

GENGHIS KHAN AND THE MONGOL EMPIRE

GENGHIS KHAN UNITED MONGOL TRIBES BEHIND HIM AND BEGAN CONQUERING LAND IN CHINA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND EUROPE. HIS CONQUESTS LED TO AN EMPIRE FAR LARGER THAN THOSE OF ROME OR ALEXANDER THE GREAT.

About 1162, the wife of a minor Mongol tribal leader gave birth to a male child. The boy's father named his son Temujin after a brave chieftain he had just captured in battle. We know Temujin today as Genghis Khan.

The Mongols were nomadic horsemen and herders, who lived in tents on the Asian steppe. A dry grassy plain, the steppe extended from Eastern Europe to China. Like all Mongol boys, Temujin learned early to shoot a bow and arrow while riding horseback. This skill was essential for hunting but also for raiding enemy tribes and foreign settlements to steal goods and take prisoners.

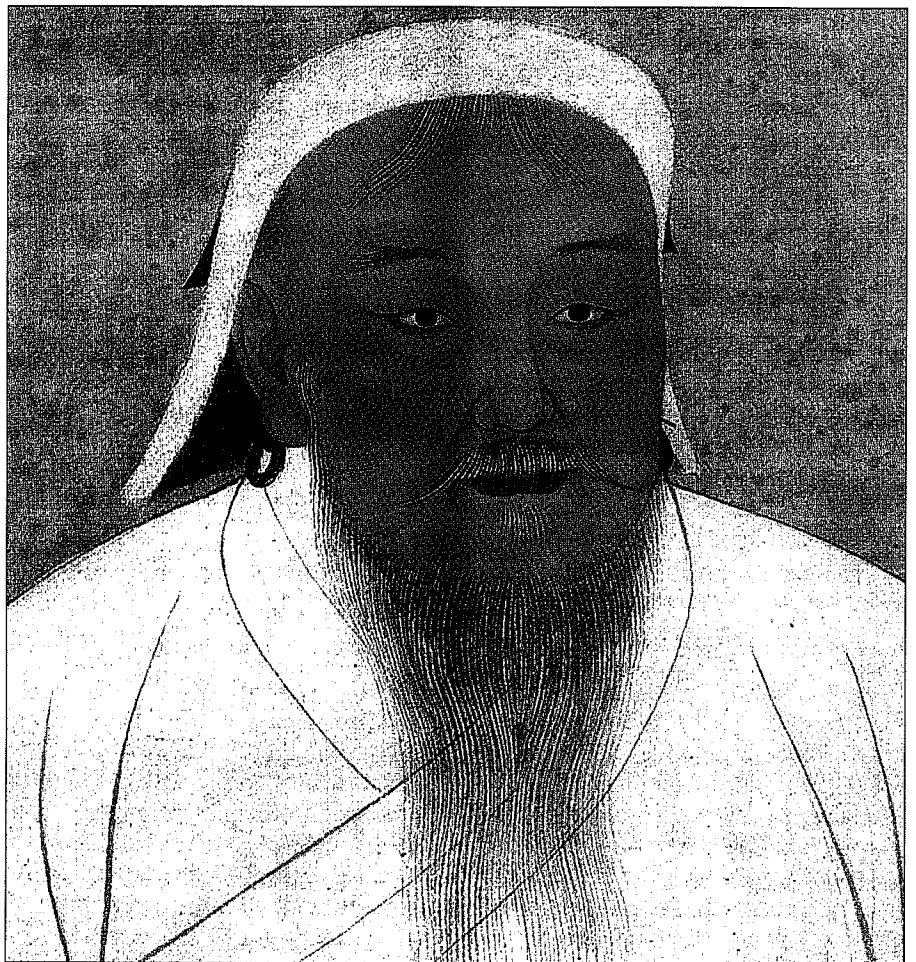
Around the time of Temujin's birth, the Jin Empire in northeast China and its Tartar allies defeated a raiding Mongol army. (The Tartars were another nomadic people from Central Asia.) The Jin victors forced the Mongols to pay annual tribute (money and valuable goods) while also taking some as slaves.

The defeat caused humiliation, poverty, and fighting among the Mongol tribes. When Temujin was 9, some Tartars invited his father for a feast and poisoned him.

At age 14, Temujin and his younger brothers murdered an older half-brother who bragged that he, not Temujin, would replace their father as tribal chief. The Mongols respected him for the killing, believing it showed he was a strong leader who would use any means to win.

At 18, Temujin married a woman from a tribe of Turk people. When she was kidnapped by raiders, he assembled a band of followers, attacked the raiders' camp, and rescued his wife. For the first time, Temujin tasted victory on the battlefield.

Over the next 25 years, Temujin attracted warriors in a quest to unify the



Genghis Khan (c. 1162-1227) united the Mongol tribes, led his armies to victory, and established the largest continuous land empire in history.

Mongols under his command. To unite the Mongols, he had to fight and defeat rival Mongol tribes, which then pledged their loyalty to him. While only in his 20s, Temujin was elected khan (king) of his growing confederation of tribes.

Temujin then led a successful war against the Tartars who had killed his father. Revenge proved to be a strong motivating force throughout his life. After defeating the Tartars, Temujin called an assembly of all the Mongol tribes.

At the assembly in 1206, the tribes elected Temujin as Genghis Khan (more accurately, Chinggis Qahan), the "Fierce King." Just in his mid-40s, he had risen to be the supreme leader of the Mongols. But he had even greater ambitions.

Preparing for World Conquest

The Mongols believed in an all-powerful god in the blue sky above (called Eternal Heaven). Their religion did not have a formal priesthood, holy book, or temples. Shamans (holy men) communicated with the spirits of nature, interpreted visions, and predicted the future.

When Temujin was elected Genghis Khan, a powerful shaman had a vision of the world ruled by a blue wolf who had come from the Eternal Heaven. The shaman interpreted this to mean that Genghis Khan and his family were given a divine mission to conquer and rule wherever the blue sky extended.

Genghis Khan also had practical reasons for conquering peoples beyond

the Mongol homeland. He wanted to improve the economic conditions of his nomadic people by taking more treasure from settled peoples. He also realized the value of controlling trade routes from distant lands.

In the past, many Mongol khans had led armies, but Genghis Khan radically changed the way his army was organized. He broke his army into units of 10, 100, 1,000, and 10,000 men. He chose his commanders based on merit, rather than tribal leadership.

Most important, Genghis Khan mixed members of different tribes within military units. His idea was to shift the loyalty of the soldiers, and the Mongol people, from their tribes to him.

Genghis Khan proclaimed laws for the Mongols. Most of his laws related to military discipline, the hunt, and social order. Here is one example:

A horse thief must compensate the owner with 10 horses. If he cannot provide the horses, he must turn over his children. If he has no children, he is to be executed.

In addition, the new Mongol leader established a court system with a chief judge to decide disputes among the Mongols, try criminals, and apportion the spoils of war fairly. He also authorized making Mongolian a written language, which was needed for record keeping. Confident of his divine origins and mission, Genghis Khan declared that only his sons and their descendants could be elected khans in the future.

Conquering Northern China

In 1209, Genghis Khan attacked Xia, an independent state in northwest China. He easily defeated the Xia Chinese army, but could not take the capital. This was the first Mongol attempt to besiege a fortified city. Lacking siege weapons, he failed to capture it.

As winter approached, Genghis Khan negotiated a treaty that required Xia to pay tribute and pledge allegiance to him. He then withdrew to Mongolia.

Two years later, Genghis Khan invaded the Chinese Jin Empire east of Xia. Jin had a long history of humiliating and oppressing the Mongols. Genghis Khan's army slaughtered many and looted their villages.

The Mongols blockaded the Jin

capital, which forced the emperor to agree to a peace treaty that required tribute and a princess for Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan then took his army back home.

When the Jin emperor violated the terms of the treaty, Genghis Khan returned and again besieged the capital. The starving city population finally surrendered, and the Mongols massacred residents and looted the city.

The Mongol Empire at its peak facilitated the movement of foreigners around the empire. They brought with them new ideas, styles of art, scientific knowledge, political skills, and religions.

When Genghis Khan went back to Mongolia, he left his generals in charge of the Jin. For the first time, the Mongols faced the task of governing a conquered settled people. Genghis Khan recruited foreign experts as occupation administrators. Their main job was to collect taxes and draft troops for the Mongol army.

Invading the Muslim World

In 1218, Genghis Khan sent representatives to the Muslim Khwarazm Empire in Central Asia to negotiate access to trade routes through its territory. After securing a treaty with the shah (emperor), the Mongol leader sent a caravan of about 100 merchants to Khwarazm to begin trading.

When the merchants reached the city of Otrar, the governor accused them of spying, and with the permission of the shah, he executed all but one and seized their goods. Genghis Khan was enraged, but sent a diplomat to convince the shah to punish the governor and return the goods.

The shah ordered the diplomat killed. This turned out to be a catastrophic mistake and a major turning point in world history.

Genghis Khan assembled an army of about 200,000, consisting of infantry, cavalry, and Chinese experts on attacking city fortifications. In 1219, he and his four sons led the Mongol invasion of the Muslim world.

The Mongol army, outnumbered by the shah's forces, marched to Otrar where the merchants had been executed. After defeating the shah's army outside the city, Genghis Khan besieged it for five months. When Otrar fell, the Mongols massacred the entire population.

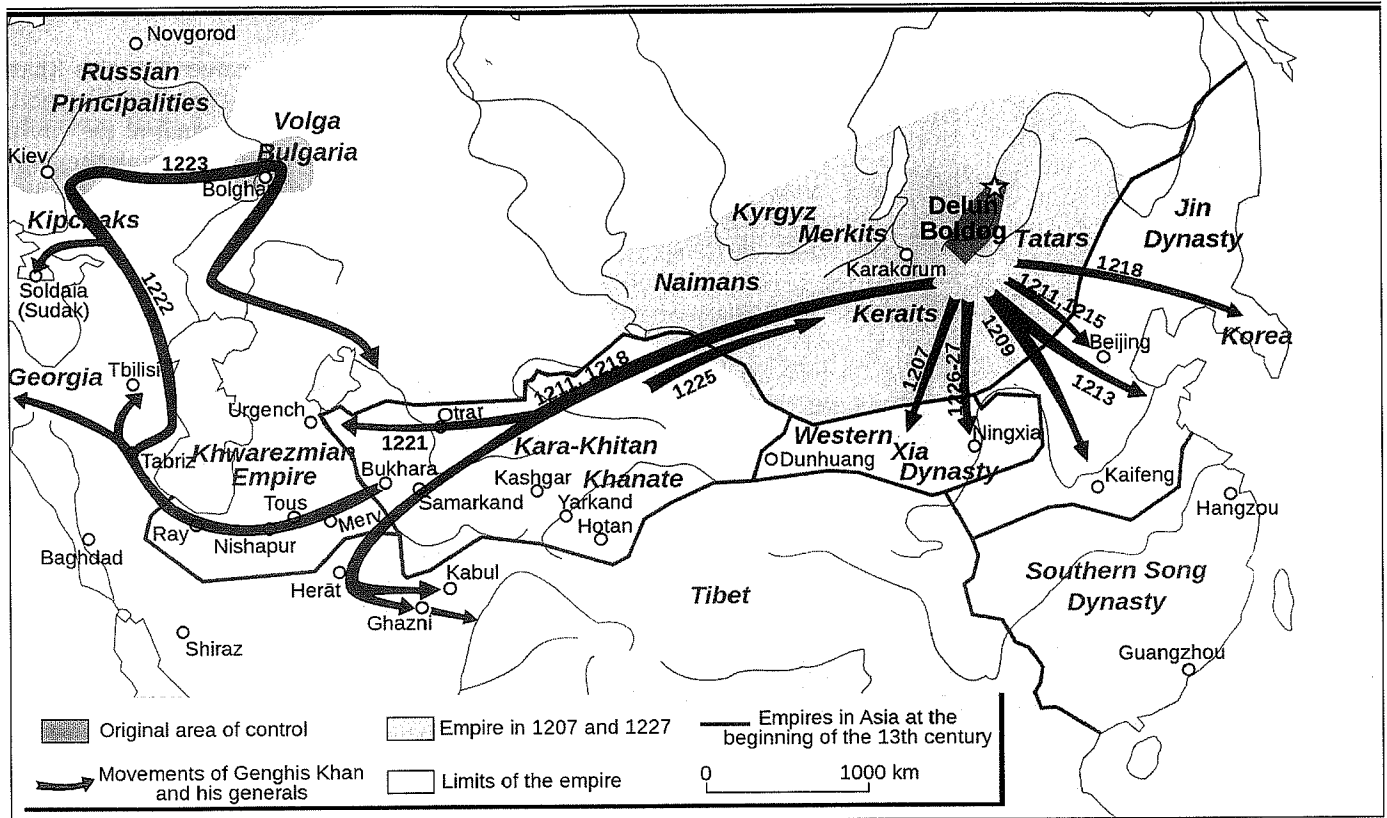
From Otrar, Genghis Khan advanced toward the Khwarazm capital of Samarkand. Along the way, he destroyed farms and irrigation systems, demolished city defenses with catapults, and slaughtered any who resisted. One survivor said, "They came, they sapped [struck], they burnt, they slew, they plundered, and they departed." From this invasion, the Mongols gained their reputation for lightning-fast cavalry attacks with bows and arrows, sabers, and spears.

To reduce his own casualties, Genghis Khan deliberately used the fear of Mongol terror to convince many enemy soldiers and civilians to surrender. As a general rule, the Mongols did not kill those in a city who surrendered without a fight. They were usually taken to safety outside the city walls. Then the Mongols butchered any remaining defenders, looted the city, and set it afire.

Many of those who surrendered were still not entirely safe. Genghis Khan forced young men to march in front of his army as human shields to the next city. He also sent captured craftsmen and other "useful people" to work in Mongolia and other parts of his growing empire.

The shah unwisely divided his army to defend his cities. In the spring of 1220, Genghis Khan captured and sacked Samarkand. He then invaded parts of Afghanistan, Persia, and India.

Meanwhile, Genghis Khan sent two generals to pursue the fleeing shah. The shah apparently died of natural causes on an island in the Caspian Sea. But the generals kept going until they reached Russia and defeated Christian forces there. This army, called "The Golden



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Major conquests and movements of Genghis Khan and his generals during his lifetime.

Horde,” established the first Mongol foothold in Europe.

Genghis Khan returned to Mongolia in 1224. He left behind generals and civilian administrators to govern in his name. The administrators were usually educated Chinese and other foreigners experienced in government affairs. Their job was to restore the war-torn economy, re-open trade routes, and collect taxes.

At first, the Mongols saw little value in farms or farmers, preferring to raid them and use the land as pastures for their horses and other livestock. But Genghis Khan began to see that taxing farmers was a steadier source of wealth. He also grew to appreciate the cultural advances of the people he had conquered and readily adopted their ideas and technology.

Genghis Khan had no interest in imposing his Eternal Heaven belief on the Muslims or any other religious group. “All religions must be treated with deference and not discriminated against,” said one of his laws. His policy of toleration existed as long as there was no religious threat to Mongol rule. This also gained him support among religious leaders in conquered lands.

One thing that Genghis Khan would not tolerate was rebellion. After a son-in-law was killed fighting a rebellious city, the Fierce King directed his youngest son to exterminate every living thing within its walls, including dogs and cats.

The Mongol Empire

In 1227, Genghis Khan died of natural causes while crushing a rebellion by the Chinese Xia state. In his will, he called for his sons to continue his divine mission of Mongol conquests.

Genghis Khan had earlier named his third son, Ogedei, as his successor. Ogedei took the title Great Khan. He brought engineers and craftsmen from all over the empire to start building a capital city in Mongolia. He also expanded the courier system created by Genghis Khan that speeded communication throughout the empire.

Ogedei ended the Jin dynasty in northern China and ordered the Golden Horde in Russia to invade further into eastern Europe. The Mongols terrorized Poland and Hungary. The people there called them “devils.” But just as the Mongols were about to attack the heart

of Europe, Ogedei died, and the leaders of the Golden Horde abandoned their invasion plans.

In 1258, the Great Khan Mongke, grandson of Genghis, sent an army to conquer the Muslim caliphate (empire) centered in Iraq and Syria. The Mongols sacked Baghdad, killed the caliph, and went on to capture Aleppo and Damascus in Syria.

The next year, Mongke died, setting off a civil war over which family member should succeed him. Mongke’s brother, Kublai, won and was confirmed Great Khan in 1264.

By this time, sons and grandsons of Genghis Khan ruled a divided empire, consisting of four mostly independent kingdoms called khanates. These were located in Central Asia, Persia-Iraq, Russia, and China-Mongolia where the Great Khan Kublai reigned but held little power over the other khanates.

Kublai moved the Mongol capital to what is now Beijing, and adopted the traditional characteristics of a Chinese emperor. In 1279, he defeated the Chinese Song dynasty in the South, unifying all of China. This also expanded the Mongol Empire to its greatest extent.

Pax Mongolica

By 1280, Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire had grown to become the largest continuous land empire in world history. It reached from China and Korea in the East to Poland and Hungary in the West, dwarfing the empires of Alexander the Great and Caesar Augustus.

The near domination of the Mongols over such a vast area made it possible for what has been called the Pax Mongolica (Mongolian Peace). Kublai and the rulers of the other khanates opened safe long distance trade routes like the Silk Road, connecting Europe and China, which Marco Polo traveled on his way to the Great Khan's capital.

Soon, an exchange of trade goods, luxuries, medicine, science, and technology connected China, the Muslim world, and Europe for the first time. The nomadic Mongols themselves had little to contribute, but their leaders enthusiastically continued Genghis Khan's trade policies that opened up the known world. Some historians compare this with today's economic "globalization."

Genghis Khan and his successors were eager to learn from foreigners regardless of their ethnicity or religion. Thus, the Mongol Empire at its peak facilitated the movement of foreigners around the empire. They brought with them new ideas, styles of art, scientific knowledge, political skills, and religions.

Early in his career, Genghis Khan declared a policy of religious toleration, something very unusual in the world up to that time. Three of the four khanate rulers eventually converted to Islam as did other Mongols. This spurred the spread of Islam into Persia, Central Asia, India, and further east. In China-Mongolia, many became Buddhists and Christians.

End of the Empire

Kublai Khan attempted to enlarge the Mongol Empire by invading Japan, Java, and Southeast Asia, but all his campaigns ended in disaster. Battles over succession in the four khanates increasingly weakened the empire. It finally fell apart by the 1500s and was largely absorbed by other powers.

Mongolia itself was attacked and dominated by the Chinese Ming dynasty, which overthrew Mongol rule in 1368. In 1921, Mongolia became a communist satellite of the Soviet Union. Mongolia today, where Genghis Khan is a national hero, is a democratic country that is enjoying an economic boom due to large mineral discoveries.

Genghis Khan certainly earned his reputation as a ruthless conqueror. But some credit him and the Mongol Empire he founded with beginning the exchange of knowledge that led to the making of the modern world.

ACTIVITY

Evaluating Genghis Khan

Historians have long debated over how best to assess Genghis Khan. Below are four different assessments. In small groups, do the following:

1. Read and discuss each of the assessments below.
2. Using the information in the article, determine which, if any, of the assessments you agree with.
3. If you agree with none of them, write your own short assessment of Genghis Khan.
4. Be prepared to present your decisions and reasons for them to the whole class.

Leo de Hartog, *Genghis Khan: Conqueror of the World* (1989): A judgment about Genghis Khan can be made only if he is seen in the context of his times and surroundings. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Mongols were far more barbarous than their neighboring tribes. For this reason Genghis Khan, as the cultivated Chinese put it, was nothing more nor less than a barbarian. However, this barbarian possessed a number of qualities that enabled him to become one of the greatest conquerors in the history of the world.

Robert Walsh, *The American Quarterly Review*, Volume 1 (1827): Excessively proud, ambitious, and revengeful, he joined the most wily artfulness to the most unsparing cruelty. With him, the end always justified the means, and expediency was ever sufficient to justify any breach of faith. . . . [H]e set no value on human life, nor hesitated to make any sacrifice of it to gratify his lust of conquest. Considering his subjects as *enemies*, he swayed them with an iron sceptre, maintaining thus their loyalty through their fears

Don Lessem, museum exhibit producer of Genghis Khan: *The Exhibition* (2012): Genghis did do brutal things, but no more so than the Crusaders. And his savagery had a purpose — creating a secure world empire — and once inside the Pale, people were safe and more prosperous and liberated than anywhere else. Genghis was the guy who developed diplomatic immunity, a code of laws including fair trial and tax benefits for clerics and scholars.

Harold Lamb, *Genghis Khan: The Emperor of All Men* (1927): Genghis Khan, the destroyer, had broken down the barriers of the Dark Ages. He had opened up roads. Europe came into contact with the arts of Cathay. At the court of his son, Armenian princes and Persian grandees rubbed shoulders with Russian princes.

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. What do you think was the most important reason for Genghis Khan's success as a conqueror?
2. Was Genghis Khan a terrorist? Explain.
3. What made the Mongol Empire different from other empires?

For Further Reading

Dunnell, Ruth W. *Chinggis Khan, World Conqueror*. Boston: Longman, 2010.

Fitzhugh, William W. *et al.*, eds. *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Perpetua Press, 2009.



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