisfy his *ordu's* demand for black *kumiss*, as stated earlier. Marco witnessed that *kumiss* also played a part in religious ceremonies and observances.³¹ In the case of horse- and cattle-breeding peoples, their religious rituals often involve the animals that are so central to their way of life, and the Mongols were able to honor both their sky god and their horses with ceremonies involving the sprinkling of *kumiss* and the consecration of their herds with this beverage.

Another account of the libation of white mare milk is related to a feast of Qublai Khan twelve year before his ascendance to the throne. The account is from his Chinese teacher Zhang Dehui 張德輝 (1195–1275).

Contact with the sedentary Islamic west and the Chinese south allowed the Mongols to accustom themselves to more varied drinking habits, though no less excessive. The Mongols drank rice mead, rice ale, honey mead (*bal*), fermented millet (*buzza*), as well as red grape wine, which Rubruck compared to the French wine *La Rochelle*.³² It was the Mongols who facilitated the growing popularity of grape wine in China. A colony of Muslim artisans originally from Samarqand settled in Simali just north of Beijing, cultivated grapes, and provided wine for the imperial court throughout the thirteenth century. The Chinese introduced rice wine to the Persians, who called it *tardsun*. The Mongols drank both.

Friar Oderic of Pordenone (1286–1331), who traveled eastward between 1316 and 1330, noted the vast abundance of wine in Canasia (today's Hangzhou).³³ Hangzhou was famed for a date wine called *Mi-yin* or *Bi-im*.³⁴

In 1330, the Yuan emperor Tuq Temür was presented with a magnificent cookbook, the *Yinshan zhengyao* 飲膳正要, very much a new concept brought to the east from the Islamic west by Mongol cultural brokers. The author, Hu Sihui, probably an Uyghur, included a splendid array of dishes from throughout the empire. He also included a section on alcoholic beverages and their medicinal and nutritional properties. Apart from grape wine,

30 Komroff 1926, 65.

31 Komroff 1930, 92.

32 Komroff 1926, 142.

33 "The Journal of Friar Odoric", in Komroff 1926, 233.

34 Lane 2006, 155.

popular since the time of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907 C.E.), and a few rare fruit drinks, Chinese liquor was always brewed from grain.³⁵

Medicinal concoctions described in the *Yinshan zhengyao* involved steeping various objects in liquors. Usually they were added to the grain mash and fermentation allowed to continue, or they were added to the finished spirit, such as was the case with lamb wine. Lamb wine did not involve fermenting lamb meat. Tiger bone wine, still popular today for its supposed medicinal properties, is simply local vodka with a few grains of powdered bone added. These various tinctures were and are referred to as *jiu*, which was in classical times beer or ale. Other grains could be substituted for rice.³⁶

Presumably, these rice and grain ale, honey mead, or fermented millet drinks were stronger than *kumiss*. Though mare's milk, which is particularly high in lactose (6% +), readily ferments into *kumiss*, the resulting liquor is not particularly high in alcohol, ranging from only 1.65 percent to 3.25 percent.³⁷ Because the drink was not so potent, the Mongols had to consume large quantities of *kumiss* in order to achieve the desired intoxication, as Carpini notes.³⁸

To sum up, the alcoholism and binge drinking common among Mongol men and women also seemed to have had a marked effect on their life style, fertility and longevity. American historian John Masson Smith, Jr., came out with some interesting figures to elaborate both the Mongols' drinking and eating habits. Based on details provided by William of Rubruck, he calculated that at a great drinking festival organized by Möngke Khan on June 24, 1254, each guest would have been provided with the equivalent of 19 shots of 80-proof whiskey. He assumed that the drink-laden wagons carried 1,000-pound loads and that the estimated 7,000 guests received two gallons of *kumiss* each.³⁹

As you can see, the drinking overindulgence of the Mongols is well documented. Overindulgence in drinking also may have selected for problem genes and the Russians' blame of Mongol roots in their drinking habit has to be considered.

35 Buell and Anderson 2010, 496, n. 30.

36 Buell and Anderson 2010, 497, n. 30.

37 Batjargal *et al.* 2006.

38 Komroff 1926, 65.

39 Masson Smith, Jr. 2000, 8.

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