

THE NOMADS' ARMAMENT: HOME-MADE WEAPONRY

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Our understanding of Inner Asian nomads' practices may often be improved by examining those of the imperial Mongols, on whom the sources report more directly and fully than on any other premodern Inner Asians. Moreover, given the imperial Mongols' extraordinary performance, it can be argued that theirs represented the 'best practice' of Inner Asian nomadism. Let us look, accordingly, at Mongol military technology both for itself and as a guide to understanding that of other groups.

Perhaps surprisingly—and *pace* some older interpretations of Mongol warfare¹—the weaponry of the Mongols was for the most part unremarkable. Consider the account of Mongol arms by John of Plano Carpini.

They all have to possess the following arms at least: two or three bows, or at least one good one, three large quivers full of arrows, an axe and ropes for hauling engines of war. As for the wealthy, they have swords . . . and . . . a horse with armor; their legs are covered and they have helmets and cuirasses . . . Some of them have lances. (Plano Carpini, 1966, 33)

This description may be buttressed by reports from William of Rubruck and Marco Polo. William relates that when his party, returning from Mongolia, traveled along the Caspian coast past the Caucasus mountains, the local Mongol garrison provided them with an armed escort to protect them against hostile mountaineers.

I was delighted, for I was hoping I should see . . . armed [Mongols], for I had never managed to have a look at their weapons although I had been most anxious to do so. When we reached this dangerous stretch, of the twenty [soldiers of the escort] there were two who had habergeons [coats of mail]. I asked how they had come by these; they said they had procured them from the [Alans of the Caucasus mountains], who are fine artificers of such things and excellent smiths. This makes me think [the Mongols] have few arms apart from their bows and arrows and leather garments. I saw them being presented with iron plates and helmets from Persia, and I also saw two men who appeared

From *Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia No. 4*, ed. Michael Gervers and Wayne Schlepp. Copyright 2000 by the Governing Council of the University of Toronto and the Board of Governors of York University, Ontario.

1. See Martin (1971, 19–20) for an overestimation, based on Mongol disinformation, of the drawing weight and effective range of the Mongols' bows. Cf. Rubruck (1966, 159), "Then Mangu had a very strong bow made, which two men could hardly draw, and two arrows with heads of silver . . . And he gave the following instructions to the Mongol he was sending with Theodolus [an unofficial member of the 1249 French embassy to Möngke]: 'You will go to that French King to whom this man will take you, and you will present him with these things on my behalf . . . telling him that with such bows we shoot far and strike hard.'"