

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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STRAYER:**

Chapter 11, The Mongols. More than barbarians?

Since most historians come from urban civilizations, it's hardly surprising that they have celebrated the achievements of those societies. But in doing so, they have often neglected, or even belittled, pastoral nomadic people who depended heavily on their herds of animals and generally lacked cities, writing, enduring states, and monumental architecture so characteristic of urban civilizations everywhere. Pastoral peoples generally appeared in the larger story of world history only when they were threatening to destroy established civilizations. Chapter 11 focuses our attention on pastoralists in general, and on the Mongols in particular.

And it reflects a changing and somewhat more positive view of pastoral people that is increasingly common among historians. After all, these pastoral people pioneered the human occupation of dry or desert regions that could not support an agricultural economy. Their technological achievements such as horse harnesses, saddle stirrups, had both military and economic applications in many societies. Women in pastoral societies generally enjoyed a higher status, fewer restrictions, and a greater role in public life than their counterparts in agricultural civilizations.

And if you like empires, you should love the Mongols. During the 13th century, they created the world's largest empire to date. And despite their well deserved reputation for brutality, they encouraged commerce and they practiced religious toleration among their subject people.

So why are historians now presenting a more balanced view of pastoral people, emphasizing what they created as well as what they destroyed? Maybe it reflects more current moral thinking that deliberately embraces cultural differences. Perhaps mongol atrocities are somehow less shocking when compared to the genocides of the 20th century or to threats to obliterate entire cities and countries with nuclear weapons.

As you read chapter 11, you might want to think about the ways that our contemporary values and ways of thinking shape our understanding of the past, because they always do.