

DOC 8

3. KARAKORUM: BUILDING A MONGOL CAPITAL

[Rashid al-Din (ca. 1247–1317) was a Persian historian and the author of a massive world history, from which the following passage comes. Like Juvaini, Rashid served the Mongols as a high official. Ogedei, the subject of this reading, was the son of Chinggis Khan and succeeded his father as Great Khan, 1229–1241.]

During the seven years [between 1234/35 and 1240/41] . . . [Ogedei] enjoyed life and amused himself. He moved from summer to winter camp and vice versa, serene and happy, and took permanent delight in beautiful women and moonfaced enchantresses.

At every opportunity, he allowed his sublime thoughts to overflow lavishly into the most just and charitable of good deeds, into the eradication of injustice and enmity, into the development of cities and districts, as well as into the construction of various buildings. He never neglected any measure designed to strengthen the framework of peace, and to lay the foundations of prosperity. In earlier years, he had already brought with him from China various craftsmen and masters skilled in the arts. Therefore in his main camp ('yurt') in Karakorum, where he contentedly resided most of the time, he now had erected his palace with a very high base and columns as befits the lofty thoughts of such a ruler. Each side of the palace was an arrow-shot long. In the centre, a sumptuous high pavilion ('kiosk') was built; the building was handsomely decorated with paintings and representations, and it was called *qarshi* [Mongolian = Palace]. The Khan designated it his sublime residence. [Thereafter] the order was put out, that each of his brothers, sons and the other princes residing close to him should build a handsome house near the palace. Everybody obeyed the order. When these buildings were completed and snuggled one against the other they formed a whole settlement. [Furthermore the Great Khan] ordered that experienced goldsmiths should make for the drinking house a centerpiece of gold and silver in the shape of animals such as elephants, tigers, horses, and the like. They were set up, together with large drinking vessels which were filled with wine and fermented mare's milk (*qumys*). In front of each figure a silver basin was set up: from the orifices of these figures wine and mare's milk poured into the basins.

[Once, the ruler] asked: 'Which is the best city on earth?' The reply was: 'Baghdad.' He therefore had a great city built on the banks of the river Orkhon, and he called it Karakorum.