
Documents

Considering the Evidence: Perspectives on the Mongols



How did the Mongols understand themselves and the enormous empire they had created? How did the peoples who were forcibly incorporated within that empire or threatened by it view the Mongols? In studying the Mongol phenomenon, historians use documents that reflect both the Mongols' perception of themselves and the perspectives of outsiders. The first two documents derive from Mongol sources, while the final three represent views from Russian, Chinese, and Western European observers (see Map 12.1, p. 530).

Sorting through these various perceptions of the Mongols raises questions about the kinds of understandings—or misunderstandings—that arise as culturally different peoples meet, especially under conditions of conquest. These documents also require reflection on the relative usefulness of sources that come from the Mongols themselves as well as those that derive from the victims of Mongol aggression.

Document 12.1

Mongol History from a Mongol Source

The major literary work to emerge from the Mongols themselves, widely known as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, was written a decade or two after the death in 1227 of Chinggis Khan. The unknown author of this work was clearly a contemporary of the Great Khan and likely a member of the royal household. The first selection discusses the Mongol practice of *anda*, a very close relationship between two unrelated men. Although they later broke with one another, the *anda* relationship of Temujin, the future Chinggis Khan, and his friend Jamugha was important in Temujin's rise to power. The second selection from the *Secret History* describes the process by which Temujin was elevated to the rank of Chinggis Khan, the ruler of a united Mongol nation, while the third recounts the reflections of Ogodei, Chinggis Khan's son and successor, probably toward the end of his reign, which lasted from 1229 to 1241.

- How would you describe the *anda* relationship?
- What does the *Secret History* suggest about the nature of political authority and political relationships among the Mongols?

- What did Ogodei regard as his greatest achievements and his most notable mistakes?
- What evidence do the selections from the *Secret History* provide that the author was an insider?

The Secret History of the Mongols

ca. 1240

Anda: Temujin and Jamugha

Temujin and Jamugha pitched their tents in the Khorkonagh Valley.

With their people united in one great camp, the two leaders decided they should renew their friendship,

their pledge of anda.

They remembered when they'd first made that pledge,

and said, "We should love one another again."

That first time they'd met Temujin was eleven years old. . . .

So Temujin and Jamugha said to each other:

"We've heard the elders say,

'When two men become anda their lives become one.

One will never desert the other and will always defend him.'

This is the way we'll act from now on.

We'll renew our old pledge and love each other forever."

Temujin took the golden belt he'd received in the spoils from Toghtoga's defeat and placed it around Anda Jamugha's waist.

Then he led out the Merkid chief's warhorse, a light yellow mare with black mane and tail, and gave it to Anda Jamugha to ride.

Jamugha took the golden belt he'd received in the spoils from Dayir Usun's defeat and placed it around the waist of Anda Temujin.

Then he led out the whitish-tan warhorse of Dayir Usun

and had Anda Temujin ride on it.

Before the cliffs of Khuldaghar in the Khorkhonagh Valley, beneath the Great Branching Tree of the Mongol, they pledged their friendship and promised to love one another.

They held a feast on the spot and there was great celebration.

Temujin and Jamugha spent that night alone, sharing one blanket to cover them both.

Temujin and Jamugha loved each other for one year,

and when half of the second year had passed they agreed it was time to move camp. . . .

Temujin Becomes Chinggis Khan

Then they moved the whole camp to the shores of Blue Lake in the Gurelgu Mountains.

Altan, Khuchar, and Sacha Beki conferred with each other there,

and then said to Temujin:

"We want you to be khan.

Temujin, if you'll be our khan we'll search through the spoils for the beautiful women and virgins, for the great palace tents,

for the young virgins and loveliest women, for the finest geldings and mares.

We'll gather all these and bring them to you.

When we go off to hunt for wild game

we'll go out first to drive them together for you to kill.

We'll drive the wild animals of the steppe together so that their bellies are touching.

Source: Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 44–45, 48–49, 192–93.

We'll drive the wild game of the mountains together
 so that they stand leg to leg.
 If we disobey your command during battle
 take away our possessions, our children, and wives.
 Leave us behind in the dust,
 cutting off our heads where we stand and letting
 them fall to the ground.
 If we disobey your counsel in peacetime
 take away our tents and our goods, our wives, and
 our children.
 Leave us behind when you move,
 abandoned in the desert without a protector."
 Having given their word,
 having taken this oath,
 they proclaimed Temujin Khan of the Mongol
 and gave him the name Chingis Khan....

Reflections of Ogodei

Then Ogodei Khan spoke these words:
 "Since my father the Khan passed away
 and I came to sit on his great throne,
 what have I done?
 I went to war against the people of Cathay^o and I
 destroyed them.
 For my second accomplishment
 I established a network of post stations
 so that my words are carried across the land with
 great speed.
 Another of my accomplishments has been
 to have my commanders dig wells in the desert
 so that there would be pasture and water for the
 people there.
 Lastly I placed spies and agents among all the
 people of the cities.
 In all directions I've brought peace to the Nation
 and the people,
 making them place their feet on the ground;
 making them place their hands on the earth.
 Since the time of my father the Khan
 I added these four accomplishments to all that
 he did.

But also since my father passed away
 and I came to sit on his great throne
 with the burden of all the numerous people on
 my shoulders
 I allowed myself to be conquered by wine.
 This was one of my mistakes.
 Another of my mistakes was to listen to a woman
 with no principles
 and because of her
 take away the daughters who belonged to my
 Uncle Odchigin.
 Even though I'm the Khan,
 the Lord of the Nation,
 I have no right to go against established principle,
 so this was my mistake.
 Another mistake was to secretly harm Dokholkhu.
 If you ask, 'Why was this wrong?'
 I would say that to secretly harm Dokholkhu,
 a man who had served his proper lord, my father
 the Khan,
 performing heroic deeds in his service, was a
 mistake.
 Now that I've done this
 who'll perform heroic deeds in my service?
 So now I admit that I was wrong and didn't
 understand.
 I secretly harmed a man who had served my
 father the Khan,
 someone who deserved my protection.
 Then my last mistake was to desire too much,
 to say to myself,
 'I'm afraid that all the wild game born under
 Heaven
 will run off toward the land of my brothers.'
 So I ordered earthen walls to be built
 to keep the wild game from running away,
 but even as these walls were being built
 I heard my brothers speaking badly of me.
 I admit that I was wrong to do this.
 Since the time of my father the Khan
 I've added four accomplishments to all that
 he'd done
 and I've done four things which I admit were
 wrong."

^oCathay: China.

Document 12.2

A Letter from Chinggis Khan

Document 12.2 comes from a remarkable letter that Chinggis Khan sent to an elderly Chinese Daoist master named Changchun in 1219, requesting a personal meeting with the teacher. Changchun in fact made the arduous journey to the camp of Chinggis Khan, then located in Afghanistan, where he stayed with the Mongol ruler for almost a year, before returning to China.

- Why did Chinggis Khan seek a meeting with Changchun?
- How does Chinggis Khan define his life's work? What is his image of himself?
- How would you describe the tone of Chinggis Khan's letter to Changchun? What does the letter suggest about Mongol attitudes toward the belief systems of conquered peoples?
- How do Documents 12.1 and 12.2 help explain the success of the Mongols' empire-building efforts?
- What core Mongol values do these documents suggest?

CHINGGIS KHAN

Letter to Changchun

1219

Heaven has abandoned China owing to its haughtiness and extravagant luxury. But I, living in the northern wilderness, have not inordinate passions. I hate luxury and exercise moderation. I have only one coat and one food. I eat the same food and am dressed in the same tatters as my humble herdsmen. I consider the people my children, and take an interest in talented men as if they were my brothers. . . . At military exercises I am always in the front, and in time of battle am never behind. In the space of seven years I have succeeded in accomplishing a great work, and uniting the whole world into one empire. I have not myself distinguished qualities. But the government of the [Chinese] is inconstant, and

therefore Heaven assists me to obtain the throne. . . . All together have acknowledged my supremacy. It seems to me that since the remote time. . . such an empire has not been seen. . . . Since the time I came to the throne I have always taken to heart the ruling of my people; but I could not find worthy men to occupy [high offices]. . . . With respect to these circumstances I inquired, and heard that thou, master, hast penetrated the truth. . . . For a long time thou has lived in the caverns of the rocks, and hast retired from the world; but to thee the people who have acquired sanctity repair, like clouds on the paths of the immortals, in innumerable multitudes. . . . But what shall I do? We are separated by mountains and plains of great extent, and I cannot meet thee. I can only descend from the throne and stand by the side. I have fasted and washed. I have ordered my adjutant. . . to prepare an escort and a cart for thee.

Source: E. Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* (London, 1875), 37–39.

Do not be afraid of the thousand *li*.^o I implore thee to move thy sainted steps. Do not think of the extent of the sandy desert. Commiserate the people

^o*li*: a great distance.

in the present situation of affairs, or have pity upon me, and communicate to me the means of preserving life. I shall serve thee myself. I hope that at least thou wilt leave me a trifle of thy wisdom. Say only one word to me and I shall be happy.

Document 12.3

A Russian View of the Mongols

The initial impression of the Mongol impact in many places was one of utter devastation, destruction, and brutality. Document 12.3 offers a Russian commentary from that perspective drawn from the *Chronicle of Novgorod*, one of the major sources for the history of early Russia.

- How did the Russian writer of the *Chronicle* account for what he saw as the disaster of the Mongol invasion?
- Can you infer from the document any additional reasons for the Mongol success?
- Beyond the conquest itself, what other aspects of Mongol rule offended the Russians?
- To what extent was the Mongol conquest of Russia also a clash of cultures?

The Chronicle of Novgorod

1238

That same year [1238] foreigners called Tartars^o came in countless numbers, like locusts, into the land of Ryazan, and on first coming they halted at the river Nukhla, and took it, and halted in camp there. And thence they sent their emissaries to the *Knyazes*^o of Ryazan, a sorceress and two men with her, demanding from them one-tenth of everything: of men and *Knyazes* and horses—of everything

one-tenth. And the *Knyazes* of Ryazan, Gyurgi, Ingvor's brother, Oleg, Roman Ingvorevich, and those of Murom and Pronsk, without letting them into their towns, went out to meet them to Voronazh. And the *Knyazes* said to them: "Only when none of us remain then all will be yours." . . . And the *Knyazes* of Ryazan sent to Yuri of Volodimir asking for help, or himself to come. But Yuri neither went himself nor listened to the request of the *Knyazes* of Ryazan, but he himself wished to make war separately. But it was too late to oppose the wrath of God. . . . Thus also did God before these men take from us our strength and put into us perplexity and thunder and dread and trembling for our sins. And then the pagan foreigners surrounded Ryazan and fenced it in with a stockade. . . . And the Tartars took the town on

^oTartars: Mongols.

^o*Knyazes*: Princes.

Source: Robert Mitchell and Nevill Forbes, trans., *The Chronicle of Novgorod, 1016–1471* (New York: AMS Press, 1970; repr. from the edition of 1914, London), 81–83, 88.

December 21, and they had advanced against it on the 16th of the same month. They likewise killed the *Knyaz* and *Knyaginya*, and men, women, and children, monks, nuns and priests, some by fire, some by the sword, and violated nuns, priests' wives, good women and girls in the presence of their mothers and sisters. But God saved the Bishop, for he had departed the same moment when the troops invested the town. And who, brethren, would not lament over this, among those of us left alive when they suffered this bitter and violent death? And we, indeed, having seen it, were terrified and wept with sighing day and night over our sins, while we sigh every day and night, taking thought for our possessions and for the hatred of brothers.

...The pagan and godless Tartars, then, having taken Ryazan, went to Volodimir. ... And when the lawless ones had already come near and set up battering rams, and took the town and fired it on Friday before Sexagesima Sunday, the *Knyaz* and *Knyaginya* and *Vladyka*, seeing that the town was on fire and that the people were already perishing, some by fire

and others by the sword, took refuge in the Church of the Holy Mother of God and shut themselves in the Sacristy. The pagans breaking down the doors, piled up wood and set fire to the sacred church; and slew all, thus they perished, giving up their souls to God. ... And Rostov and Suzhdal went each its own way. And the accursed ones having come thence took Moscow, Pereyaslavi, Yurev, Dmitrov, *Volok*, and Tver; there also they killed the son of Yaroslav. And thence the lawless ones came and invested Torzhok on the festival of the first Sunday in Lent. They fenced it all round with a fence as they had taken other towns, and here the accursed ones fought with battering rams for two weeks. And the people in the town were exhausted and from Novgorod there was no help for them; but already every man began to be in perplexity and terror. And so the pagans took the town, and slew all from the male sex even to the female, all the priests and the monks, and all stripped and reviled gave up their souls to the Lord in a bitter and a wretched death, on March 5... Wednesday in Easter week.

Document 12.4

Chinese Perceptions of the Mongols

Chinese responses to Mongol rule varied considerably. To some, of course, the Mongols were simply foreign conquerors and therefore illegitimate as Chinese rulers. Marco Polo, who was in China at the time, reported that some Mongol officials or their Muslim intermediaries treated Chinese "just like slaves," demanding bribes for services, ordering arbitrary executions, and seizing women at will—all of which generated outrage and hostility. Document 12.4 illustrates another side to Chinese perception of the Mongols. It comes from a short biography of a Mongol official named Menggu, which was written by a well-educated Chinese scholar on the occasion of Menggu's death. Intended to be inscribed on stone and buried with the Mongol officer, it emphasizes the ways in which Menggu conformed to Chinese ways of governing. Such obituaries were an established form of Chinese historical writing, usually commissioned by the children of the deceased.

- Why might Menggu's children have requested such a document and asked a Chinese scholar to compose it? What does this suggest about Mongol attitudes to Chinese culture?

- What features of Menggu's governance did this Chinese author appreciate? In what ways did Menggu's actions and behavior reflect Confucian values? What might the writer have omitted from his account?
- What might inspire a highly educated Chinese scholar to compose such a flattering public tribute to a Mongol official?
- Why might historians be a bit skeptical about this document? Which statements might be most suspect?

Epitaph for the Honorable Menggu

1274

Emperor Taizu [Chinggis Khan] received the mandate of Heaven and subjugated all regions. When Emperor Taizong [Ogodei Khan] succeeded, he revitalized the bureaucratic system and made it more efficient and organized. At court, one minister supervised all the officials and helped the emperor rule. In the provinces, commanderies and counties received instructions from above and saw that they got carried out. Prefects and magistrates were as a rule appointed only after submitting [to the Mongols]. Still one Mongol, called the governor, was selected to supervise them. The prefects and magistrates all had to obey his orders. . . .

In the fourth month of 1236, the court deemed Menggu capable of handling Zhangde, so promoted him . . . to be its governor. . . . Because regulations were lax, the soldiers took advantage of their victory to plunder. Even in cities and marketplaces, some people kept their doors closed in the daytime. As soon as Menggu arrived, he took charge. Knowing the people's grievances, he issued an order, "Those who oppress the people will be dealt with according to the law. Craftsmen, merchants, and shopkeepers, you must each go about your work with your doors open, peaceably attending to your business without fear. Farmers, you must be content with your lands and exert yourselves diligently according to the seasons. I will instruct or punish those who mistreat

you." After this order was issued, the violent became obedient and no one any longer dared violate the laws. Farmers in the fields and travelers on the roads felt safe, and people began to enjoy life.

In the second month of 1238, Wang Rong, prefect of Huaizhou, rebelled. The grand preceptor and prince ordered Menggu to put down this rebellion, telling him to slaughter everyone. Menggu responded, "When the royal army suppresses rebels, those who were coerced into joining them ought to be pardoned, not to mention those who are entirely innocent." The prince approved his advice and followed it. When Wang Rong surrendered, he was executed but the region was spared. The residents, with jugs of wine and burning incense, saw Menggu off tearfully, unable to bear his leaving. Forty years later when he was put in charge of Henei, the common people were delighted with the news, saying, "We will all survive—our parents and relatives through marriage all served him before."

In 1239 locusts destroyed all the vegetation in Xiang and Wei, so the people were short of food. Menggu reported this to the great minister Quduqu, who issued five thousand piculs of army rations to save the starving. As a consequence no one had to flee or starve. . . .

At that time [1247] the harvest failed for several years in a row, yet taxes and labor services were still exacted. Consequently, three or four of every ten houses was vacant. Menggu ordered the officials to travel around announcing that those who returned to their property would be exempt from

Source: Patricia Buckley Ebrey, ed. and trans., *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 192–94.

taxes and services for three years. That year seventeen thousand households returned in response to his summons...

When there was a drought in 1263, Menggu prayed for rain and it rained. That year he was given the title Brilliant and August General and made governor of Zhongshan prefecture. In 1270 he was transferred and became governor of Hezhong prefecture. In the spring of 1274 he was allowed to wear the golden tiger tablet in recognition of his long and excellent service, his incorruptibility, and the repute in which he was held where he had served...

The house where Menggu lived when he governed Zhangde nearly forty years ago, and the fields from which he obtained food then, were just adequate to keep out the wind and rain and supply enough to eat. When he died there were no estates or leftover wealth to leave his sons or grandsons. Therefore they had to model themselves on him and concentrate on governing in a way that would bring peace and safety, show love for the people, and benefit all. They have no need to be ashamed even if compared to the model officials of the Han and Tang dynasties.

Document 12.5

Mongol Women through European Eyes

Document 12.5 provides some insight into the roles of Mongol women and men through the eyes of a European observer, William of Rubruck (1220–1293). A Flemish Franciscan friar, William was one of several emissaries sent to the Mongol court by the pope and the king of France. They hoped that these diplomatic missions might lead to the conversion of the Mongols to Christianity, perhaps an alliance with the Mongols against Islam, or at least some useful intelligence about Mongol intentions. While no agreements with the Mongols came from these missions, William of Rubruck left a detailed account of Mongol life in the mid-thirteenth century, which included observations about the domestic roles of men and women.

- How does William of Rubruck portray the lives of Mongol women? What was the class background of the Mongol women he describes?
- What do you think he would have found most upsetting about the position of women in Mongol society?
- Based on this account, how might you compare the life of Mongol women to that of women in more established civilizations, such as China, Europe, or the Islamic world?

WILLIAM OF RUBRUCK

Journey to the Land of the Mongols

ca. 1255

The matrons^o make for themselves most beautiful (luggage) carts.... A single rich Mo'al or Tartar^o has quite one hundred or two hundred such carts with coffers. Baatu^o has twenty-six wives, each of whom has a large dwelling, exclusive of the other little ones which they set up after the big one, and which are like closets, in which the sewing girls live, and to each of these (large) dwellings are attached quite two hundred carts. And when they set up their houses, the first wife places her dwelling on the extreme west side, and after her the others according to their rank, so that the last wife will be in the extreme east; and there will be the distance of a stone's throw between the yurt of one wife and that of another. The *ordu*^o of a rich Mo'al seems like a large town, though there will be very few men in it.

When they have fixed their dwelling, the door turned to the south, they set up the couch of the master on the north side. The side for the women is always the east side... on the left of the house of the master, he sitting on his couch his face turned to the south. The side for the men is the west side... on the right. Men coming into the house would never hang up their bows on the side of the woman.

It is the duty of the women to drive the carts, get the dwellings on and off them, milk the cows, make butter and *gruit*,^o and to dress and sew skins, which they do with a thread made of tendons. They divide the tendons into fine shreds, and then twist them

into one long thread. They also sew the boots, the socks, and the clothing. They never wash clothes, for they say that God would be angered, and that it would thunder if they hung them up to dry. They will even beat those they find washing [their clothes]. Thunder they fear extraordinarily; and when it thunders they will turn out of their dwellings all strangers, wrap themselves in black felt, and thus hide themselves till it has passed away. Furthermore, they never wash their bowls, but when the meat is cooked they rinse out the dish in which they are about to put it with some of the boiling broth from the kettle, which they pour back into it. They [the women] also make the felt and cover the houses.

The men make bows and arrows, manufacture stirrups and bits, make saddles, do the carpentering on their dwellings and the carts; they take care of the horses, milk the mares, churn the *cosmos* or mare's milk, make the skins in which it is put; they also look after the camels and load them. Both sexes look after the sheep and goats, sometimes the men, other times the women, milking them.

They dress skins with a thick mixture of sour ewe's milk and salt. When they want to wash their hands or head, they fill their mouths with water, which they let trickle onto their hands, and in this way they also wet their hair and wash their heads.

As to their marriages, you must know that no one among them has a wife unless he buys her; so it sometimes happens that girls are well past marriageable age before they marry, for their parents always keep them until they sell them.... Among them no widow marries, for the following reason: they believe that all who serve them in this life shall serve them in the next, so as regards a widow they believe that she will always return to her first husband after death. Hence this shameful custom prevails among them, that sometimes a son takes to wife all his father's wives, except his own mother; for the *ordu* of the father and mother always belongs to the youngest son, so it is he who must provide for all his

^o**matrons:** married women.

^o**Mo'al or Tartar:** Mongol.

^o**Baatu:** grandson of Chinggis Khan.

^o**ordu:** residence.

^o**gruit:** sour curd.

Source: *The Journey of William of Rubruck...*, translated from the Latin and edited, with an introductory notice, by William Woodville Rockhill (London: Hakluyt Society, 1900), chaps 2, 7.

father's wives . . . and if he wishes it, he uses them as wives, for he esteems not himself injured if they return to his father after death. When then anyone has made a bargain with another to take his daughter, the father of the girl gives a feast, and the girl flees to her

relatives and hides there. Then the father says: "Here, my daughter is yours: take her wheresoever you find her." Then he searches for her with his friends till he finds her, and he must take her by force and carry her off with a semblance of violence to his house.

Using the Evidence: Perspectives on the Mongols

1. **Assessing sources:** What are the strengths and limitations of these documents for understanding the Mongols? Taking the position of their authors into account, what exaggerations, biases, or misunderstandings can you identify in these sources? What information seems credible and what should be viewed more skeptically?
2. **Characterizing the Mongols:** Based on these documents and on the text of Chapter 12, write an essay assessing the Mongol moment in world history. How might you counteract the view of many that the Mongols were simply destructive barbarians? How do your own values affect your understanding of the Mongol moment?
3. **Considering self-perception and practice:** How would you describe the core values of Mongol culture? (Consider their leaders' goals, attitudes toward conquered peoples, duties of rulers, views of political authority, role of women.) To what extent were these values put into practice in acquiring and ruling their huge empire? And in what ways were those values undermined or eroded as that empire took shape?

Visual Sources

Considering the Evidence: The Black Death and Religion in Western Europe



Among the most far-reaching outcomes of the Mongol moment in world history was the spread all across Eurasia and North Africa of that deadly disease known as the plague or the Black Death. While the Mongols certainly did not cause the plague, their empire facilitated the movement not only of goods and people but also of the microorganisms responsible for this pestilence (see Map 12.2, p. 543 and pp. 545–47). The impact of the Black Death was catastrophic almost everywhere it struck, but it is from Western Europe that our most detailed accounts and illustrations have survived about how people responded to that calamity.

Religion permeated the cultural world of Western Europe in the fourteenth century. The rituals of the Roman Catholic Church attended the great passages of life such as birth, marriage, and death, while the major themes of Christian teaching—sin and repentance, salvation and heaven, the comfort available through Jesus, Mary, and the saints—shaped most people’s outlook on life and the world. It is hardly surprising, then, that many people would turn to religion in their efforts to understand and cope with a catastrophe of such immense proportions.

Seeking the aid of parish priests, invoking the intercession of the Virgin Mary, participating in religious processions and pilgrimages, attending mass regularly, increasing attention to private devotion—these were among the ways that beleaguered people sought to tap the resources of faith to alleviate the devastating impact of the plague. From Church leaders, the faithful heard a message of the plague as God’s punishment for sins. An Italian layman reflected this understanding when he wrote *A History of the Plague* in 1348. There he pictured God witnessing the world “sinking and sliding into all kinds of wickedness.” In response, “the quivering spear of the Almighty, in the form of the plague, was sent down to infect the whole human race.”⁴²

Accompanying such ideas were religiously based attacks on prostitutes, homosexuals, and Jews, people whose allegedly immoral behavior or alien beliefs had invited God’s retribution. In Florence alone, some 17,000 men were accused of sodomy during the fifteenth century. Jews, who were sometimes held responsible for deliberately spreading the disease, were subject to terrible perse-

cution, including the destruction of synagogues, massacres, burnings, expulsion, and seizure of property. Although several popes and kings defended them, many Jews fled to Poland, where authorities welcomed their urban and commercial skills, leading to a flourishing Jewish culture there in the several centuries that followed.

The most well-known movement reflecting an understanding of the plague as God's judgment on a sinful world was that of the flagellants, whose name derived from the Latin word *flagella*, "whips." The practice of flagellation, whipping oneself or allowing oneself to be whipped, had a long tradition within the Christian world and elsewhere as well. Flagellation served as a penance for sin and as a means of identifying with Christ, who was himself whipped prior to his crucifixion. It reemerged as a fairly widespread practice, especially in Germany, between 1348 and 1350 in response to the initial outbreak of the plague. Its adherents believed that perhaps the terrible wrath of God could be averted by performing this extraordinary act of atonement or penance. Groups of flagellants moved from city to city, where they called for repentance, confessed their sins, sang hymns, and participated in ritual dances, which climaxed in whipping themselves with knotted cords sometimes embedded with iron points. Visual Source 12.1 is a contemporary representation of the flagellants in the town of Doornik in the Netherlands in 1349. The text at the bottom reads in part:

In [1349] it came to pass that on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin (Aug. 15) some 200 persons came here from Bruges about noon. . . . [I]mmediately the whole town was filled with curiosity as to why these folk had come. . . . Meantime the folk from Bruges prepared to perform their ceremonies which they called "penance." The inhabitants of both sexes, who had never before seen any such thing, began to imitate the actions of the strangers, to torment themselves also by the penitential exercises and to thank God for this means of penance which seemed to them most effectual.

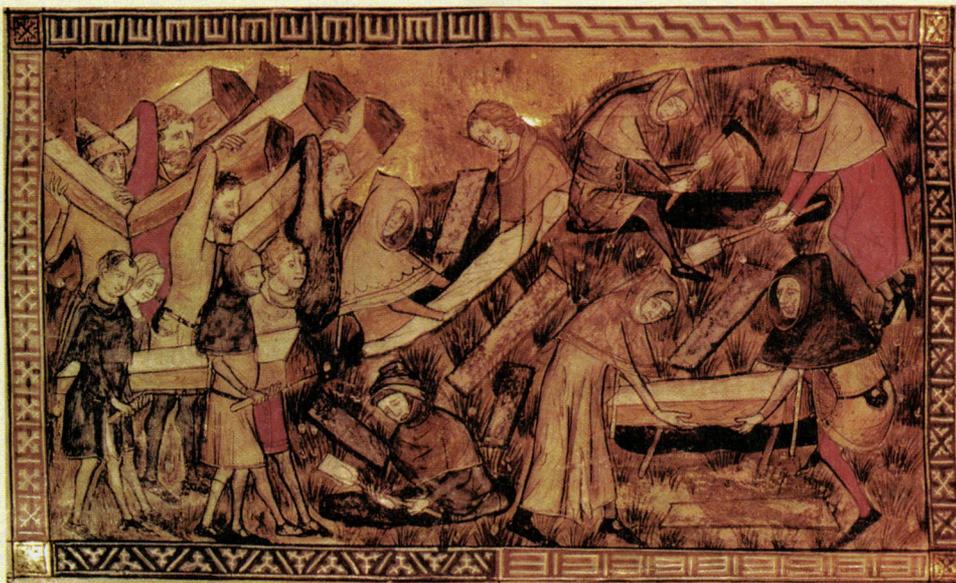
- Flagellation was but one form of penance. What other forms of self-inflicted punishment for sin are suggested in the image?
- What is the significance of the Christ on the cross that precedes the flagellants?
- Does the procession seem spontaneous or organized? Do Church authorities appear to have instigated or approved this procession?
- How might the flagellants have understood their own actions?
- Church authorities generally opposed the flagellant movement. Why do you think they did so?



Visual Source 12.1 The Flagellants (Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library)

While many people certainly turned to religion for solace in the face of the unimaginable disaster of the Black Death, others found traditional Christian rituals and teachings of little use or difficult to reconcile with the overwhelming realities of the disease. For some the plague prompted an orgy of hedonism, perhaps to affirm life in the face of endless death or simply to live to the full in what time remained to them. A contemporary Italian observer noted, “As they wallowed in idleness, their dissolution led them into the sin of gluttony, into banquets, taverns, delicate foods, and gambling. The rushed headlong into lust.”⁴³ In 1394 a representative of the pope threatened excommunication for those who practiced debauchery in the graveyards.

Among the deepest traumas inflicted by the plague was its interference with proper Christian rituals surrounding death and dying, practices that were believed to assist the dead to achieve eternal rest and the living to accept their loss and find hope for reunion in heaven. Priests were scarce and sometimes refused to administer last rites, fearing contact with the dying. The sheer numbers of dead were overwhelming. City authorities at times ordered quick burials in mass graves to avoid the spread of the disease. A French observer in 1348 wrote, “No relatives, no friends showed concern for what might be happening. No priest came to hear the confessions of the dying, or to administer the sacraments



Visual Source 12.2 Burying the Dead (Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique, Brussels, Belgium/The Bridgeman Art Library)

to them.”⁴⁴ The fourteenth-century Italian poet Boccaccio echoed those sentiments: “[T]here were no tears or candles or mourners to honor the dead; in fact no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown toward dead goats.”⁴⁵ Visual Source 12.2, published in 1352, illustrates a burial of plague victims of 1349 in the city of Tournai in what is now Belgium.

- How does this visual source support or contradict the written accounts excerpted above?
- How would you characterize the burial scene in this visual source?
- How does it differ from what an image of a proper Christian burial might contain? How might survivors of the plague have regarded such a burial?

The initial and subsequent outbreaks of the plague in Western Europe generated an understandable preoccupation with death, which was reflected in the art of the time. A stained-glass window in a church in Norwich, England, from about 1500 personified Death as a chess player contesting with a high Church official. A type of tomb called a cadaver tomb included a sculpture of the deceased as a rotting cadaver, sometimes with flesh-eating worms emerging from the body. An inscription on one such tomb in the Canterbury Cathedral in England explained the purpose of the image:

Whoever you be who will pass by, I ask you to remember,
 You will be like me after you die,
 For all [to see]: horrible, dust, worms, vile flesh.⁴⁶



Visual Source 12.3 A Culture of Death (St. Nicolair's Church, Tallinn, now the Niguliste Museum. Photo: Visual Connection Archive)

This intense awareness of the inevitability of death and its apparent indiscriminate occurrence was also expressed in the Dance of Death, which began in France in 1348 as a ritual intended to prevent the plague or to cure the afflicted. During the performance people would periodically fall to the ground, allowing others to trample on them. By 1400 such performances took place in a number of parish churches and subsequently in more secular settings. The Dance of Death also received artistic expression in a variety of poems, paintings, and sketches. The earliest of the paintings dates from 1425 and depicts dozens of people—from an emperor, king, pope, and bishop to a merchant, peasant, and an infant—each dancing with skeletal figures enticing them toward death. Visual Source 12.3 reproduces a portion of one of these Dance of Death paintings, originally created by the German artist Berndt Notke in 1463 and subsequently restored and reproduced many times.

In the inscriptions at the bottom of the painting, each living character addresses a skeletal figure, who in turn makes a reply. Here is the exchange between the empress (shown in a red dress at the far right of the image) and Death. First, the empress speaks:

I know, Death means me!
 I was never terrified so greatly!
 I thought he was not in his right mind,
 after all, I am young and also an empress.
 I thought I had a lot of power,
 I had not thought of him
 or that anybody could do something against me.
 Oh, let me live on, this I implore you!

And then Death replies:

Empress, highly presumptuous,
I think, you have forgotten me.
Fall in! It is now time.
You thought I should let you off?
No way! And were you ever so much,
You must participate in this play,
And you others, everybody—
Hold on! Follow me, Mr Cardinal!⁴⁷

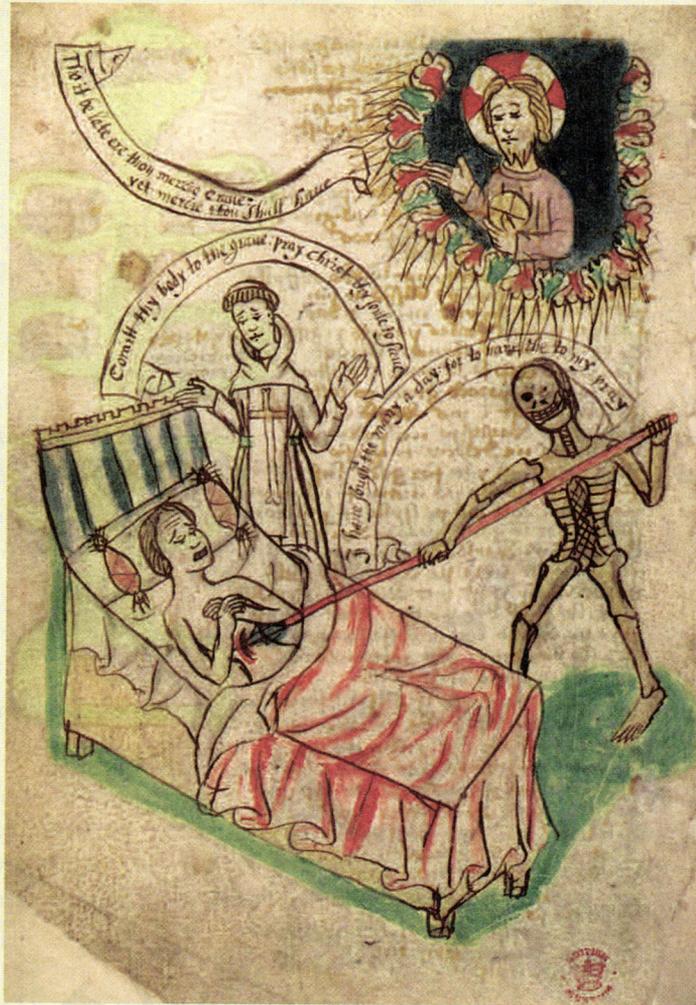
- How is the status of each of the various living figures—from left to right: the pope, the emperor, the empress—depicted?
- What does the white sheet around each of the death images represent? What do their expressions suggest about their attitude toward the living?
- Notice that the living figures face outward toward the viewer rather than toward the entreating death figures on either side of them. What might this mean?
- Does the portrayal of death pictured here reflect Christian views of death or does it challenge them?
- How is the exchange between the empress and Death reflected in the painting?

The horrific experience of the Black Death also caused some people to question fundamental Christian teachings about the mercy and benevolence of God or even of his power to affect the outcome of the plague. A late-fourteenth-century clergyman in England expressed the dismay that many must have felt:

For God is deaf nowadays and will not hear us
And for our guilt, he grinds good men to dust.⁴⁸

In a similar vein, the fourteenth-century Italian Renaissance scholar Francesco Petrarch questioned why God's vengeance had fallen so hard on the people of his own time: "While all have sinned alike, we alone bear the lash." He asked whether it was possible "that God does not care for mortal men." In the end, Petrarch dismissed that idea but still found God's judgments "inscrutable and inaccessible to human senses."⁴⁹ Thus the Black Death eroded more optimistic thirteenth-century Christian views, based on the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, that human rationality could penetrate the mind of God.

Efforts to interpret Visual Source 12.4, a fifteenth-century English painting, raise similar issues to those expressed by Petrarch.



Visual Source 12.4 In the Face of Catastrophe — Questioning or Affirming the Faith (© British Library Board/Robana/Art Resource, NY)

- Why is the death figure smiling?
- How does this skeletal figure differ from the ones in Visual Source 12.3?
- How are the priest and the Christ figure depicted? What possible interpretations of their gestures can you imagine?
- Notice that the death figure spears the dying person in the side, an action that evokes the biblical account of Jesus being speared in his side during his crucifixion. What might the artist have sought to convey by such a reference?

- The captions, from top to bottom, read: Christ figure: “Tho it be late ere thou mercie came: yet mercie thou shalt have.” Priest figure: “Commit thy body to the grave: pray Christ thy soul to save.” Death figure: “I have sought thee many a day: for to have thee to my pray.” How do these captions influence your understanding of the painting?
 - Would you characterize the overall message of this painting as one of hopefulness, despair, or something else? What elements in the painting might support each of these conclusions?
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Using the Evidence: The Black Death and Religion in Western Europe

1. **Assessing motives:** Do you think the artists who created these visual sources sought to reinforce traditional Christian teachings or to challenge them?
2. **Using art as evidence:** What do these visual sources tell you about the impact of and responses to the plague in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Western Europe?
3. **Connecting past and present:** Considering the various ways that people sought to avert, cope with, or explain the plague in these visual sources, what parallels to the human responses to crises or catastrophes in more recent centuries or in our own time can you identify?

