

To Protect, Serve, and Sell Out: The Mongol Imperial Guard and the Roman Praetorian Guard

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In order to successfully maintain and secure an empire, rulers often sought to establish a personal bodyguard charged primarily with the preservation of their lives. Such situations were particularly true in the cases of the Mongol and Roman Empires, in which elite guards attended their leaders day and night, during peacetime and in open battle. Whereas the Mongol Imperial Guard was created with honest intent and found to be exclusively loyal to its political patron, the khan, the Roman Praetorian Guards were often bribed to sacrifice their own values for the political agendas of the Senate and swayed by their own agendas to oust one emperor for another better suited. This essay compares and contrasts these two imperial corps, their later incarnations, their expectations, and their loyalties and disloyalties within the context of their respective empires and the political patrons they were entrusted to protect. Many differences and similarities can be found between the two sets of soldiers, who thrived in two completely different eras of history and in two completely different parts of the world.

The first incarnation of the Mongol Imperial Guard differed from the Roman Praetorians, who were, from the moment of their origins, seen as an elite unit¹ and an “important arm of the state and a formidable personal military power base.”² The Mongol Imperial Guard under command of Chinggis Qan, established in 1206,³ differed somewhat from that of the Romans. According to Richard A. Gabriel,

¹ Michael Kerrigan, *A Dark History: The Roman Emperors* (New York: Metro Books, 2008), 47.

² Kerrigan, 47.

³ Richard A. Gabriel, *Genghis Khan's Greatest General: Subotai the Valiant* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 37.

“in the early days, the [Mongol Imperial] Guard had comprised only 1,000 men and consisted of the khan’s household, personal servants, and old, trusted comrades from the tribal wars who acted as a battle guard when engaged.”⁴ Chinggis Qan’s elite guards were not only fully capable of protecting his life, but they were also his family members, his cooks, and his personal valets. The mundane nature of the khan’s bodyguard changed dramatically over time, as these attendants’ titles eventually gave way to a designation as “the personal bodyguard of the Khan,”⁵ who made up the “*tungaut*, or Day Guard, *kabtaut*, or Night Guard, and the Quiver Bearers, or battle guard.”⁶ Once the Mongol Imperial Guard had developed into this particular incarnation, they closely resembled the standing Praetorian Guards in Rome under Caesar Augustus and his successors.

Praetorians ranged from “men of lowly origin and of possibly doubtful Latinity and Romanization to sons of the municipal middle classes who possessed much higher standards of culture and education.”⁷ Such similarities can be seen among the Mongol Imperial Guard under Möngke Qan, who also “drew upon his guard and that of his father for lower echelon personnel of non-Mongol origin.”⁸ In some respects, the makeup of the Praetorians nearly mirrored that of the Imperial Guard, with foreigners and commoners—and in the case of the Mongols, prisoners—mixed heavily with the elite from the more prominent rungs of society. Perhaps this recruitment from the lower echelon was also strategic, as soldiers with fewer accolades and less clout might be less likely to plan a *coup d’état* for control of the empire. Both sets of soldiers were indeed qualified for the positions they came to hold, and circumstances and internal structure eventually determined their ultimate allegiances—whether to their rulers, to their policymakers, or to themselves.

⁴ Gabriel, 37

⁵ Gabriel, 37.

⁶ Gabriel, 37.

⁷ William G. Sinnigen, “The Roman Secret Service,” *The Classical Journal* 57, no. 2 (1961): 65-72.

⁸ Thomas T. Allsen, “Guard and Government in the Reign of the Grand Qan Möngke,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1986): 495-521.

Upon their initial establishment under Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C.E., the Praetorian Guard remained loyal to its emperor, just as the original Imperial Guard of Chinggis Qan did in 1206 C.E. Thomas Allsen points out that Möngke Qan “simply drew upon his own and his father’s *kešigs* for key personnel.”⁹ Due process for recruitment worked similarly in ancient Rome, when Emperor Vespasian named his son Titus as his prefect, or head of the Praetorian Guard. Both instances can be seen as strategic ways of choosing one’s personal guard in order to eliminate the chances of disloyalty. This idea leads into the primary argument of this paper, which seeks to distinguish the loyalty of the Mongol Imperial Guard from the treacherous tendencies of its Roman counterpart.

Though the Roman and Mongolian Guards paralleled one another in many ways, they also differed significantly in others. While the Praetorians consisted of elite soldiers and Roman citizens elected to the title of prefect, the Imperial Guard claimed a heavy contingent of prisoners, as “most of the hostages sent to the Mongols served as guards.”¹⁰ In Ch’i-ch’ing Hsiao’s book, he reports that Rashid al-Din described one such occurrence, in which “they (the Korean court) removed *turqaqs* and *keziktens* without number from the land of Solanqa, and sent them to Qa’an.”¹¹ Surely, the land of Solanqa refers to Korea, and the terms *turqaqs* and *keziktens* probably translate to prisoners or perhaps vagabonds—people considered the dregs of Korean society who had done nothing to benefit the Korean state. Later in the same section Hsiao writes that Hulegu, grandson of Chinggis, also chose the sons of Armenian and Georgian princes and placed them in his Persian court as guards.¹² This evidence fails to point towards the loyalty of the Imperial Guard, but it does perhaps suggest a forced appointment to the position—namely, as foreigners conscripted into the protection of the Mongol emperors under punishment of possible death. In the case of the Armenian and Georgian princes taken from their fathers, who were

⁹ Allsen, 507.

¹⁰ Ch’i-ch’ing Hsiao, *The Military Establishment of the Yuan Dynasty* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 149.

¹¹ Hsiao, 150.

¹² Hsiao, 150.

surely kings subjugated by the Il-khanate, their sons' appointment to the Imperial Guard as hostages could have been used to ensure these subject kings' good behavior. Perhaps if the subject kings challenged or displeased the Mongol rulers in any way, their sons would be put to death as a direct result of their actions. In a sense, even in this particular case, the foreigners appointed to the Imperial Guard could be seen as loyal to the cause of protecting their khan's life—just in a different circumstance than those originally loyal to Chinggis Qan.

The term *keshig* is often associated with the Mongol Imperial Guard. As Ch'i-ch'ing Hsiao writes in his book on the establishment of the Yuan military, “[*k*]eshig is a Mongolian word from the Turkish *kāzik*,”¹³ and that in “Yuan sources it was used to denote the Imperial Guard created by Činggis.”¹⁴ Of all of his soldiers, “Chinggis Khan expected absolute obedience to his commands.”¹⁵ Upon the Imperial Guard's official establishment in 1206, Chinggis reorganized his own army to improve its ability to defeat armies larger than itself.¹⁶ The *keshig* had apparently undergone at least two incarnations under the reign of Chinggis, and possibly more under the control of his successors—particularly in the case of Hulegu, as mentioned earlier. In a broader view, the *keshig* “was normally composed of the sons and relatives of Mongolian noblemen and military commanders, but included as well individuals of different social and ethnic backgrounds who possessed some talent or skill useful to an aspiring prince.”¹⁷ As the Mongol Imperial Guard became “the home of the best, brightest, and most promising of the Mongol army's military commanders and staff officers,”¹⁸ nearly the same can be said of the Praetorian Guard,

¹³ Hsiao, 148.

¹⁴ Hsiao, 148.

¹⁵ Timothy May, “The Training of an Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period,” *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 3 (2006): 633.

¹⁶ Gabriel, 37.

¹⁷ Allsen, 507.

¹⁸ Gabriel, 40.

its members “perfectly integrated into the Roman military establishment by virtue of their recruitment, careers, and functions.”¹⁹

Another difference between the two imperial corps is that the Mongol Imperial Guard was never run by a Republican Senate, as the Roman Praetorian Guard was. The Roman emperors were in sole control of ruling the Roman Empire, but they usually consulted the Senate on important decisions. There may have been some sort of political body performing actions such as these under the Mongol Empire, especially in the case of the Yuan Dynasty, but even if such a body existed, its members certainly respected the decisions of their khan without planning a political coup of some sort.

Another difference between the two can be found in their personal requirements and expectations. While the Praetorian Guard was stationed in Rome²⁰ on a permanent basis under direct command of the emperor, the Mongol Imperial Guard was expected to learn to operate siege machinery on the battlefield and took “its place next to the Great Khan in the center of the line, to be employed at his command.”²¹ Even in battlefield situations when the Roman emperor was present, the Praetorians never left his side, allowing the infantry, cavalry, and auxiliary units to resolve the conflict.

The same level of loyalty exhibited by the Mongol Imperial Guard toward the khan was not usually felt by the Roman Praetorians toward their emperor. In one instance, Emperor Gaius Caligula, the great-great grandson of Augustus—the man who created the Praetorians—was murdered by them, with “the most prominent role being given to Cassius Chaerea, a tribune of the Praetorian Guard.”²² In this particular case, Chaerea was seen as a man “motivated by a profound commitment to Republican liberties,”²³ and as one who, despite being “very manly in personal tastes, had a weak, high-pitched,

¹⁹ Sinnigen, 66.

²⁰ Marjorie & C.H.B. Quennell, *Everyday Life in Roman and Anglo-Saxon Times* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1959), 88.

²¹ Gabriel, 38.

²² Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 161.

²³ Barrett, 161.

voice, that sounded effeminate.”²⁴ Chaerea was repeatedly mocked by Caligula, who “called him *gynnis* (‘lass’).”²⁵ Therefore, the mission of the Praetorian tribune was sparked by his loyalty to the Senate or his ideals of Republican liberty as well as his personal grudge against Caligula. According to author Anthony Barrett, in other scenarios, “behind the military figures there lurked idealistic or ambitious senators.”²⁶ In further examples, the Praetorian Guard proclaimed Claudius, Caligula’s uncle, emperor without the consent of the Senate,²⁷ deserted Nero when riots took to the streets of Rome,²⁸ and murdered Emperor Pertinax before selling the title of emperor to the highest bidder.²⁹ Nothing even resembling this sort of disloyalty of an imperial bodyguard toward its leader appears in the history of the Mongol Empire.

While Emperor Caligula and subsequent rulers in his line were either slain or deserted by their Praetorian Guards, the elite soldiers under Chinggis Qan can be seen as just as loyal as his original “Four Dogs,” whom he trusted with his life. Perhaps the same can be said for a generalized audience of Mongols and Romans, but history seems to point out that the latter were, as a whole, a more egocentric people. Ever since the Roman Empire was first established, its people were subjected to exhibitions of torture, execution, and bloody gladiatorial games—all for the sake of spectacle. As the average Roman of the time regularly witnessed the spilling of blood in the arena during all-day festivities, it seems a bit more likely that the Praetorian Guard, stationed in Rome and surely having witnessed such indifferent slayings, may have been a military corps far less averse to shedding blood for personal gain than the Mongol Imperial Guard. With a more skewed view of right and wrong, the Romans as a whole must be seen as a people much less willing to preserve life. For the Mongol Empire to have become what it was, people of course had to die along the way. At times during his reign, Chinggis Qan established his

²⁴ Barrett, 161.

²⁵ Barrett, 161.

²⁶ Barrett, 161.

²⁷ Kerrigan, 70.

²⁸ Kerrigan, 109.

²⁹ Kerrigan, 189.

regimes with religious tolerance in mind, while part of Roman blood sport was watching innocent Christians be devoured by starved lions.

It is probable that the Mongol Imperial Guard viewed some of the khans with contempt, but in the slaying of Roman emperor Caligula, the first instance in which the Praetorian Guard betrayed its ruler, certain patterns were perhaps developed in the Roman psyche, passing down from one generation of Praetorians to the next. These patterns refer to the ousting of one emperor for a newer, better, wealthier, or more popular one. It also seems most definite that the Mongol Imperial Guard was scarcely familiar with the Roman Empire's administrative tactics, or the perhaps the Roman Empire in general. This conclusion can be drawn simply because the Mongol Imperial Guard never developed, even in the Yuan state, such untrustworthy patterns of betrayal exhibited in the Praetorian Guard.

The Mongol Imperial Guard not only mirrored the more loyal elements of the Praetorians, but they also mirrored those of the Chinese dynasties into which they later came to be incorporated. According to Hsiao, "each dynasty in Chinese history—native or conquest—strove to keep large numbers of elite troops directly under the central government as Imperial Guards."³⁰ The conquest element of the quotation surely alludes, at least in part, to the Mongol Yuan establishment in China. The most interesting fact here is that the Imperial Guard established by Chinggis Qan was able to continue to flourish centuries later in Kubilai's Yuan China, thanks in part to it being such an integral aspect to both the histories of the Mongols and the Chinese. This commonality surely meant a smooth transition into Yuan establishment, with the conquered and incorporated Chinese already familiar with the idea of an Imperial Guard.

Before Mongol integration, the Chinese Imperial Guard more closely resembled the often treacherous Praetorian Guard. In Hsiao's book, he writes that the early Chinese "guard corps, if not well controlled, tended to become mutinous praetorian cohorts, their actions sometimes resulting in a

³⁰ Hsiao, 33.

change of emperors.”³¹ This passage could very well be taken out of the context of *The Military Establishment of the Yuan Dynasty* and placed in a text on Roman history. The Chinese had faced such treacherous acts in the dynastic lines, but this pattern of betrayal had apparently vanished almost completely once Kubilai had established the Yuan. The word praetorian, used surprisingly often in Hsiao’s passage when describing Chinese elite guards, comes from the Latin word *praetor*, a term referring to a commanding field general recruited to be an elite guard by the Roman emperors. The passage uses the words praetorian and emperor, which is a curious and interesting finding in itself, especially when comparing the Roman guards and the Chinese guards which were later incorporated into the Mongol Imperial Guard.

In order to properly compare the Praetorian Guard and the Imperial Guard, the latter must be categorized into their two different forms. Hsiao gives some insights on these two forms, and how they differed from one another. He writes that “the system (*keshig*) would appear to have evolved from the *nököd* (sing. *nökör*) or ‘companions’ of the Mongolian clan-tribal chieftains.”³² In the system he speaks of, the incarnation taken by the Imperial Guard around the turn of the thirteenth century,³³ the *keshig*, perhaps not even referred to by this particular title by the year 1200, had already been transformed into a more imperial form under the later khans in Chinggis’ line—namely, under Kubilai in his establishment of Yuan China. The *nököd*, according to Hsiao, seems to refer to the original form of the Guard under Chinggis Qan, in which they “served as bodyguards for their masters and performed household services for him.”³⁴ This passage undoubtedly refers to the original bodyguard. The *nököd* and the *keshig* can further be distinguished from one another as the original guard under Chinggis and the corps incorporated into the Chinese Imperial Guard in Kubilai’s Yuan Empire.

³¹ Hsiao, 33.

³² Hsiao, 34.

³³ Hsiao, 34.

³⁴ Hsiao, 34.

Whether in the original incarnation under Chinggis Qan or the later one under Kubilai, the Mongol Imperial Guard never performed such criminal and conspiring acts that the Roman Praetorians did under Caligula, Nero, and Pertinax. Yet another Praetorian, Lucius Aelius Sejanus, under the rule of Tiberius, strove for absolute power over the emperor even though he was still seen as “a functionary.”³⁵ This status failed to stop him from “embarking on a series of treason trials, aimed at the most important families in the Roman establishment,” including that of Tiberius, Caligula’s grandfather. “The proceedings,” as Michael Kerrigan writes, “were a cynical sham, with the prosecutions based in the spurious ‘evidence’ of his paid informers; the intention was to neutralize any opposition to Sejanus’ rise.”³⁶ Sejanus had not committed any political murders, but he had surely profited from them. Instances of Praetorian betrayal continually show up in Roman sources, while none appear in those on the steppe Mongol or Yuan Empire, more than likely due to the latter’s probable purge of the untrustworthy Guards of the Chinese Song Dynasty, mentioned earlier in this paper. Some of the Roman emperors covered in this topic executed their share of innocents and performed acts considered to be tyrannical during their reigns, and this behavior perhaps has something to do with the difference in loyalties between the Imperial Guard and the Praetorians. The Mongols, even upon incorporation with the Chinese, seemed a much more disciplined people as a whole, retaining their virtues of honor. Chinggis Qan was a much respected man long after his reign over the Mongol Empire ended, and the loyalties of the later form of Imperial Guard speak to their reverence for the accomplishments of Chinggis and the rest of their ancestors.

In both the Mongol and Roman Empires, the establishment of a personal bodyguard was a strategic form of protecting the man deemed the most important in the empire. Chinggis Qan’s Guard was formed from the members of his household and his oldest, most trusted comrades. Those of Caesar Augustus were composed of field commanders and generals with personal religious and political

³⁵ Kerrigan, 48.

³⁶ Kerrigan, 49.

affiliations. Ideally, the Praetorian Guard should have been the backbone of the Roman emperor, seeing to his safety in every situation presented. Inadequate leaders, politics, and personal grudges came into play in the ruling of the Roman Empire, while the Mongols led a simpler life, protecting leaders deemed more competent and able to better control Mongol assets. Many factors must be considered when discussing the loyalties of the Imperial Guard and the disloyalties of the Praetorians. The two prominent empires were run by completely different men under an entirely different set of circumstances, and the Mongol Imperial Guard and the Roman Praetorian Guard were founded to perform the same immediate functions for their emperors—even if the outcomes were not always the same.

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