

DEFINITION OF CRISIS

The term crisis defies a precise definition and is often used as synonym for collapse, decline, disaster, dissolution, and fragility. It has limited value as an analytical category. In recent historical research, crisis is referred to as a perception phenomenon and a social construction, even by non-constructivists. This leads to the recommendation to understand crisis more as an observable concept rather than as an analytical category. A survey of cultural anthropology literature revealed an even clearer picture. The term is neither established nor is it used in studies on transformation and cultural change. Moreover, it is deeply rooted in Western-Christian thought, and its global application should be considered carefully for this reason.

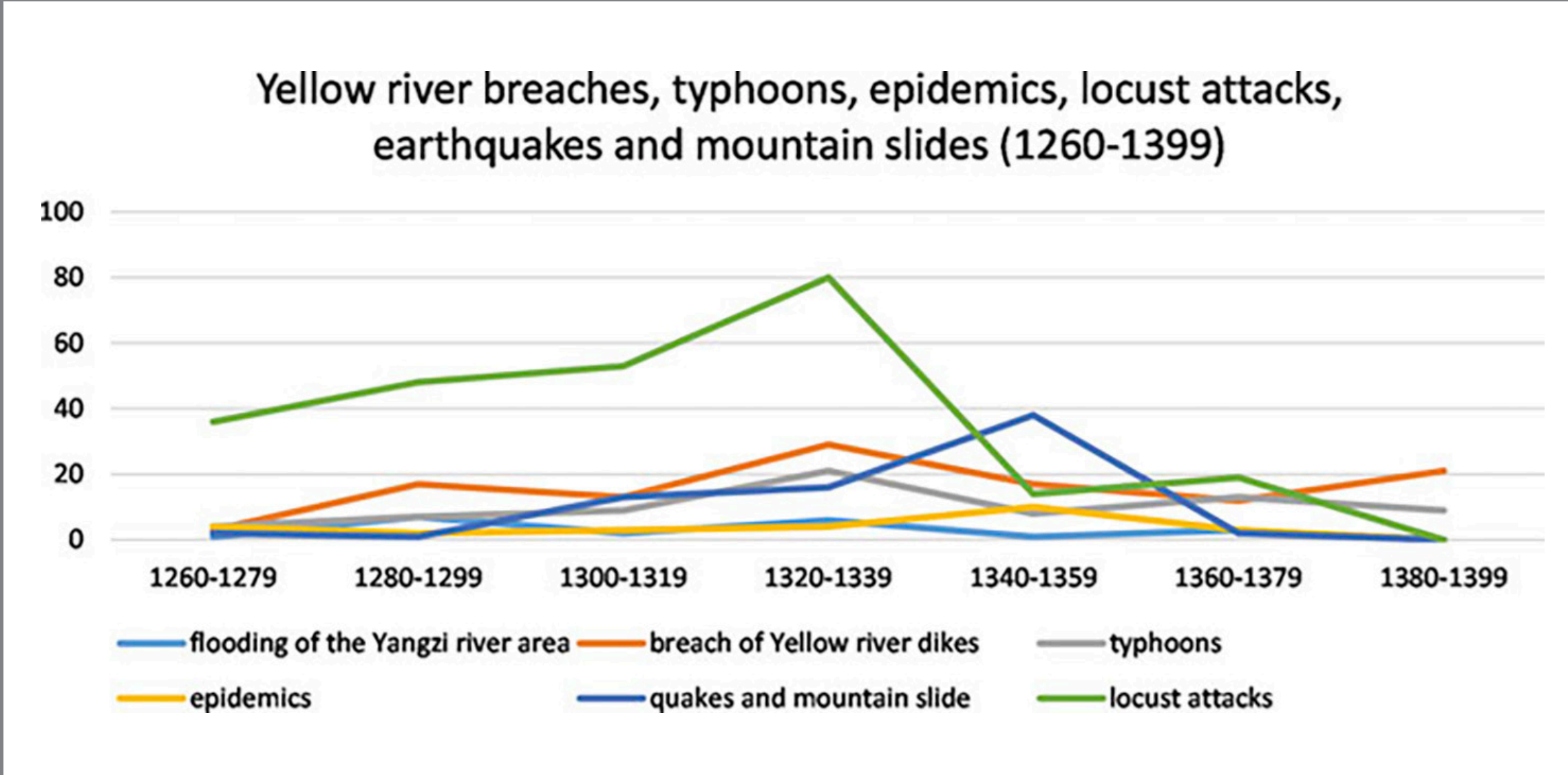
In this analysis it is used as an umbrella term for serious threats to social order, whether caused by natural events or human actions. Crises are a time of stress, from the very personal level to the state level.



CHINGGISID CRISIS

Chinggisid crisis spans the decades from the 1330s to the 1370s. The ingredients of the crisis are not only the difficulties inherent in the system of government, such as succession disputes, distributive struggles among the elites and among the Chinggisids, patronage, and corruption. These fault lines have accompanied the Mongol Empire and the Yuan Dynasty from the beginning. The disputes between Khubilai Khan (r. 1260/64-1294) and his successors with Arigh Böke and Qaidu continued into the first decade of the 14th century, which created civil war-like conditions in the north of the Yuan Empire. They certainly hampered economic activity on the Mongolian Plateau and led to the loss of population. These internal disputes and the struggle of diverse elites for influence may have led to a crisis of legitimacy and identity, as well as difficulties in mitigating the effects of natural disasters. But in addition to that pandemics, famines, inflation, and a currency problem caused by the replacement of copper coinage with paper money, floods, wars, social upheavals, insecure overland routes, and supply problems characterize these decades.

With natural disasters, wars, diseases, and economic turmoil, all the ingredients for a polycrisis or perfect storm are on the table, as if the four horsemen of the apocalypse have arrived.



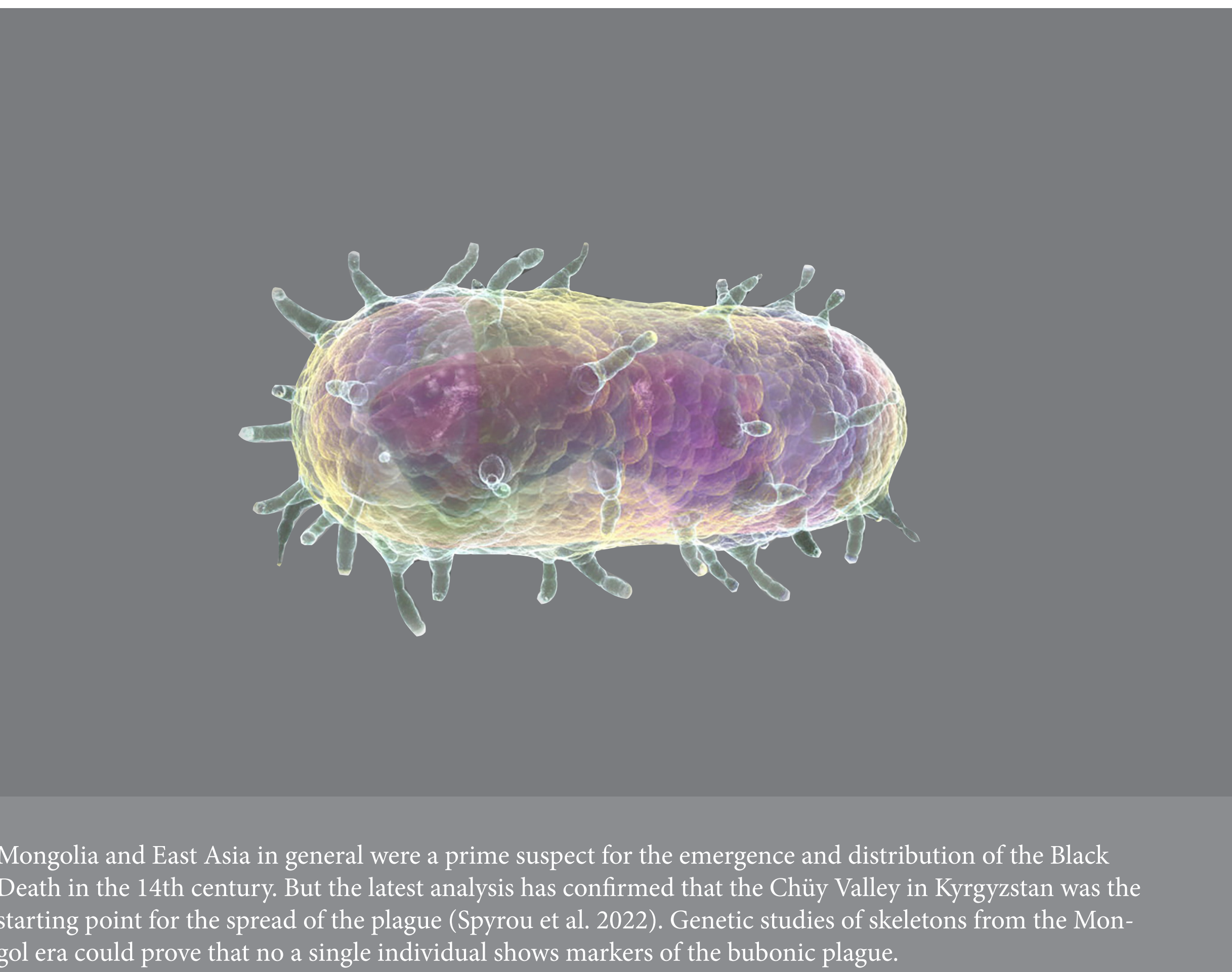
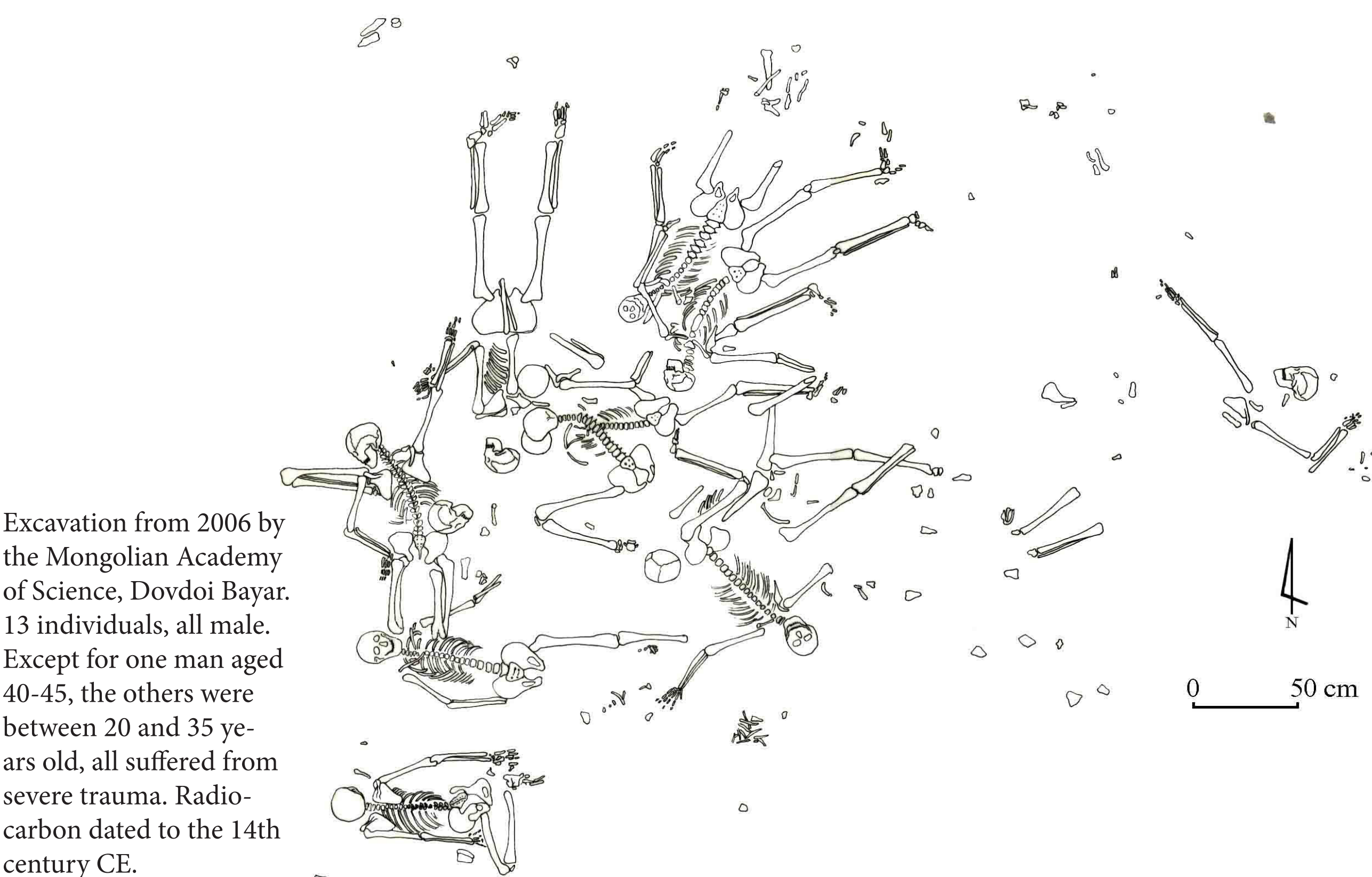
Tana Li, The Mongol Yuan Dynasty and the Climate, 1260–1360. In: Martin Bauch and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds.), The Crisis of the 14th Century Teleconnections between Environmental and Societal Change? Das Mittelalter. Perspektiven mediävistischer Forschung. Beihefte 13. Berlin, De Gruyter 2020, 153–168; 165 Fig. 1.

HOW CAN ARCHAEOLOGY CONTRIBUTE TO THE ONGOING DEBATE ABOUT THE CHINGGISID CRISIS (1330-1370)?

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CRITERIA FOR CRISIS

FIVE INTERRELATED TOPICS

- 1) Armed conflict: war, turmoil, civil upheaval
- 2) Economic decline: demise of productivity, shortages, failed harvest, significant loss of herd animals, inflation
- 3) Legitimacy
- 4) Disease: plagues and epidemics
- 5) Natural disasters and climate change



House floor in Karakorum. Artifacts and coins spread over a floor of an excavated building in the center of Karakorum, the first capital of the Mongol Empire. The large container was filled with tools and valuables. It was as if the house had been deserted in the blink of an eye.

CONCLUSION

All the individual observations taken do not necessarily point to a singular, cohesive narrative of decline or collapse. The traces of violent conflict and the desire for additional legitimization found are within the range of normal human behavior and do not indicate anything out of the ordinary. Thus, archaeology contributes to the debate by providing physical evidence but also by cautioning against oversimplified interpretations of complex historical processes.



Turtle with inscription, During the reign of the last emperor of the Yuan dynasty the good fortune was endangered. Karakorum and the Orkhon Valley were an important source of good fortune (Allsen 2023, 452). Toghon Temür, the last Khan of the Yuan dynasty, tried to tap this source. He rebuilt from 1342–1346 the Buddhist Pagoda, named it "Pavilion of the Rising Yuan", and erected for the first time an inscription stele in front of the monumental temple on the back of a turtle (Cleaves 1952; Reichert 2021). The refurbishment of the temple by imperial decree was a huge investment at a time of crisis and a strong commitment from the emperor to the importance of the city of Karakorum.

PUBLICATION

Jan Bemann, Signs of the time: The Chinggisid Crisis and its Archaeological Evidence on the Mongolian Plateau. In: Ishayahu Landa, Morris Rossabi (eds.), Decline and Legacy of Chinggis Khan's Empire. Fourteenth Century Eurasia in Transformation (Edinburgh University Press 2025, in press).

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