

Honors Literature – World History

TASK: Read the following text carefully, making all appropriate notations. Identify SOAPStone, DIDLS, PERSIAN, and other information as evidence of your research and analysis of the piece of literature. Answer the related questions on notebook paper or on this document. You may use this information for any written essay on the piece. See the text at the very bottom of these notes.

TASK: Comprehension Questions

- 1. What might the qualities of the Mongols that Piano Carpini emphasizes tell us about his own society and its values or shortcoming?**
- 2. How are the Mongol virtues Carpini extols linked to the achievements of Chinggis Khan and the stunning Mongol wars of conquest?**
- 3. To what extent would they be typical of nomadic societies more generally?**
- 4. In what ways might his account of Mongol vices be simply dismissed as sour grapes resulting from European defeats?**

A European Assessment of the Virtues and Vices of the Mongols

As we have seen, much of what we know about the history of nomadic peoples is based on the records and reactions of observers from sedentary cultures that were often their mortal enemies. Some of the most famous observers were those, including Marco Polo, who visited the vast Mongol domains at the height of the khans' power in the 12th and 13th centuries. Many tried to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these people, who were suddenly having such a great impact on the history of much of the known world. One of the most insightful of these observers was a Franciscan friar named Giovanni de Piano Carpini. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent Piano Carpini as an envoy to the "Great Khan" to protest the recent assaults by his Mongol forces on Christian Europe. The pope's protest had little effect on the Mongol decision to strike elsewhere in the following years. But Piano Carpini's extensive travels produced one of the most detailed accounts of Mongol society and culture to be written in the mid-13th century. As the following passages suggest, like other visitors from sedentary areas, he gave the Mongols a very mixed review:

In the whole world there are to be found no more obedient subjects than the Tartars [Mongols]. . . . They pay their lords more respect than any other people, and would hardly dare lie to them. Rarely do they revile each other, but if they should, the dispute hardly ever leads to blows. Wars, quarrels, the infliction of bodily harm, and manslaughter do not occur among them, and there are no large-scale thieves or robbers among them. . . .

They treat one another with due respect; they regard each other almost as members of one family, and, although they do not have a lot of food, they like to share it with one another. . . . When riding

they can endure extreme cold and at times also fierce heat; they are neither soft, nor sensitive [to the weather]. They do not seem to feel in any way envious of one another, and no public trials occur among them. No one holds his fellow in contempt, but each helps and supports the other to the limits of his abilities.

They are extremely arrogant toward other people and look down on all others with disdain. In fact, they regard them, both noble and humble people alike, as little better than nothing. . . . Toward other people the Tartars tend to anger and are easily roused. . . . They are the greatest liars in the world in dealing with other people [than the Tartars], and hardly a true word escapes from their mouths. Initially they flatter but in the end they sting like scorpions. They are crafty and sly, and wherever possible they try to get the better of everybody else by false pretenses. . . .

They are messy in their eating and drinking and in their whole way of life. Drunkenness is honorable among them. . . . At the same time they are mean and greedy, and if they want something, they will not stop begging and asking for it, until they have got it. They cling fiercely to what they have, and in making gifts they are extremely miserly. They have no conscience about killing other people. In short, if one tried to enumerate all their bad characteristics there would be too many to put on paper.

QUESTIONS What might the qualities of the Mongols that Piano Carpini emphasizes tell us about his own society and its values or shortcomings? How are the Mongol virtues he extols linked to the achievements of Chinggis Khan and the stunning Mongol wars of conquest? To what extent would they be typical of nomadic societies more generally? In what ways might his account of Mongol vices be simply dismissed as sour grapes resulting from European defeats?