

What was the Pax Mongolica?

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<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-was-the-pax-mongolica-195196>

In much of the world, the Mongol Empire is remembered as a cruel, barbaric conquering force under Genghis Khan and his successors that laid waste to the cities of Asia and Europe. Certainly, the Great Khan and his sons and grandsons did more than their fair share of conquering. However, what people tend to forget is that the Mongol conquests ushered in an era of peace and prosperity for Eurasia - a time that is known as the Pax Mongolica of the 13th and 14th centuries.

At its height, the Mongol Empire extended from China in the east to Russia in the west, and south as far as Syria. The Mongol army was large and highly mobile, enabling it to patrol this enormous territory. Permanent army garrisons along major trade routes ensured the safety of travelers, and the Mongols made sure that their own supplies, as well as trade goods, could flow smoothly east to west and north to south.

In addition to enhancing security, the Mongols established a single system of trade tariffs and taxes. This made the cost of trade much more equitable and predictable than the previous patchwork of local taxes that had prevailed before the Mongol conquests. Another innovation was the Yam or postal service. It connected the ends of Mongol Empire through a series of relay stations; much like the American Pony Express centuries later, the Yam carried messages and letters by horseback across long distances, revolutionizing communications.

With this vast region under a central authority, travel became much easier and safer than it had been in centuries; this, in turn, spurred a vast increase in trade along the Silk Road. Luxury goods and new technologies spread across Eurasia. Silks and porcelains went west from China to Iran; jewels and beautiful horses traveled back to grace the court of the Yuan Dynasty, founded by Genghis Khan's grandson Kublai Khan. Ancient Asia innovations like gunpowder and paper-making made their way into medieval Europe, changing the future course of world history.

An old cliché notes that at this time, a maiden with a gold nugget in her hand could have traveled safely from one end of the empire to the other. It seems unlikely that any maiden ever attempted the trip, but certainly, other traders and travelers such as Marco Polo took advantage of the Mongol Peace to seek out new products and markets.

As a result of the increase in trade and technology, cities all along the Silk Road and beyond grew in population and sophistication. Banking innovations such as insurance, bills of exchange, and deposit banks made long-distance trade possible without the risk and expense of carrying large amounts of metal coinage from place to place.

The golden age of the Pax Mongolica was doomed to end. The Mongol Empire itself soon fragmented into different hordes, controlled by various descendants of Genghis Khan. At certain points, the hordes even fought civil wars with one another, usually over the succession to the Great Khan's throne back in Mongolia.

Worse still, smooth and easy movement along the Silk Road enabled travelers of a different sort to cross Asia and reach Europe - fleas carrying the bubonic plague. The disease probably broke out in western China in the 1330s; it hit Europe in 1346. Altogether, the Black Death probably killed about 25% of the population of Asia and as much as 50 to 60% of Europe's population. This catastrophic depopulation, coupled with the political fragmentation of the Mongol Empire, led to the breakdown of the Pax Mongolica.