

East Asia Study Unit

LESSON THREE: THE MONGOL INVASIONS

LEARNING TO READ PRIMARY SOURCES, PART THREE

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GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods with discussion.

GOALS:

1. To help students to read carefully and evaluate information against what they think they already know.
2. To have students engage with visual materials and appreciate the picture scroll format.
3. To use a primary source to question knowledge learned from secondary sources.

MATERIALS/PREP:

A copy of Tom Conlan's book *In Little Need of Divine Intervention*, published by the Cornell East Asia Series. This is a very affordable paperback that includes Professor Conlan's translation of Takezaki Suenaga's Mongol Invasion Picture Scroll. It also includes black-and-white line drawings of the illustrations in the scroll, English renditions documents relating to the Mongol invasions, and more. This lesson will draw upon certain passages from Conlan's translation of the scroll text. You also might find full color images from the scroll available on the web which would be wonderful to show in class, though this is not essential.

INTRODUCTION:

This lesson allows you to use a truly remarkable resource that is sure to capture the imagination of many of your students – the Mongol Invasion Picture Scroll. This scroll, which dates to the late thirteenth century, was commissioned by a Japanese warrior who fought against the Mongol armies of Khubilai Khan in 1274 and 1281. It reveals much about the attitudes and expectations of medieval Japanese samurai as well as the ways that a primary source can force us to rethink the accepted interpretations of Japanese history.

BACKGROUND (to read aloud to the students):

The Genpei Civil War (1180-85, described briefly in the previous lesson) made warriors aligned with Minamoto Yoritomo the most powerful in the land. Over the course of the 1180s and 90s, they established the first warrior government, the Kamakura Bakufu. Based in the eastern city of Kamakura, the early bakufu administered warrior affairs, but the old imperial government still existed in the city of Heian (Kyoto) and had jurisdiction over civilian affairs. During these years (known as the Kamakura period, 1185-1333), Japan was said to have a dual government – the emperor in Kyoto and the shogun in Kamakura. When the last of Yoritomo's sons died without an heir, the family of his widow, Hojo Masako, became the most powerful in the bakufu, serving as regents to adopted figurehead shoguns.

Meanwhile, on the Asian mainland, Genghis Khan united the Mongols into a major military power in the early thirteenth century. His grandson, Khubilai, set his sights on conquering China and, as part of his efforts to defeat the Chinese, attempted to make Japan an ally. In 1266, Khubilai had the following letter sent to the Japanese:

From time immemorial, rulers of small states have sought to maintain friendly relations with one another. We, the Great Mongolian Empire, have received the Mandate of Heaven and have become the master of the universe. Therefore, innumerable states in far-off lands have longed to form ties with us. As soon as I ascended the throne, I ceased fighting with Koryo and restored their land and people. In gratitude, both the ruler and the people of Koryo came to us to become our subjects; their joy resembles that of children with their father. Japan is located near Koryo and since its founding has on several occasions sent envoys to the Middle Kingdom. However, this has not happened since the beginning of my reign. This must be because you are not fully informed. Therefore, I hereby send you a special envoy to inform you of our desire. From now on, let us enter into friendly relations with each other. Nobody would wish to resort to arms.

-- *From P132, ChJv3 of Cambridge History of Japan*

What does this letter really say? Is it friendly or not? How do you suppose the Japanese reacted?

- (Answers: on the one hand, the letter is quite polite, invites the Japanese to enter into friendly relations with the Mongols, and does not directly threaten Japan or call for its surrender. On the other hand, it clearly implies that the Mongols are superior and ends in a veiled threat.)

As you might have guessed, reaction among the Japanese was mixed. Some in the imperial court favored a conciliatory approach or ignoring the letter, but Kamakura bakufu leaders took a more belligerent stand and rejected the letter. Khubilai sent several more diplomatic missions over the next few years, but the bakufu remained steadfast, even executing the messengers on one occasion. It also told its warriors living on the southernmost main island of Kyushu to prepare for war.

Khubilai's initial motives for contacting Japan are not entirely clear. It may have been because he had heard rumors of gold and treasure in Japan, or perhaps because he knew the Japanese traded with the Chinese and wanted to cut off trade to China (which he was trying to conquer). Regardless, after having his diplomatic efforts rebuffed and his representatives executed, Khubilai was now determined to make Japan submit to his authority. In 1274 the first invasion forces, sailing on boats that Khubilai had forced the Koreans to make, reached Kyushu. The Japanese defenders were sorely tested, for the Mongols used military tactics (such as advancing in formation) and weapons (such as exploding shells) that the Japanese were not familiar with. But when a great storm hit the coast of Kyushu, the Mongol fleet lost perhaps one-third of its forces and the rest returned to the Asian mainland.

The Japanese knew that the Mongols would be back, and so they prepared for a second invasion by ordering more troops to Kyushu and building a stone defensive wall along the beach. Remnants of that wall can still be seen along parts of the Kyushu coast today. The second invasion came in 1281, and this time included conquered soldiers and sailor from China (which had fallen to the Mongols in 1279), but again the weather helped the Japanese. A typhoon destroyed much of the invading force and the Mongol-led forces retreated. (Note: this is a standard narrative of the invasions, but we will question it through our reading of the picture scroll)

TAKEZAKI SUENAGA AND THE PICTURE SCROLL:

Takezaki Suenaga was a middle-ranking warrior from Kyushu who fought in both invasions. Later in life, he commissioned an illustrated scroll to preserve his story of the battles and of how Adachi Yasumori, an important bakufu high official, had generously recognized Suenaga's bravery on the battlefield. The scroll is a fantastic window into the thinking of warriors of the time. Let's look at a few passages:

[Passage one, p. 23]

Based on this passage, is Suenaga brave or reckless? What makes you say so?

Why does Suenaga trade helmets with another warrior?

What are his concerns?

- (Answers: some might look at the first line and think Suenaga reckless for charging into battle before all of the troops are assembled. But he commissioned the scroll to reflect his bravery, and as should be apparent elsewhere in the passage, being the first into battle was a point of distinction which was worthy of recognition and reward. He trades helmets with another warrior so that the two can easily spot each other – not to help each other on the battlefield, but so that they can each report on the brave deeds that the other carries out. Samurai of this time fought in large part for recognition and rewards, and so making sure that someone of importance would witness your great deeds was a major concern.)

[Passage three, p. 50]

What is the warrior on the gray horse wearing? Why?

Suenaga notes that the other warrior is bringing the severed heads of defeated enemies back to camp with him. Why?

- (Answers: here again, we see the concern with standing out and being witnessed. The warrior on the gray horse wears purple armor and a crimson cape, things which make him noticeable on the battlefield, and he brings back heads as proof of the number of enemies he has killed. Suenaga, seeing that this man is a successful, notable warrior, then asked him to witness Suenaga's own charge into battle.)

[Passage seven, pp. 88-89]

Suenaga survived the first invasion but did not receive rewards for his service, so he takes the unusual step of traveling all the way to Kamakura, the seat of the warrior government, to appeal his case.

Passage seven concerns his efforts to have his case heard, which finally lead him to an audience with an important bakufu official, Adachi Yasumori.

At the bottom of p. 88, Yasumori asks Suenaga specific questions to see if he deserves rewards. What does he ask?

Suenaga still has a complaint. What is at issue, in his mind?

- (Answers: Yasumori recognizes two criteria for rewards/compensation: one, if Suenaga took enemy heads, and two, if Suenaga's men were killed. Suenaga still complains, however, because his being first in battle was left out of the report. In the end, Suenaga's persistence persuades Yasumori to recommend him for rewards, and Suenaga later commissioned the picture scroll in part to pay tribute to Yasumori. This passage also highlights an important function of the bakufu – settling judicial cases. Although we speak of the bakufu as a "warrior government," in fact one

of its most important functions was to keep disputing warriors in the courtroom rather than on the battlefield).

RETHINKING THE BIG PICTURE:

If you are able, pass around a copy or copies of the book and ask students to look at the illustrations. What do they find that is interesting or unusual? Perhaps the most famous scene is the pitched battle on pp. 72-73 of Conlan's translation (it would look much more impressive to students if they could see a full color version). In this scene, we see blood spurting from Suenaga's wounded horse and a Mongol "cannonball" exploding overhead. The Mongols did use gunpower, and the Japanese, who were unfamiliar with it, found this to be terrifying (as did their horses). However, as Conlan notes, the Mongols depicted in this scene may be later additions to the scroll.

The students may notice other interesting things in the illustrations, but the most significant thing is what is NOT there. If they were paying attention when you summarized the battles, then they should surely be looking for illustrations of the great typhoons that saved Japan. But they will not find any such illustrations, for Suenaga makes no reference to the typhoons that supposedly play such a big part in the Mongols' defeat. Why? Even scholars do not know for sure. Your students might think that Suenaga left the typhoons out because he wanted to emphasize the brave role played by Japanese warriors, though it seems unlikely that he would completely ignore the typhoons, especially since they were thought to be sent by the gods and Suenaga was clearly a religious man. Some scholars including Tom Conlan have come to question the typhoons (see his essay in the same volume). For the Mongols, he argues, the weather was a perfect excuse to explain their defeat, while for Japanese courtiers and religious leaders back in Kyoto, the winds were proof of Japan's divine nature. Is it possible that later writers exaggerated the role of the winds and that Suenaga's account more accurately reflects what happened? We may never know, but this certainly illustrates why we should always look to primary sources when trying to understand the past.