

**GENIUS LOCI**

**LASZLOVSZKY 60**

edited by  
Dóra Mérai  
and

Ágnes Drosztmér, Kyra Lyublyanovics,  
Judith Rasson, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed,  
András Vadas, Csilla Zatykó



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# The Mongol Empire's Northern Border: Re-evaluating the Surface Area of the Mongol Empire

STEPHEN POW\*

In making a contribution to the *Festschrift* for József Laszlovszky, a scholar who characteristically takes big perspectives, asks broad questions, and sees patterns between widely disparate medieval topics, it is fitting to explore a topic with similar horizons. Thus, the issue of sweeping proportions investigated here is the borders of the Mongol Empire, particularly the question of its northern border. We often read that the Mongols in the thirteenth century possessed “the largest historical empire in terms of contiguous territory,” and its maximum size is set at 24 million km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>1</sup> A distinction is made between the British Empire as the largest historical empire at 35.5 million km<sup>2</sup> (in 1920) and the Mongol Empire, listed as the second largest, albeit one not divided over several continents. The consistent reinforcement of these numbers and rankings on popular online sources like Wikipedia,<sup>2</sup> or Worldatlas,<sup>3</sup> makes them something like official, canonical facts.

Ever since modern scholarship began trying to quantify and depict the extent of the Mongol Empire, map representations have apparently been constructed based on primary sources. While much primary source material is available to outline the Mongol Empire's limits to the south, west, and east,<sup>4</sup> the situation becomes much less clear for the northern borders owing to sparse records. Thus, how exactly are historians determining the Mongols' northernmost extent, and more significantly, are current representations accurate? After all, if the northernmost extent of the Mongol Empire is not accurately depicted it certainly calls into question the standard approximation of its total land area.

Answers are seldom clear-cut when dealing with questions of how a medieval administration

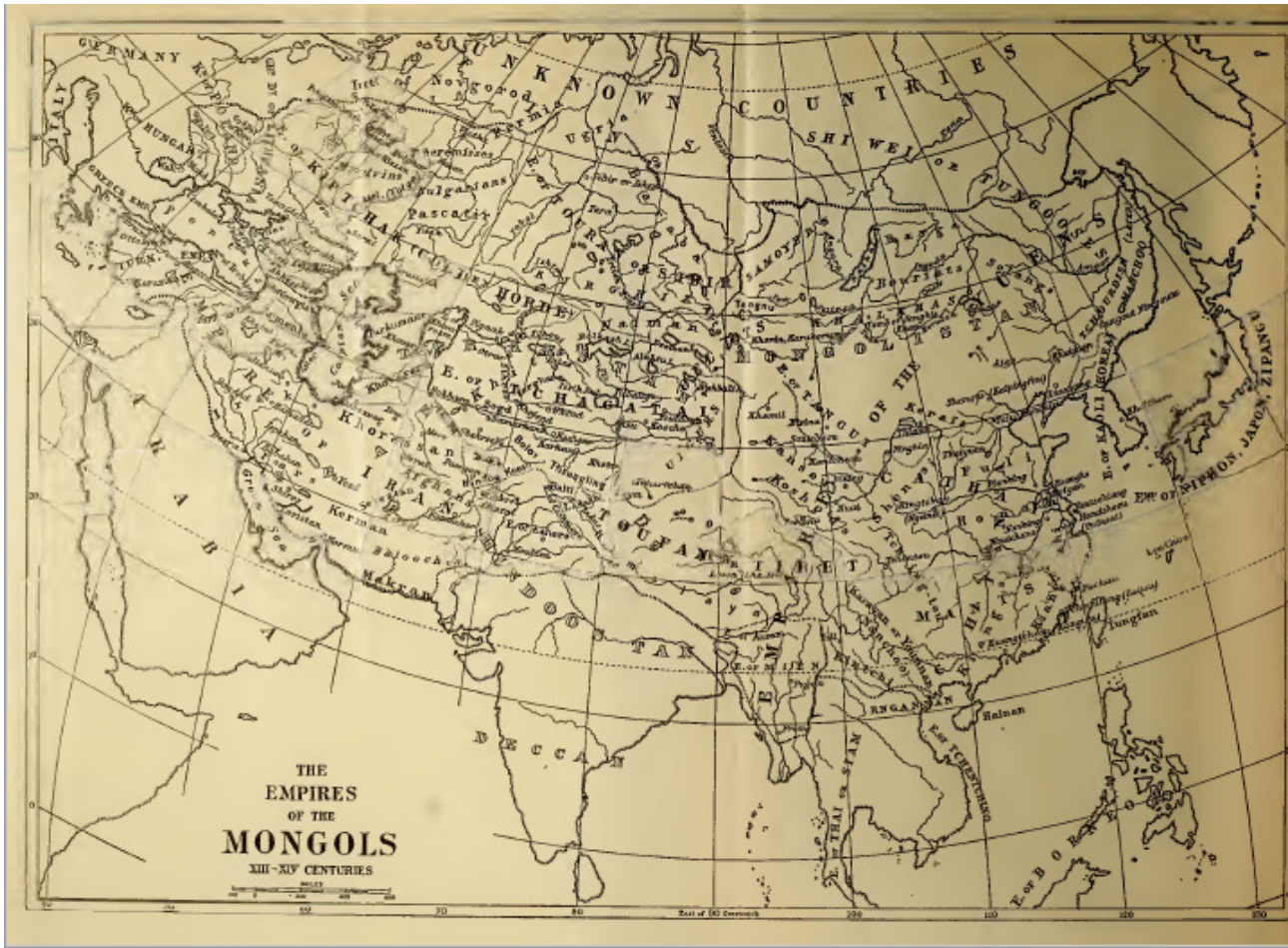
founded by pastoral nomads delineated the borders of its state. Three considerations help make better sense of the issue. Firstly, we need to investigate modern historical scholarship to trace how this northern border was initially determined. Secondly, we must revisit the primary sources to see what they say about Mongol conquests in the north. Thirdly, we must take the Mongols' own ideology and political philosophy into account, considering how they perceived the extent of their own state and defined a population's or geographical region's inclusion in it. Taking all these perspectives into account, I contend that we ultimately reach the conclusion that the Mongol Empire's northern borders are misrepresented. Based on the Mongols' claims of rulership and their recorded interference in northern regions, it appears that representations of the Mongol Empire on maps have depressed the actual extent of its real and claimed control; it was in fact the world's largest empire.

In the first issue pertaining to modern map depictions, it appears that the northern border is drawn today based on earlier maps that placed it somewhat arbitrarily. A standard map of the



► Fig. 1. A standard depiction of the Mongol Empire on Wikipedia, Wikimedia Commons, accessed: October 22, 2018, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mongols-map.png>.

\* Central European University, Department of Medieval Studies



► Fig. 2. *The Mongol Empire's northern border.* Attribution: Jeremiah Curtin, *The Mongols: A History* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1908).

Mongol Empire on Wikipedia (Fig. 1) shows that with the exception of a deviation along the Amur River, the Mongol Empire's northern border appears to be more or less a straight line, as though the Mongols established their border from the Amur to Moscow along a parallel of latitude – something that is, of course, anachronistic. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* gives an alternative approach, featuring a suspiciously detailed and undulating northern border, dropping southward along the Ob River for some unknown reason and then rising precipitously northward in the region west of Lake Baikal.<sup>5</sup> It appears that such modern depictions owe something to the map in a popular work of the last century, *The Mongols: A History* (1908), written by American folklorist and celebrated author, Jeremiah Curtin (Fig. 2). A talented enthusiast with varied interests rather than a specialized historian of the Mongols, his northern border features these same characteristic undulations, but it should

raise some suspicion for today's historians that the most defined sections of the Mongols' border occur in a region where their northern neighbor is listed as "Unknown Countries." William R. Shepherd's *Historical Atlas* (1923) made another early twentieth-century map of the Mongol Empire in which its northern border is basically straight, lacking any undulations along the boundary of the Ob and Amur; in fact, Mongol dominion stretches far north of the Amur here (Fig. 3). Modern depictions, such as that found on Wikipedia, represent hybrids between these two earlier, basically arbitrary approaches. It is telling that D'Ohsson and Bretschneider were experts who closely consulted the primary sources and while they did provide detailed maps of Eurasia in the front matter of their respective works, they conspicuously avoided drawing any northern borders of the Mongol Empire.<sup>6</sup> Maps with such borders appear to have originated in general works.



► **Fig. 3.** *The Mongol Empire's border in William R. Shepherd, Historical Atlas (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911, 2nd ed.1923) Source: University of Texas Libraries, accessed October 22, 2018, [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/mongol\\_domains.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/shepherd/mongol_domains.jpg).*

Thus, the second consideration is exploring the textual evidence to determine if a remapping of the Mongol Empire's northern frontier is in order. Meager though it is, the evidence *does* suggest that Mongol control extended far north of where modern conventions have established it. Carpini detailed that after their conquest of the Volga Bulgars and Magna Hungaria the Mongols campaigned northward against people called "Parrosites" who lived on steam inhaled from meat broth, and then the Samoyeds "who live entirely on their hunting," until finally they reached the shores of the Arctic Ocean, populated by monsters including men who bark like dogs.<sup>7</sup> In a separate passage, Carpini listed the Parrosites and Samoyeds among the Mongols' subject peoples,<sup>8</sup> though C. de Bridia, repeating Carpini's narrative about these northern peoples, added that the Mongols despised them for their poverty or monstrousness.<sup>9</sup> He also implies the conquests reached the Arctic Ocean in the north.<sup>10</sup>

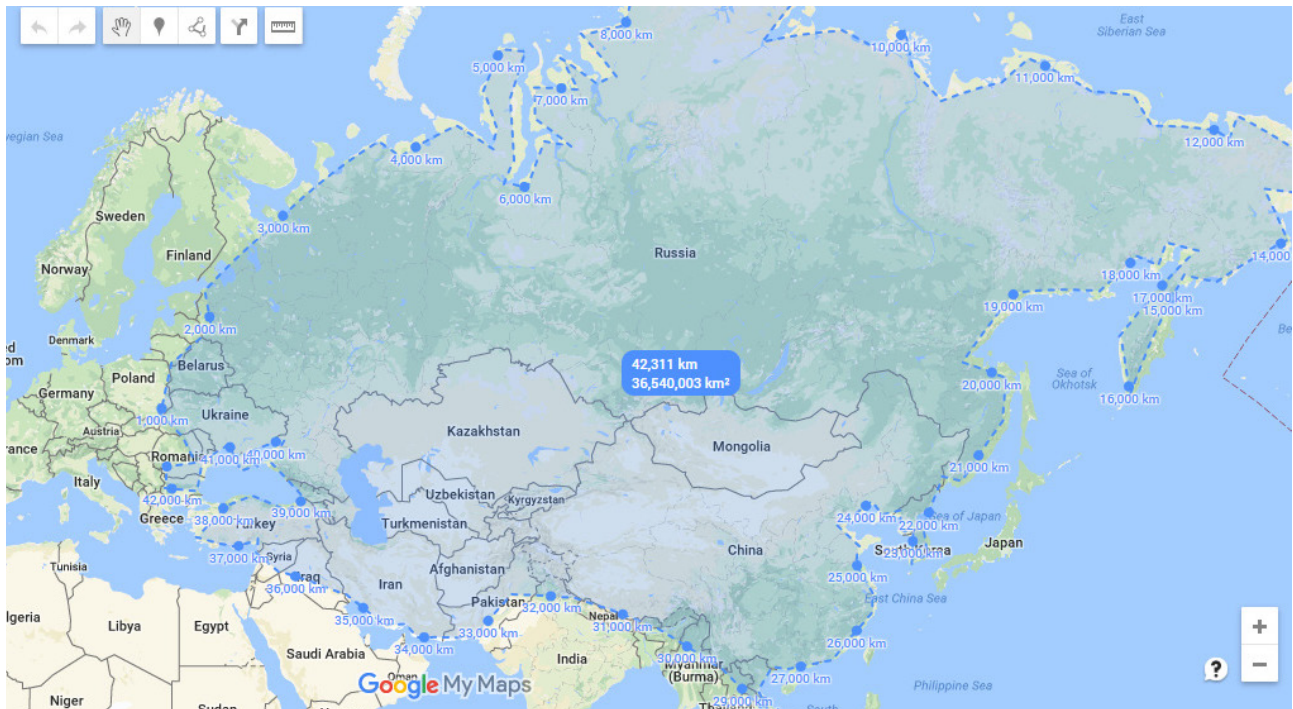
It is tempting to dismiss these stories as outgrowths of the *Alexander Romance*-type of medieval literature that envisioned a world beyond Latin Christendom peopled by dog-headed men and other monsters, but that approach is short-sighted. The Franciscan William of Rubruck's remarkably sober report on his journey to Mongolia in the 1250s noted that Mongols told him these "poor tribes stretching as far north as the cold permits" were not actually monsters, but were so poor that the Mongols made them supply

labor instead of goods.<sup>11</sup> The Parrosites appear to be the Permiaks (Permiaks), well-documented in medieval source material and termed Barrosites by al-Idrisi in the twelfth century.<sup>12</sup> The Samoyed people (Nenets) are also well-documented Uralic-speaking people dwelling near the Arctic Ocean. Even Carpini's far-fetched tales of Parrosite eating habits seem to have their origin in truth. The Syrian al-Umari reported the account of a Muslim visitor that Finno-Ugric people of the "farthest northern regions" gathered bones and boiled them repeatedly, drinking the broth to extract any nutrients whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> The Russian term "Samoyed" is thought to stem from the derogatory "self-eater," suggesting hunger was a by-word among the northern tribes.

It should be no surprise that the Mongols subjugated northern tribes up to the White Sea, particularly considering that Novgorod had subjugated the area before the Mongol conquest. Novgorodians had permanent stations on the Northern Dvina in 1137, were taxing the people on the Pechora River by 1187, and they had a hold over the Kola Peninsula and the Yughra on the Arctic Ocean by the early 1200s.<sup>14</sup> Since Novgorod itself submitted to the Mongols and paid taxes (something seldom reflected in recent maps), it seems improbable the Mongols would have simply ignored the Novgorodians' own subject peoples. Norse sources support the view that the Mongols conquered up to the Arctic. The mid-thirteenth-century Saga of King Haakon tells of how he Christianized and settled "many Bjarmir" in Malangen after they "fled from the east for the strife of the Tatars."<sup>15</sup> Previously the Norwegian



► **Fig. 4.** *A free depiction of the Mongol Empire that appears to be using as a template the map found at Ulan Bator airport. Wikipedia. Wikimedia Commons, accessed: October 22, 2018, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mongolia\\_1500\\_AD.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mongolia_1500_AD.jpg).*



► Fig. 5. A reimagined bordering of the Mongol Empire according to source evidence and the Mongols' own stated imperial ideology. Created by S. Pow. Map data © 2018 Google.

king had been making war or trading with Bjarmaland.<sup>16</sup> During the reign of Haakon (1217–1263), datable Norwegian expeditions to Bjarmaland ceased abruptly, with the trade route from the far north to the Volga permanently abandoned.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a mid-thirteenth-century Icelandic geographical treatise suddenly lists *Tartararíki* (Tartar kingdom) as being located north of *Rúszaland* (Russia).<sup>18</sup> It seems obvious based on this data that we have to change what we think we know about Mongol conquests in the far north, but other historians have chosen to argue that there must have been no direct Mongol-Permian contacts,<sup>19</sup> or to advance the absurd notion that *Tartararíki* meant Russia in the Norse sources.<sup>20</sup>

Mongol penetration of the far north extended eastward judging from Russian folklore about a Mongol *bogatyř* (hero) from Veliky Ustyug<sup>21</sup> and Marco Polo's account that when the Great Khan (Khubilai) wished to obtain peregrine falcon nestlings, he sent men north of Mongolia, and even far north of the Merkit lands in the forest zone, until they reached uninhabited mountains bordering the Ocean Sea (Arctic Ocean). They even obtained gerfalcons from islands in the Arctic Ocean.<sup>22</sup> Polo also describes how Mongols periodically entered the Land of Darkness (Siberia)

east of Russia to rob the inhabitants. Reaching these settlements, the Mongols would “rob the people of everything they can lay their hands on,” before cleverly having their mares lead them back to foals that the Mongols had intentionally left on the borders.<sup>23</sup>

The Mongol willingness to push far north even into uninhabited regions is not surprising; it all relates to the third point, above, which relates to Mongol imperial ideology. The wording in Güyüg Khan's letter to the pope in 1246 concisely transmits the underlying premise: “From the rising of the sun to its setting, all the lands have been made subject to me.”<sup>24</sup> Beyond language, this fundamental belief was also conveyed in symbols – a powerful symbolism that was missed by an outsider like Carpini. As the “solemn court” to enthrone Güyüg began, when the Mongol leaders and foreign ambassadors gathered together around an enormous palisade and tent, Carpini noted that on the first day the Mongol chiefs all wore white velvet, then red on the second day, blue on the third, and brocade (*baldaquin*) on the fourth day.<sup>25</sup> In the medieval Turkic directional system, white represented the west, red the south, blue the east, and black the north, while in the Mongolian system yellow (gold) could imply the

center or north.<sup>26</sup> Certainly three of the cardinal directions were symbolized in this ceremony, so presumably the brocade was in keeping with the symbolic program, be it gold or black. The north was also part of the Mongol mandate of conquest in so far as it had value in resources and people. Al-Umari stated that the Golden Horde's dominion stretched along the Irtysh and to the Yughra of the Arctic Circle – Islamic traders visited them.<sup>27</sup> A Georgian chronicle records that when Batu decided to find out how many troops he could draft, his officials journeyed “down to the Dark,” taking a census of his entire dominion.<sup>28</sup> The “Land of Darkness” was part of the Jochi Khan's patrimony – according to sources Chinggis Khan had originally ordered his eldest son to “bring under control all the lands to the north, from Ibir-Siber ... to the Caspian straits.”<sup>29</sup> If the Mongol imperial ideology claimed all lands – even uninhabited regions to the north – and if nobody was effectively challenging their claims to authority, why do we not give them the benefit of the doubt and ascribe that territory to them? Is that merely a prerogative granted to later empires?

To conclude, there is not enough evidence to precisely and reliably reconstruct a northern border for the Mongol Empire. There is admittedly a degree of facetiousness in my proposal to remap it, but this exercise has helped expose problems with the tendency of modern historians to assign precise surface areas to historic empires. I argue there is enough evidence to suggest that the present ways of drawing the Mongols' northern border do not do their empire justice. Several years ago, I was in Ulan Bator's Chinggis Khan International Airport and saw an enormous map of the Mongol Empire on the wall. Rather than displaying a precise northern border, the empire seemed to simply stretch upward, its dark color blurring and fading out of sight as the map abruptly ended in the Arctic region (Fig. 4). I was skeptical at the time that this was patriotic exaggeration, but as a result of the study here I tend to believe that the map is correct and probably one of the only depictions to ever conceptualize properly the Mongol polity's relationship to the north.

To satisfy my curiosity and because the technology is widely available, I undertook an admittedly crude and imprecise readjustment of the

Mongol Empire's borders according to the source evidence and reflecting the Mongols' own imperial ideology. It comes out to 36.5 million km<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 5), a full million square kilometers larger than the British Empire. A case can and should be made that the Mongol Empire was not simply the largest contiguous empire, but rather the largest empire, full stop.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Peter Turchin, Jonathan M. Adams, and Thomas D. Hall, “East-West Orientation of Historical Empires and Modern States,” *Journal of World Systems Research* 12, no. 2 (2006): 220, 222.
- <sup>2</sup> “List of largest empires,” Wikipedia, accessed October 20, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_largest\\_empires](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_empires).
- <sup>3</sup> “Largest Empires in Human History by Land Area,” Worldatlas, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/largest-empires-in-human-history-by-land-area.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Sources from Mamluk historians, the Delhi Sultanate, and even Java, besides copious official sources composed in Chinggisid courts, detail the Mongols' southernmost conquests. For Mongol expansion in the West, much material by anxious observers in Latin Christendom and the Levant help to define clear borders. The question of why the Mongols invaded and then withdrew from Hungary in 1241-1242 so that it formed the Mongols' westernmost neighbor is still a topic of lively debate in scholarship. See: Zsolt Pinke, László Ferenczi, Beatrix F. Romhányi, József Laszlovszky, and Stephen Pow, “Climate of doubt: a re-evaluation of Büntgen and Di Cosmo's environmental hypothesis for the Mongol withdrawal from Hungary, 1242 CE.,” *Scientific Reports* 7, 12695 (2017). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-017-12128-6. In the East, official dynastic histories of the Yuan state, the Korean kingdom, and even Japanese records of the failed invasions of Japan help to draw a similarly clear picture.
- <sup>5</sup> “Mongol empire,” Encyclopædia Britannica, accessed October 20, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mongol-empire/media/389325/235959>.
- <sup>6</sup> Constantine D'ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols depuis Tchinguiz-Khan jusqu'à Timour Bey ou Tamerlane* vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Van Cleef, 1834); Emil Bretschneider, *Medieval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources* vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1910).
- <sup>7</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 30–31.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
- <sup>9</sup> George Painter, “The Tartar Relation,” in: *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation*, ed R. Skelton et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 73–74.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>11</sup> Dawson, *Mongol Mission*, 170-171. This account rather agrees with C. de Bridia's account of their poverty. The idea that Mongols would put the northern tribes to work after assessing that they had little to tax seems plausible.
- <sup>12</sup> Painter, “The Tartar Relation,” 74, no. 1. These people are Bjarmians of the Bjarmaland documented in Norse sagas and described in the Old English “Voyage of Ohthere” for instance. A Russian account from 1118 tells of what a Novgorodian experienced among the “Pechera” people who dwelt in the vicinity of the more northerly Yughra, “dwelling in the north with the Samoyeds” by

the Arctic Ocean. See: Caroline Stone and Paul Lunde (trans.), *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2012), 180.

<sup>13</sup> Stone and Lunde (trans.), *Ibn Fadlan*, 198-199; Klaus Lech, Klaus, trans., *Das mongolische Weltreich, Al-Umari's Darstellung der mongolischen Reiche in seinem Werk Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1968), 138, 143. Al-Umari mentions pale-skinned Siberians habitually boiling bones seven times.

<sup>14</sup> Mervi Koskela Vasaru, *Bjarmaland* (Oulu: University of Oulu, 2016), 413.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. Dasent, *Icelandic Sagas*, vol. 4 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1894), 371. The events described in the saga are thought to date to around 1240. These Permian refugees were settled in Norway's far north, having fled east – all of which supports that the Mongols were really campaigning in the area of the White Sea.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Vasaru, *Bjarmaland*, 232–233.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 218, 223–224.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 237–238.

<sup>20</sup> Alan S. C. Ross, *The Terfinnas and Beormas of Ohthere* (Reprint: London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), 46–47. Ross noted that in the 1940s, the prevailing view in Russian literature was that *Tattarar* meant Russians from Novgorod. I share Ross's view that this unduly simplified the problem of why the Mongols were reported to be ruling north of Russia though "Mongol penetration is not usually assumed to have extended nearly as far north as 'Bjarmaland'." Ross reached the perceptive conclusion that, judging by the evidence, Mongols must have been campaigning not far from the Dvina.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Nigel Cliff, trans., *Marco Polo: The Travels* (London: Penguin, 2015), 76–77. Polo clarified that the region was uninhabited but for the people of the khan who went to get the birds, and that it was so far north that the Pole Star

appeared behind in the south. There was, it appears, an element of exploration in these sorts of expeditions.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 324–325. Marco Polo mentions that this exploitation was driven by the wealth of furs in the region which were also traded with people to the south. This sort of regular fleecing of the local people can be seen as a form of subjugation, even if the Mongols chose not to occupy the region permanently, and they also evidently viewed the uninhabited areas where they collected birds as their sovereign territory.

<sup>24</sup> Dawson, *Mongol Mission*, 86. The message was one that the Mongols claimed to have received from Chinggis Khan. Their divine mandate was the conquest of the entire world – not just the steppe belt and not just Chinggis Khan's personal enemies.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; Anastasius van den Wyngaert, ed., *Sinica Franciscana* vol. 1 (Florence: Collegium S. Bonaventura, 1929), 117. The term in Latin is *baldikinis* (baldaquin), a fabric originally manufactured in Baghdad. The color is not immediately evident. Benedict the Pole claimed 5000 princes and chiefs wore baldaquin on the first day of this ceremony rather than the fourth day as Carpini remembered it. See: A. van den Wyngaert, *Sinica*, 139.

<sup>26</sup> Timothy May, "Color Symbolism in the Turko-Mongolian World," in *The Use of Color in History, Politics, and Art*, ed. Sungshin Kim (Dahlonga: University of North Georgia Press, 2016), 60-61; Omeljan Pritsak, "Qara: Studie zur Türkischen Rechtssymbolik," in *Studies in Medieval Eurasian History* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981), 249.

<sup>27</sup> Lech, *Das mongolische Weltreich*, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Jones, *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia* (Tbilisi: Artanuji Publishers, 2014), 350.

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler Thackston, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998–1999), 347. Thackston notes that this refers to the Middle Irtysh region, Siberia taking its name from this designation.