

## STEPHEN POW: CONQUEST AND WITHDRAWAL: THE MONGOL INVASIONS OF EUROPE (Book Review)

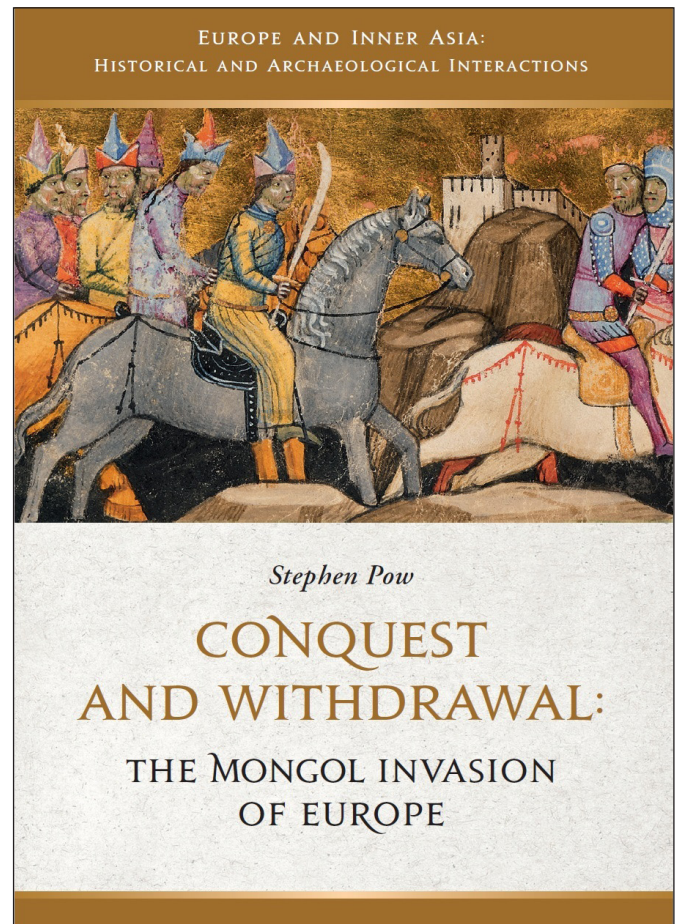
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*It is a joy to present a good book, and I am pleased to take on the task as I have known Stephen for ten years, since he first appeared at Central European University dealing with Mongolian history. He then put forward his research proposal for his PhD dissertation, and in 2020 he obtained his PhD in Medieval Studies. Between 2018 and 2023, he was also involved in an interdisciplinary research project in Hungary that examined the impact and Eurasian context of the Mongol invasion of Central Europe in 1241–42. The present volume is a fully revised and expanded version of Pow's PhD dissertation which also builds upon the results of the mentioned research project.*

The primary aim of the monograph was to provide an explanation for the abrupt Mongol withdrawal from Europe in 1242. At first sight, the author's intention may seem rather simplistic but delving into his text one can realise how complex and diversified the problem is. He proceeds step by step, expounding the whole gamut of problems, and immediately tries to find answers to them. First, he exposits the theories and methodologies to be applied in the work. The author is primarily a historian utilising a wide range of written sources in various languages. He uses mainly reliable translations but often resorts, if necessary, to the original source. His idea of the inclusion of archaeological findings in his research is excellent, thereby combining the evidence of different types of sources. Before setting to the task proper he gives an excellent, readjusted outline of the Western campaigns of the Mongols.

Chapter 1 is largely devoted to outlining the first invasion of Europe and the larger westward advance of the Mongols (1236–44), while drawing attention to some problematic issues that persist in the scholarly discussions. Essentially, he follows the four broad theories for the 1242 withdrawal expounded Greg S. Rogers in 1996. First, he discusses the predominant and most common one, the 'political theory', then continues with the 'geographical theory' and the 'environmental theory', finally 'the gradual conquest theory'. Based on thorough investigation he enumerates the pros and cons of these theories and arrives at a balanced position: only a multi-causal approach can give explanation to the Mongol withdrawal from Europe in 1242.



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Chapter 2 looks into Mongol preconceptions of Europe and Hungary, as well as the conventional theory that the Mongols withdrew from Europe owing to the death of Ögedei Khan.

Chapter 3 analyses arguments which attribute the Mongol withdrawal to environmental or climatic factors, and also explores the explanation that the Mongols never intended a lasting conquest in 1241.

Chapter 4 explores the merits of the theory that strong resistance compelled the Mongols to withdraw, and while the author does not agree with this theory as it has appeared in past works, this is the explanation in which we see some European sources showing agreement with the scanty materials on the events recorded outside of Europe. Thus, he then presents his own explanation of a complex series of factors that likely brought about the withdrawal.

Chapter 5 pertains to the oft-neglected details of Mongol-European relations for the remainder of the thirteenth century which reveal that the Mongols still intended to subjugate Europe, even as reforms in East-Central Europe reduced the likelihood that a lasting conquest could be achieved. Across the entire region, fortification reforms and social adaptations reinforced the ability of those areas to combat future invasions. As a result, the major Mongol inroads of the 1280s against Hungary and Poland were military failures.

Conclusions. Based on this ‘revisiting’ of the existing explanations for the Mongol withdrawal in 1242 and the subsequent half-century of Mongol-European interactions, some conclusions emerge. First, the Mongol ideology of world conquest seems was the driving factor behind the invasion of Europe in 1241. Thus, the goal of the invasion of Hungary was the same that motivated other Mongol invasions across Eurasia: subjugation of territory, its ruler, and its people to the divinely chosen Chinggisid dynasty whose mandate was to rule the entire world. The evidence is overwhelming that this objective was Europe-wide since the Great Khan sent that message bearing his seal on it, intended for the pope. The formulae recorded in such ultimatums sent by Chinggisid khans in the 1200s were not *topoi* invented authors living in distant places and writing in various genres. Rather, this *topos* of the world conquering Mongol ideology came from the highest decision-makers.

Secondly, the initial invasion of Hungary was a stunning success in military terms, but the occupation of Hungary was only a partial success. Archaeology confirms that the destruction of the country was piecemeal, not total. Many regions of the kingdom still had troops and a healthy population, and there were still unconquered countries nearby, making Hungary a prominent point for Batu’s forces. The consistent message from the sources is that the fierce resistance encountered there was a problem for the Mongols, despite massive defeats and massacres of the local population.

Thirdly, fortifications played an important role in the defense of parts of Europe and the survival of certain segments of the population in the regions concerned. After 1242, extensive and large-scale fortification reforms took place throughout the region of East-Central Europe. Although we have textual records of failed Mongol sieges, the usefulness of fortifications is perhaps better demonstrated by the costly and labor-intensive construction projects that were initiated in response in the 13th century. It can be assumed that there was a prevailing feeling in the region that such reforms were worth the effort.

A fourth point is that once the Mongols withdrew from the heart of the Kingdom of Hungary, their subsequent movements, documented in Rashid al-Din’s work and illuminated by other sources, do not paint the picture of an army rushing back to Inner Asia for some political reason. In fact, there is ample evidence that they headed towards Constantinople.

A fifth conclusion, concerning methodology, may constitute the most valuable historiographical contribution of this study. This relates to the problem of unrelated written sources. Medievalists are often keen to see in surviving texts the narrative structures, *topoi*, and genre conventions that shape narratives. In the case of the Mongol attacks on Europe, we see independent sources in several genres that could not have influenced each other, reinforcing and complementing each other. Moreover, other types of evidence, such as archaeological finds and environmental data, also seem to support the picture presented in the textual sources.

The originality of the monograph is unquestionable, and it genuinely contributes to our knowledge of the motifs of the Mongol attitude toward European powers during the second half of the 13th century. Although a large amount of secondary literature exists on the Mongol invasions of Europe, the questions raised by

the author and the answers to them are essential. He clarified a lot of uncertainties prevailing at the present stage of research, and disentangled a great many details. I would emphasise the relevance of the question raised by Stephen Pow: Was it possible to travel from Mongolia to Hungary during the short timespan between Ögödei Khan's death on 11 December 1241 and March 1242? By arriving at a negative response, he successfully refutes the inveterate theory that the main cause of the Mongol withdrawal was the death of the Great Khan.

All in all, Pow's book leads us to better understand the manifold causes for the Mongol withdrawal from Europe in 1242. The book is a well-arranged, logically upbuilt study of the given theme which is organically based on previous research. He skilfully handles data in an innovative way. His argumentation is always lucid and taut, his style is readable. Finally, an exhaustive bibliography of primary and secondary sources closes the book which testifies to the fact that the author is proficient in numerous languages and aware of the relevant scholarship.

In sum, Pow's monograph titled *Conquest and Withdrawal: the Mongol Invasions of Europe* is an outstanding piece of historical scholarship based on the critical knowledge of a wide-range of primary and secondary sources. His thorough investigation offers novel insights that fully deserve our attention. I can recommend it both to specialist historians of the theme and to readers interested in historical narratives. I can assure you no one will be disappointed.