DBQ – Were the Mongols “civilized”?

Prompt:

Using the documents, evaluate the extent to which the Mongols exhibited “civilized” behavior in building and maintaining their empire. Identify an additional type of document and explain how it would help in assessing the question of whether the Mongols were “civilized” or not.

Historical Background:

The Mongols were originally an unstable, competitive group of nomadic pastoralists from the inner Eurasian steppes. United in 1206 under Temujin (better known as Chinggis, or Genghis, Khan) the Mongols began a half-century of military campaigns and mass killings that led to the creation of the single largest, contiguous, land-based empire in world history. After Chinggis Khan’s death in 1227, his empire was divided into four parts, or “khanates” – the Yuan dynasty in China, the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, the Il-Khanate in Persia, and the Kipchak Khanate (“Golden Horde”) in Russia.

Document 1

Source: Chinggis [Genghis] Khan, speech to his men before the campaign into China, 1206

“The greatest joy for a man is to defeat his enemies, to drive them before him, to take from them all they possess, to see those they love in tears, to ride their horses, and to hold their wives and daughters in his arms.”

Document 2

Source: Letter sent to Hulegu Khan* by three Shia Muslim dignitaries** of Baghdad, 1258

“We submit ourselves, our families and our lands, for we have knowledge passed on to us from our forbears….from Ali ibn Abi Talib’s mouth we have a knowledge that you will one day be the owners of this land, that the grip of your power will defeat its governor, and that he will give way before the verdict of greatness…”

*Hulegu Khan: Chinggis Khan’s grandson
**dignitaries: people who hold high rank or office.

Document 3

Source: Friar John, letter sent to fellow Franciscans who were working as missionaries in the Black Sea area, 1307, forwarded to Rome

“I, Friar John of Monte Corvino departed from Tauris in the year of our Lord, 1291…..found my way to Cathay (China), the realm of the emperor of the Tartars (Mongols) who is called the grand Khan. To him I presented the letter of our lord the pope and invited him to adopt the Catholic faith of our Lord Jesus Christ…..but he had grown too old in idolatry; however, he bestows many kindnesses upon the Christians….I request some good fellow-workers to help me…”

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Document 4

**Source:** Chinese chronicler writing about the Yuan* dynasty, 1390

“They smell so heavily that one cannot approach them. They wash themselves in urine.”

*Yuan: dynasty during Mongol rule of China

Document 5

**Source:** Marco Polo, Italian merchant, recorded in his book, *A Description of the World*, c. 1300

“Upon leaving the city of Kue-lin-fu, and traveling three days, during which you are continually passing towns and castles, of which the inhabitants are idolaters, have silk in abundance, and export it in considerable quantities, you reach the city of Unguen. This place is remarkable for a great manufacture of sugar, which is sent from thence to the city of Kanbalu for the supply of the court. Previously to its being brought under the dominion of the grand khan, the natives were unacquainted with the art of manufacturing sugar of a fine quality, and boiled it in such an imperfect manner, that when left to cool it remained in the state of a dark-brown paste….at the end of five days’ journey, you arrive at the noble city of Zaitun, which has a port on the seacoast celebrated for the resort of shipping, loaded with merchandise,… The quantity of pepper imported there is so considerable that what is carried to Alexandria to supply the demand of the western parts of the world, is trifling in comparison….”

Document 6

**Source:** Rashid Fadl Abi-l’Hair, Muslim historian, 1498

“Hulegu Khan handed the rich treasures which had been brought from Baghdad in 1258 from the Caliph’s court to the ruler of Rayy…for safekeeping, and had them carried to Azerbaijan as was the booty from Asia Minor, Georgia, Armenia, Luristan and the land of the Kurds…..These invaders burned our great libraries, broke our canals and ditches, destroyed our farms, defiled the true Faith by raising temples to Buddha…attempted to destroy our trade with paper money…”

Document 7

**Source:** Law from the Chin-Yuan Hsin-Ka, issued by Kublai Khan, 1223

“1. All authorities shall at dawn administer (official) matters. When items scheduled for the day for deliberation are settled, then and only then may they adjourn. All authorities and the Six Boards in the capital shall be dependent upon the Secretarial Council and the rest of them shall be dependent upon their supervising authorities…”

Document 8

**Source:** Novogrod Chronicles, early source of Russian history, 1238

“And the Princes ordered….‘Give us your numbers for tribute’. And the common people would not give their numbers for tribute but said: ‘Let us die honourably for St. Sophia’ and the people were divided… And it was on the morrow, the Prince rode down…and the accursed ones [Mongols] began to ride through the streets writing down the Christian house; because for our sins God has brought wild beasts out of the desert …..And having numbered them for tribute and taken it, the accursed ones went away…”
Document 9

Source: Solongo Monkhooroi, female Mongolian artist, Mongol Empire Map, 2000s

Document 10

Source: Gregory Guzman, modern historian, essay titled “Were the Barbarians a Negative or Positive Factor in Ancient and Medieval History?” The Historian, 1988

“The late medieval period provides even more examples of cultural diffusion via the movement of barbarians along the Inner Asian steppe highway. The great Eurasian Pax Mongolica* opened the way for much cultural cross-fertilization in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries. Chinese inventions like gunpowder and printing made their way to the Middle East and Europe in this period. Records show that Chinese artillerymen accompanied the Mongol armies into the Middle East. Papal** envoys like [Friar] John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck traveled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum in the 1240s and 1250s. In the 1280s, Marco Polo brought with him from Kublia Khan’s court in China a Mongol princess to be the bride of the Mongol Khan of Persia…

This cultural exchange and interaction between Eurasian coastal civilizations ended with the collapse of the Mongol Khanates in Persia and China in the mid-fourteenth century. The barbarian Mongols, therefore, provided the last period of great cultural cross-fertilization before the modern age.”

*Pax Mongolica: “Mongol Peace” – the period from mid-1200s to mid-1300s when the Mongols imposed stability and law and order across much of Eurasia

**papal: from the Pope in Rome