

Thomas T. Allsen. *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

In *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire*, the late Thomas Allsen takes a topic with which most scholars of the Mongol empire have a general familiarity—the production and exchange of commodities—and introduces readers to a very specific part of that world—pearl exchange—in breathtaking detail. For scholars with an interest in the Mongol Empire, Allsen's take is refreshing. It is well known that the preponderance of scholarship on exchange in the Mongol Empire focuses on the land-locked east-west trade axis of the so-called Silk Roads. While other scholars, notably David Christian, have noted and addressed this, Allsen is one of a relatively small number of scholars who have devoted significant effort to investigating the less discussed but equally important north-south axis of exchange. In so doing, he not only demonstrates to readers the value of such investigations, but also that it is fallacious to separate artificially the east-west and north-south trade axes—in reality, both were part of a single, integrated, pan-continental exchange network and better understood when considered together as parts of a greater whole.

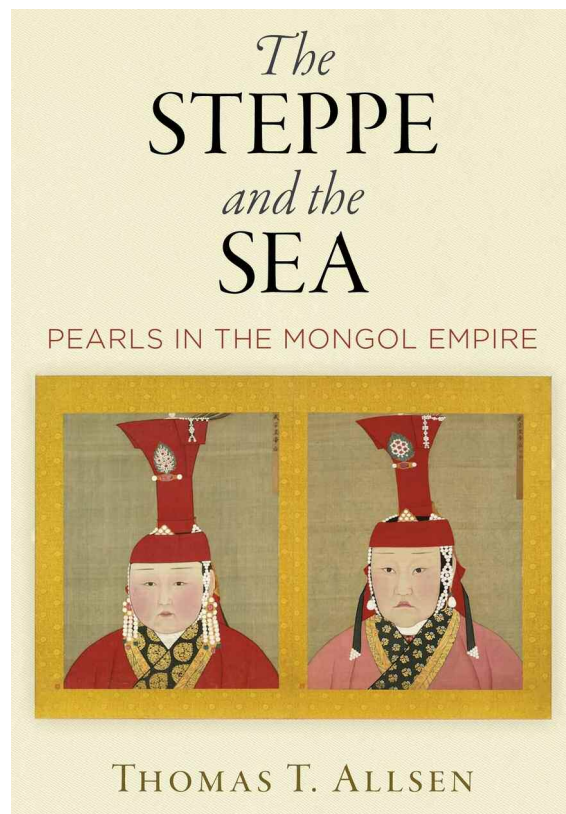
Working with characteristic thoroughness, Allsen divides his book into two parts. The first part, “From the Sea to the Steppe,” focuses on grounding readers in a thorough understanding of the importance of pearls (and luxury goods in general) to Mongolian political culture. This includes an extensive discussion of both the economic and the ideological value of pearls and how closely related those apparently separate aspects are. In this discussion Allsen puts the quality of his scholarship on full display. Similar works which focus on the exchange of commodities often take the value of the goods they discuss for granted—“luxury goods”

are either simply assumed to be inherently valuable, or their value is discussed only briefly as a function of their rarity, difficulty to produce, or some other factor. Social significance is often treated as a separate topic. The problem with this approach is its tendency to overlook the extensive social processes which imbue an item or class of items with economic value and cultural meaning and how these interact and evolve throughout the object's life. As a result, Allsen spends the first two chapters focusing simply on *why* pearls were valuable, and especially prized by elites in the Mongol empire.

His discussion of the cultivation, acquisition, display, and redistribution of pearls, and the cultural-ideological meaning imbued to them by each step in the process, is concise but thorough. Readers are introduced to the various systems for grading pearls *and* the cultural logic that underlies them. Allsen discusses, for example, why saltwater pearls are considered more precious than their freshwater counterparts (opinions were divided on whether saltwater pearls from India or the Persian Gulf were superior), and how shape, color, luster, size, and setting affect their value and ideological baggage. Pearls

were initially subject to various modes of exchange, from plunder to tribute to long-distance trade. But as the Mongols consolidated their empire and their lucrative “booty frontiers” dried up, they began to rely more and more heavily on long distance trade, which Allsen argues was their most productive source of pearls in the long term. The Mongols did not invent the systems of production, valuation, and exchange on which they relied. According to Allsen, these were rather the products of a pan-Eurasian system which stretched across the continent and predated the Mongols by centuries, but to which the Mongols fully subscribed.

The second part of the book, “Comparisons and



Influence,” discusses the circulation of pearls within the Mongol empire with an eye to explaining how participating in the pan-Eurasian pearl trade influenced Mongol elite culture and behavior in the long term. Central to this discussion is how the empire’s active engagement in seaborne trade was interconnected with the overland trade routes the Mongols are better known for overseeing. As alluded to earlier, Allsen argues that it is inappropriate to partition terrestrial and maritime trade activities artificially (124) and doing so has led to another inappropriate overemphasis: the Mongols’ military power over their commercial power. According to Allsen, seaborne trade is one area where the commercial competence of the Mongols far outshines their military strength. The Mongol state had marked limitations as a naval power but also controlled one of the longest sea frontiers in history (154). So it was only through the development of positive relationships with the trading communities already in place that the Mongols could effectively extract the wealth of the sea itself as well as the wealth of places out of their military reach across the sea via trade (such as parts of Southeast Asia). Allsen provides examples to demonstrate that the maintenance of friendly relationships with seaborne merchants was official Mongol policy and not just coincidence. For example, Qubilai issued a prohibition on the forcible relocation or military conscription of merchants that did not apply to artisans or other people whom the Mongols valued but still regularly exercised coercive power over. This indulgence toward merchants in general and maritime merchants in particular, Allsen demonstrates, was partially a product of the Mongol’s concern to keep the pearl trade operating at a high volume as the acquisition of goods like pearls through conquest dried up concomitant with the slowing of Mongol military expansion. Without wisely managed commerce, the Mongol’s prosperity would have ended at the same time as their military expansion. Trade, including maritime trade, allowed them to continue to prosper as they transitioned from conquerors to rulers. It is important for readers to understand, though, that Allsen is *not* advancing the reductionist argument that pearls, and the pearl trade, were what made the Mongol Empire prosperous.

The breadth of Allsen’s research is stunning. Pro-

ducing a book like this one, with relevant source material spanning many centuries and in many languages, would be intimidating to any scholar. Allsen not only successfully confronts this challenge, but he does so with a mastery that leaves those of us with a repertoire of only two or three functional languages (like myself) feel inadequate by comparison. Allsen knowledgeably discusses primary and secondary sources in English, French, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Russian. In translation, his sources include works in Latin, Mongolian, and Uighur, among others, and elegantly weaves information from these disparate sources together to demonstrate his points. This book’s bibliography alone is a gold mine for scholars interested in the economic and commercial history of the Mongol empire. His famously jargon-free, straightforward writing lends itself to a remarkable concision and prevents the book from becoming bloated (168 pages of text, plus endnotes and the bibliography/index). The unadorned style makes the text broadly useful across many disciplines—there is something for everyone, from anthropologist to historian to economist to political scholar, in this book.

That said, the work is not without a few minor issues. Throughout the text, Allsen provides copious examples drawn from a variety of primary sources to support his claims. In most cases, these examples function as intended, strongly buttressing his claims. At other times, though, the connection between his interpretations and the examples cited is unclear. At worst, even when the connection between interpretation and example is intuitively obvious, the evidence presented seems downright weak. That is a notable limitation of this book. For example, on pages 131-132, Allsen discusses the allegedly great lengths Sogdian merchants who managed commercial activity in the Türk empire went to acquire pearls. He states that “Tabarī reports in 751/52 a Sogdian traveling in Oman, and the only plausible reason for his presence there is the acquisition of pearls, the country’s sole export.” He does not provide any additional context to support this claim. It is possible the cited primary source (in Arabic) or secondary source (in French) provide better evidence that pearl acquisition was the goal of the merchant in question, but as a reader with no knowledge of either of those languages I cannot

independently verify this. As presented, the simple assertion that pearl acquisition is the only possible reason a Sogdian might have been traveling in Oman lacks persuasive power. Without the primary source making explicit that this was the reason, the support the example was supposed to lend Allsen's claim collapses. Examples like this are sprinkled throughout the book, and attentive readers will no doubt notice them. Most of Allsen's examples are much stronger, and examples like the one above are decidedly in the minority. But the weak examples are also the ones that tend to stand

out most to critical readers, and unfortunately cast a pall on the better-documented claims and evidence that surround them.

Overall, this is a thoroughly researched book that is well-written and persuasively argued. Although sometimes the examples provided do not function effectively to support the claims they are linked to, these instances are rare. This is a book that should be read and cited by diverse scholars with a wide variety of interests and disciplinary backgrounds for many years to come.

- Samuel Rumschlag

Roman Hautala. *Crusaders, Missionaries and Eurasian Nomads in the 13th - 14th Centuries: A Century of Interaction*. Ed. Victor Spinei. București: Editoru Academiei Române, Brăila: Editura Istros a Muzueului Brăilei "Carol I" 2017. 477 pp.

This anthology reprints seventeen published and prints two unpublished articles by Roman Hautala of the University of Oulu (Finland) and the Marjani Institute of the History of Tatarstan of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Tatarstan. Hautala's research focuses on "Latin sources known only to a narrow circle of researchers of Catholic missionary activity in the medieval East" (245). He makes a convincing case that "the accuracy of the Latin sources is not inferior to the reliability of the Mamluk and Persian sources" (433-34). Many of these sources were written by missionaries from inside the Jochid ulus, and thus have an advantage over the Asian sources written from abroad. Collectively the articles in this anthology enlarge the source base upon which the history of the Jochid ulus can be written, or, in some cases, demonstrate that previous historical views should be revised. Hautala thus make a significant contribution to our knowledge of nomads in the western Eurasian steppe.

The published articles appeared between 2014 and 2017. Eleven articles are in English, eight in Russian (each of which has an English-language summary). Hautala has made no effort to standardize terminology, but specialists are accustomed to such variety. In addition, he cites articles that ap-

pear in the anthology without cross-referencing them; it is up to the reader to realize that they are readily available by turning the page. The articles are organized in two numbered "parts." In the "Table of Contents," the articles are numbered but the numbers do not appear on the title pages of the article. A full-page color photograph of the author introduces the volume (5).

The anthology begins with an introduction by Victor Spinei, the distinguished Romanian specialist on the history of nomads in the Balkans and the editor of the volume and the series in which it appears. Spinei's introduction appears in both English, "A Medievalist with a Sense of Vocation: Roman Hautala" (11-14) (translated by Adrian Poruciuc) and Russian, "Medievist po priznaniuu: Roman Khautala" (15-18). Roman Hautala was born in Petrozavodsk, capital of the Republic of Karelia in the Russian Federation, and educated primarily in Finland and Italy (University of Siena, from which he received his Ph.D.). In addition to teaching, he is an editor, especially for English-language works, of journals in St. Petersburg and Kazan.

In discussing individual chapters, I have tried to avoid repeating conclusions already adduced from previous chapters.

Part I, "Crusaders and Missionaries," contains eleven articles. Chapter 1, "The Teutonic Knights' Military Confrontation with the Cumans during their Stay in Transylvania (1211-1225)" (21-37), examines the mixed experiences of the Teutonic Knights in Hungary. King Andrew II invited them