

**Facing the Black Death: Reflections On the 14<sup>th</sup>-Century Plague Epidemic and Its Impact On the Eurasian “Steppe City” Under Mongol Rule**

Petya Andreeva

Assistant Professor of Asian Art and Design History  
Art and Design History and Theory  
Parsons School of Design

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Soon after its foundation in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongol empire was divided into four semi-independent polities: the Yuan dynasty in China, the Chagatai Khanate nested in Central Asia, the Islamic Ilkhanate in Iran, and the Golden Horde in the Western steppe stretching from Siberia to Crimea. The Golden Horde (1242-1502) became the Mongol empire’s successor state, having outlived it by more than a century. Founded by the Jochid clan of the Mongol aristocracy, the state presents an interesting case study in broader discourse on the Black Death (1346-1353), one of the most devastating plague epidemics in human history. The ethnically and culturally diverse Golden Horde khanate was situated at the heart of several key 14<sup>th</sup>-century trade routes and thus quickly turned into a hotbed for cultural, artistic, and economic exchange. Under the Mongol hegemony in Central Eurasia, the Black Sea route (Urgench- Sarai-Caffa), passing straight through the heart of the Golden Horde toward Crimea, emerged as a powerful new branch of the traditional Silk Roads.

At its peak, the Golden Horde subjugated substantial territories from the Ural Mountains all the way to the Danube River in East Europe. Its vassal states, paying vast annual tribute to the Golden Horde khans, included the strategic Venetian and Genoese port cities of Crimea in the Northern Black Sea zone. The Crimean route provided a gateway to the lucrative European and north African markets. Since its foundation, the Golden Horde relied mostly on caravan trade for its finances: it is reasonable to assume that if the commercial transactions were disrupted, the Golden Horde’s political and economic stability would have been impacted instantaneously and significantly.

The Golden Horde’s population was ethnically and culturally diverse from the very beginning of its historical trajectory, much more so than the rest of the Mongol empire, as the state conquered a number of tribal peoples in the Caucasus and Volga region. The khans never completely abandoned nomadism, however, and neither did the local Turkic Kipchak nomads who had occupied the western portion of the Eurasian steppe for several centuries. The sons of founder Jochi (1182-1227) divided the geographical core of the Golden Horde into longitudinal strips, nomadizing north to south along the main rivers, often with hundreds of kilometers between summer and winter camps.<sup>1</sup> Some of the sons are recorded to have had hundreds of male heirs, and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese sources do indicate a sudden rise in steppe population; one can only assume that this rise would have caused significant population pressure during a sudden

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<sup>1</sup> Atwood 2004, 202

cataclysm.<sup>2</sup> But not everyone in the Horde was nomadic and of Turkic or Mongol descent—significant sedentary populations lived on the newly subjugated territory. Centered in the Caucasus foothills were the Ossets, and the Cherkas occupied the Kuban Basin and neighboring Caucasus foothills.<sup>3</sup> Both groups were Eastern Orthodox which did not seem to bother the relatively tolerant early Mongol rulers. In the middle Volga, between the Bulgars, the Russians, and the Kipchak steppe were the Mordvins who spoke a language related to Finnish and Estonian.<sup>4</sup> East of the Urals were the Bashkirs, a people akin to the Hungarians. (Fig. 1) The Mongols put all the conquered peoples from north Asia, including the Russians, to the fur tribute which must have contributed substantially to the state's economy. The Bulgar state of the Volga area and the Russian principalities became part of the Mongol trade politics which ultimately transformed the overland "Silk Roads" by adding additional axes and alternative routes to the old network.<sup>5</sup>

On the steppe itself, the khans established several cities—but as mentioned earlier, the Western steppe was already occupied by Turkic nomads whose lifestyle was not consistent with the demands of urban life. By 1255, Batu khan had founded the cities of Sarai (Selitrennoye, north of Astrakhan) and Uvek, south of Saratov, at the southern and northern limits of his migrations. In the early 14th century, just before the Black Death, the Golden Horde khans initiated a new "sedentarization" project which aimed to establish steppe cities with large, settled populations in what was previously a nomadic cultural sphere. This was an unprecedented project on the traditionally nomadic Eurasian steppe, and one that evidently aimed to facilitate the increasing trade while also contributing to the Islamification of the Golden Horde's population after Uzbek khan's mass conversion to Islam. The pastoral economic model which had flourished on the Eurasian steppe since the late Bronze Age was now (temporarily) disrupted as nomadic populations, including part of the Mongol elite, were resettled into newly built urban centers. Still, a significant number of people remained on the steppe. As noted above, the Khans showed a certain attachment to elements of the nomadic lifestyle—they kept a summer and winter residence— but were also dedicated to this much-needed transition to city life because they saw urbanization as the only feasible way to facilitate the growing demands of the booming commerce under Pax Mongolica. The Mongols were bound to find out that the Golden Horde cities would be short-lived as they were ravaged by the plague only a few decades after their establishment.

These new "steppe cities" (arguably an oxymoron in itself), flourished under the Muslim ruler Uzbek who died in 1341, just before the first plague outbreak. Important city centers of the Golden Horde included the new capital "New Sarai," on the Volga River, and Majar, Saraychik, and Aq-Kerman in the lower Urals, among others. These cities were meant to facilitate long-distance commerce: for example, Majar was an invaluable trade intermediary between the Volga-Ural area and the Black Sea providing a much-needed passage through the Caucasus. In the southwest, the port cities of Crimea, inhabited by Goths, Greeks, Armenians, Anatolian Turks, and Italians, thrived on the export of grain, fish, honey, and slaves, and the import of silver and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 203

<sup>5</sup> Martin 1978, 401-421

luxuries for the khans.<sup>6</sup>

One gains a clear understanding of the unique fabric of Golden Horde society in which pastoral nomadic populations of both Turkic and Mongol origin co-existed with sedentary peoples and subsequently transitioned toward sedentism themselves. The ruling elite of the Golden Horde faced a unique dilemma: they needed to facilitate the booming commerce, and to that end, resettle huge, ethnically diverse, and mostly nomadic populations into those urban centers. But they also needed to communicate to outsiders the image of a fearsome steppe warrior and a recipient of a centuries-old nomadic tradition.

From 800 BCE onward, the Eurasian steppe zone was characterized by pastoral nomadism which stood contrary to the concept of a city. In the Iron Age, trade was still actively facilitated by the nomads: the Eurasian steppe route remained the only active network across Eurasia until the Han dynasty in China in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. Cities were historically characteristic of the Crimea, Khwarezm, and the Middle Volga area, but not of the Eurasian steppe domain; moreover, the Eurasian grassland regions probably could not afford sufficient security for the establishment of agricultural settlements. The only incentive for building these costly urban centers at the heart of the western portion of the steppe at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century was the increased importance of the Golden Horde as a major economic player on the new Black Sea route through Crimea. One already wonders if the decision to create numerous trade cities on the nomadic steppe was not a recipe for infrastructural and economic disaster in an already largely experimental political entity—it remains to be seen if this contributed to the spread of the plague there. Certainly, the demographics of the Golden Horde khanate could offer a glimpse into an unprecedented political entity hit by an unprecedented crisis.

To understand how different segments of the Golden Horde population were impacted by the Black Death, one needs to first understand the historical fate of the Eurasian steppe which constituted the largest and central portion of Golden Horde territories. Stretching from the Mongolian-Manchurian grassland to parts of the Hungarian plain, the Eurasian Steppe belt is sometimes referred to as the Metal Road, a precursor to the more widely known Silk Roads linking China and Europe. Since the early Iron Age, pastoral nomadic alliances along the Eurasian steppe, namely the Pontic Scythians, Saka, Sarmatians, became an important intermediary in trade relations between China, Persia, Greece, and the rest of Eurasia. While these tribal confederations were ultimately driven away, conquered, or gradually disintegrated, they succeeded in establishing pastoral nomadism as a strong and enduring economic and cultural model in Central Eurasia. The early nomads left behind material evidence of their funerary complexes (known as “kurgan” barrows), many filled with sumptuous golden treasures. The signature artwork produced and circulated by Iron Age steppe nomads in their seasonal or forced migrations is the so-called “animal-style”—portable gold ornaments decorated with stylized or abbreviated zoomorphic designs embellished the bodies of nomads and their horses. (Fig. 2)

The Mongols who formed the Golden Horde were nomads themselves and so were the various Turkic groups they conquered—it is very likely that both saw themselves as successors to a centuries-old cultural and artistic nomadic tradition. This is evident in the archaeological record

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<sup>6</sup> Atwood 2004, 121

from the early years of the Golden Horde before the first waves of the epidemic struck at its heart. Like their Iron Age and early medieval predecessors, the first generation of Mongol khans who relocated to the Golden Horde brought with them jewelry consistent with the portable luxury and zoomorphic decoration characteristic of early steppe peoples.<sup>7</sup> Numerous small ornaments replicating the old nomadic aesthetic were discovered in hoards and graves of the early Mongol aristocracy in the Golden Horde. The bodies of the Mongol warriors were often embellished with animal-style buckles and plaques as well as silver “belt bowls,” portable tokens of an apparent attachment to the nomadic spirit. (Fig. 3 and 4) After a centuries-long hiatus, the Iron Age animal-style tradition was reinvigorated by the Mongols of the Golden Horde in an apparent attempt to project the image of a “steppe warrior” who recognized and celebrated the ancient artistic and aesthetic traditions of the steppe. This was likely an opportunistic political strategy not entirely consistent with reality. Due to the growing urbanization of the Steppe, by the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongol elite had mostly chosen to establish themselves in fixed sedentary centers rather than mobile luxury camps.<sup>8</sup>

Naturally, after several cities were established and Islam became the official religion of the Horde, nomadic aesthetics were gradually replaced with commissions for religious objects, large-scale monuments, and blue-green ceramics and tilework consistent with Islamic conventions in other parts of Asia. The Golden Horde had to become well-integrated into the cosmopolitan Islamic milieu across Eurasia, and as such, it needed to have certain material and intellectual traditions to facilitate religious learning (e.g., illustrated manuscripts, impressive mosques, Islamic science etc. could only be accommodated within a city bureaucracy). In light of this transition to urban life, one wonders if “animal-style” and other forms of traditional nomadic art died out. To address this important question, one must consider the tumultuous short and long-term impact of the Black Death in the region.

There is no direct textual or material evidence of the plague’s death toll in the Golden Horde; such records are much more abundant for China, the Middle East and especially Europe. But Russian chronicles report a startling increase of bubonic plague

cases in the Russian principalities north of the Golden Horde’s cities in the 1340s (these were the same territories that were put to the fur tribute).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, based on the increased presence of Turkic tombstone inscriptions near the lake Issyk-kul, it can be theorized that the plague reached the Golden Horde in the late 1330s and certainly by 1345, it was the main cause behind the alarmingly high mortality rates.<sup>10</sup>

By the time the epidemic struck the Golden Horde, the “steppe city” project had already taken place, and the Uzbek khan had initiated significant religious reforms turning the Golden Horde into an Islamic state. Several medieval travelers have written about the majestic Islamic cities of the Golden Horde, some lauding Sarai for its newly built mosques, caravanserais, buzzing bazaars, and ceramic workshops. The north African scholar Ibn Battuta visited the capital Sarai a decade before the epidemic and expressed his admiration for the residential

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<sup>7</sup> Kramarovsky 2000, 55

<sup>8</sup> Schamiloglu 2018, 18-40

<sup>9</sup> Schamiloglu 2017, 327

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

architecture, bazaars, wide streets and 13 congregational and many auxiliary mosques recently built by the khans.<sup>11</sup> Numerous blue-and-green glazed ceramics and ornamental tiles from monumental buildings have been excavated from the spots where these cities were supposedly located, thus confirming his ethnographic account. (Fig. 5) The blue-and-green glazes and hues were not unique to the Golden Horde but rather followed conventions in other parts of the Islamic world, namely the Seljuk palaces of the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century. The Golden Horde cities increasing importance in international trade was also noted in Florentine banker Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's 14<sup>th</sup>-century merchant handbook *Practice of Commerce*, although it should be noted that he never actually visited the lands of the horde. Rather grim, however, is the sobering account of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Arab historian Ibn Al-Wardi, who emphasizes the almost immediate destruction of the Golden Horde cities, as well as cities like Aleppo and Beirut, and the whole of Gaza and Upper Egypt. Al-Wardi died from the plague himself, a year after completing the essay.<sup>12</sup> It is certain that the cities of the Golden Horde were deserted by the recently resettled populations because of the outbreak—the “urbanized nomads” had no attachment to the city and those who could escape did so. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman scholar Evliya Chelebi visited the domain of the former Golden Horde, including what used to be its magnificent cities, and left a heartbreaking account of the poverty and infrastructural disaster in the town that now stood at the place of former Sarai—a few thousand thatched houses are all that remained of its former glory.<sup>13</sup> He quickly points out that many nomads and semi-nomads continued to occupy the ruins of this rather derelict area but had long ago returned to their original lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> It becomes evident that those experimental Golden Horde cities on the Eurasian steppe did not manage to carry the burden of the various demographic, economic and public health challenges presented by the plague outbreak. The archaeological remains from those cities confirm the reports that the demise of the Golden Horde's steppe cities was devastatingly quick. It is perhaps unsurprising that newly settled nomads, many of whom were first-generation city dwellers, were either killed off by the disease or rushed to abandon their urban homes and returned to their former mobile lifestyle to escape the disease.

Furthermore, as a result of the plague, much of the Golden Horde population broke off into smaller “hordes” and moved further westward toward East Europe; this process was an indirect response to the mass death and subsequent economic downfall that took over the Golden Horde. These new migrations attesting to the horde's fragmentation can be observed through recent archaeological findings on the Balkans. Chinese jades, as well as zoomorphic plaques and belt buckles in the “animal-style” nomadic tradition were found as far as the northern Bulgarian Black Sea coast, once occupied by the medieval Principality of Karvuna which broke off from the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Byzantine and Bulgarian texts confirm that nomads from the lands of the Golden Horde started a sudden incursion into the Black Sea coastal zone. A hoard of hundreds of gold objects and coins minted in the Golden Horde were found at the site of Kaliakra in northeastern Bulgaria.<sup>15</sup> The concealed treasure was likely used as payment to secure passage and might have belonged to one of the smaller hordes that broke off from the Golden Horde due

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<sup>11</sup> Battutah 2002, 136

<sup>12</sup> Al-wardi 1348

<sup>13</sup> Schamaloglu 2017, 334

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Petrunova 2020, 168

to the epidemic, the Aktav horde which made its way to the Black Sea area. Treasures with gold animal-style items were also found across the Golden Horde domain in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, several decades after the plague's last wave. The steppe city disappeared as fast as it was built and was clearly a transient phenomenon in a relatively short-lived empire while nomadic craft, and the penchant for goldwork and portable luxury, made a comeback. It is important to acknowledge that the process of steppe urbanization did not happen overnight and was in fact never fully completed. Some scholars have referred to the early Golden Horde urban centers as "proto-cities" in which the khan stayed only for part of the year, choosing to spend time in one of his mobile camps followed by a huge entourage.<sup>16</sup> European travelers like Marco Polo and William of Rubruck have also alluded to the existence of mobile "tent cities" like those in the Iranian Ilkhanate—it is impossible to know how accurate the observations are, or which city they were describing. Be that as it may, the transition toward an urbanized way of life was a leading part of the Golden Horde's agenda since the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the khans had fixed summer and winter residences for almost the whole year, not unlike many rulers of settled empires. This transition toward sedentism was almost complete before being suddenly disrupted by the bubonic plague. During and in the wake of the cataclysm, cities saw a rapid decline, and nomads returned to a far more mobile way of life, once again returning to ancient nomadic art and aesthetics. The resurgence of animal-style objects in the later period of the Golden Horde is unsurprising if one considers nomadic goldworks not only for their inherent value but also for their symbolic function. They would have been seen as tokens of a seemingly uninterrupted and cherished nomadic decorative tradition—despite having temporarily embraced the luxuries of an urban lifestyle, the nomadic elite wished to maintain the nomadic "traditionskern" (kernel of tradition), to put it in Wenskus's terms. Much like the early medieval Germanic tribes whose social structure was of great interest to Wenskus, the unique demographics of the Golden Horde made it necessary for the small yet inherently unstable elite "nucleus" to communicate a carefully crafted collective identity to the rest of the alliance in the hope of preventing further fragmentation. This was even more necessary after the tumultuous Black Death which put in motion migrations and political events of far-reaching consequences and ultimately brought about the demise of the Mongols and the rise of the Ottomans. Thus, the return to a quintessentially nomadic art form was a much-needed response to the fragmentation of the nomadic collective after the epidemic.

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<sup>16</sup> Schamaloglu 2018

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## Figures

1. Map of the Golden Horde



2. Scythian gold buckle. Siberian Collection of Peter I





3. Belt buckle from Olen' Kolodez' burial mound no.7. Mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Silver.



4. Belt bowl, Golden Horde. 13<sup>th</sup> century. South Russia



5. Glazed Polychrome Bowl from Selitrennoe Site. Golden Horde 14<sup>th</sup>-early 15<sup>th</sup> c.