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# The Mongols: How Barbaric Were the “Barbarians”?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)  
World History

## The Mongols: How Barbaric Were the “Barbarians”?

### Introduction

Eight hundred years ago, during the 13th Century, a small tribe from the grasslands or **steppes** of central Asia conquered much of the known world. Operating from the backs of horses, Mongol warriors swept across much of Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Their reach extended from Korea to Poland, and from Vietnam to Syria. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. Nothing quite like it has been seen since.

The reputation of the Mongols is not pretty. Much of the world called them “barbarians.” For the ancient Greeks, “barbaros” simply meant foreigner. By the 1200s, “barbarian” was a much more negative term referring to people who lived beyond the reach of civilization, people who were savage, evil.

Below is a short sketch of Mongol history. Four maps are provided to help keep the story straight. This background essay is followed by ten documents. Your task is to use the background materials and the documents to judge the Mongol’s impact on the 13th and 14th Century world. Were they barbarians spreading death and destruction, or is there more to the story?

### Beginnings

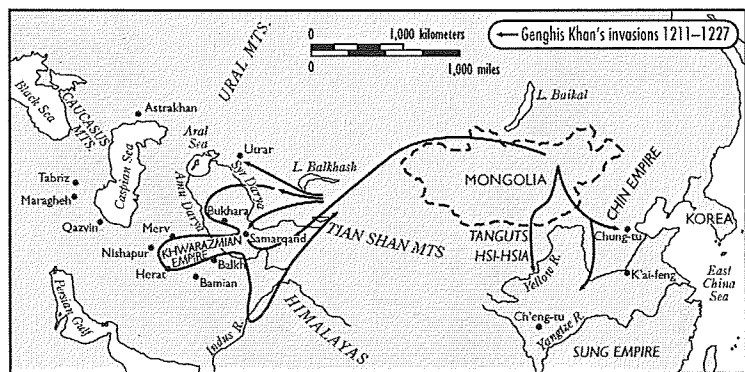
From the start, the Mongols lived in round, moveable houses they called **yurts**. They had few material possessions. They knew little about mining and cared nothing about farming. They were nomadic people who lived off the meat,

milk, and hide of horses, and the meat and wool of sheep.

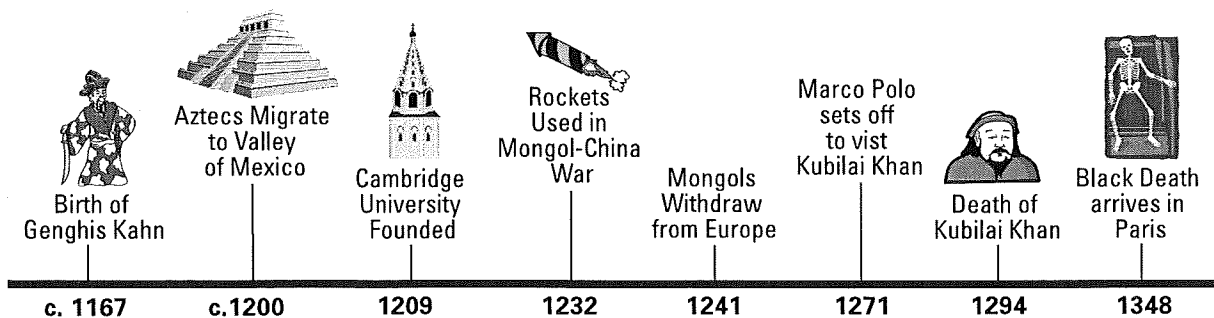
Then in 1167 a boy child was born on the Mongolian plains. His name was Temuchin. Temuchin did not have an easy childhood. His father was poisoned by a local enemy and the boy spent much of his teenage years fighting clan rivals. For an additional twenty years Temuchin fought to bring the Mongol clans of the region under one leadership. In 1206 Temuchin won that leadership and was given the title Genghis Khan. At this point, Genghis’ aspirations began to grow larger.

### The First Wave: North China and Ancient Persia

Genghis Khan’s first serious target was the Chin armies of north China in 1211. An army of 200,000 rode east. Numerous Chinese cities felt Mongol brutality. Slaughter was so great that the



streets of the Chinese capital were greasy with human fat and flesh. With north China under his control, Genghis next attacked his neighbors to the west – the Uighurs, the Kara-Khi tai, the



Merkits, the Kipchaks. The Mongol empire was suddenly not so little.

Still further to the west was the ancient Persian empire of Khwarazm which included the modern nations of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Initially Genghis Khan and the Shah of Khwarazm worked out a peaceful trade agreement, but then a Mongol caravan of 150 traders entering Khwarazm from Mongolia was murdered by one of the Shah's governors. This turned out to be a bad mistake. What followed was a Mongol onslaught that raked over the land of the Khwarazm Shah. Cities fell; Persian casualties were extraordinarily high.

**The Second Wave: Russia and Eastern Europe**

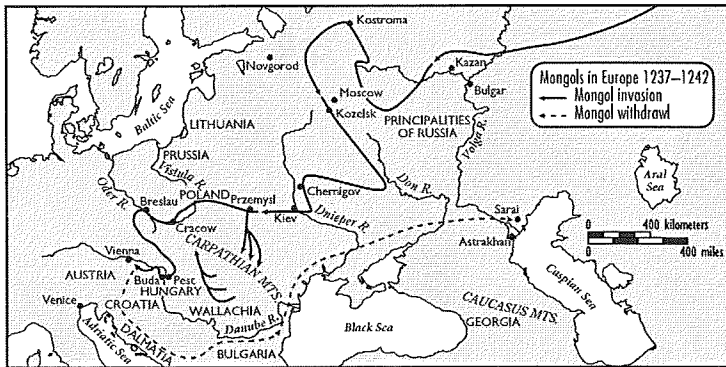
In 1227 Genghis Khan died and was succeeded by one of his four sons, Ogedei. Ogedei ordered the building of a Mongol capital called Karakorum, and afterward itched for further conquest. After long debate with his brothers

eastern Russian frontier. The great Mongol general Subedei sought to make an example of Riazan that would cause other Russian cities to submit. The city was destroyed. Men, women, and children were slain. A few survivors were allowed to escape to carry the warning: The Mongols are coming – submit or die.

Kolumna, Suzdal, Vladimir, Kozelsk, Kiev and other cities in Russia; Lublin, Cracow in Poland; Liegnitz in Silesia; Buda and Pest in Hungary – the Mongols swept their way west. By May, 1242, Mongol intelligence patrols were just 60 miles from Vienna.

And then the unexpected – the Mongols turned back! Word from Mongolia had apparently reached the front lines that the Great Khan Ogedei had died. Not understanding what had happened, western Europe held its breath and waited.

At about this time, in the 1240s, a small number of European visitors began to visit Mongolia and Mongol-controlled China, men like the John of Plano Carpini, Friar William of Rubruck, and, several years later, the famous Marco Polo. These men joined the Persians and Chinese who were already visitors at the Mongol court in Karakorum or in China. Thanks to the writings of these travellers we have some firsthand accounts of Mongol life.



and generals the decision was made to invade Russia and eastern Europe. Ogedei predicted the campaign would take a long eighteen years. An army of 50,000 horse soldiers, Persian and Chinese engineers, and 20,000 draftees were made ready to march. By the winter of 1237 this army stood poised on the frozen banks of the Volga; Russia and Europe lay before them.

The next five years were to shake the Western world. The first city to fall was Riazan on the

**The Third Wave: The Middle East**

Ogedei was succeeded by Genghis' grandson Mongke. Mongke set his sights on still further conquest. Two targets were chosen, the Middle East and southern China.

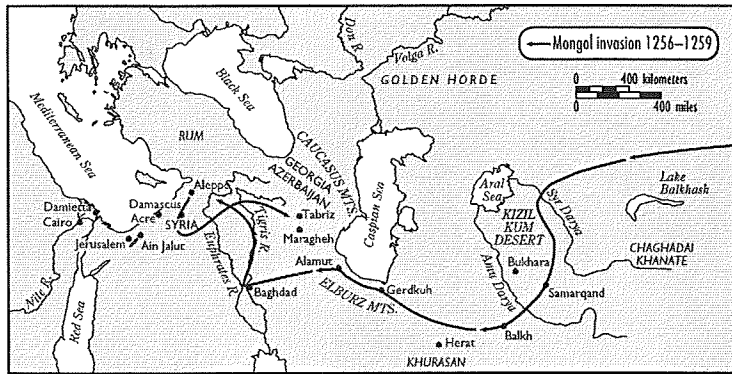
Again, a huge Mongol army was assembled on the steppes – thousands upon thousands of horses, numerous siege machines, and one thousand Chinese engineering teams for building roads and bridges. The massive army advanced into Persia on January 1, 1256.

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First the Mongols annihilated a troublesome sect known as the Assassins. Next they advanced 500 miles west to the walls of Baghdad. There, in February, 1258, this spiritual and cultural center of Islam fell. Mongol armies proceeded into Syria and Palestine where they were joined by Christian troops from Armenia and Georgia. It was a time of shifting alliances and these

Kublai, a grandson of Genghis, who ruled in China. Kubilai maintained enough ties with the other khanates to achieve a measure of security across much of Asia. Historians have called this time **pax Mongolica** or “the Mongolian peace.”

Kublai was probably the most cultured of the Great Khans. He expanded his holdings in China by defeating the Sung Empire in southern China and established a new dynasty he called the **Yuan**. For the first time in three hundred years China was again a united country but now under Mongol control.



eastern Christians saw the Mongol attack on the Middle East as a kind of crusade against Islam. Then, suddenly, history repeated itself. Just as the death of a Great Khan had stopped the Mongols as they approached Vienna in 1242, now the death of Mongke Khan in 1259 caused the Mongols to pull back from the walls of Jerusalem.

### Pax Mongolica and Kubilai Khan in China

By this time the Mongol Empire consisted of four parts or **khanates** – the Russian khanate called the Golden Horde, the Persian khanate of the Ilkhans, the central Asian khanate, and a fourth khanate which included Mongolia and China. The next Great Khan was the famous

In his later years Kubilai weakened his empire with unsuccessful attempts to conquer Japan and Java. After Kubilai’s death the Mongols began to lose their grip across the entire empire.

In Persia Mongol authority ended in 1335. In China the last Mongol emperor was removed in 1368. In Russia the Golden Horde breathed its final official breath in 1502. The Mongol era was over.

### The Question

What should we make of the Mongols? There is no debate among historians that the Mongols had their brutal side. But when the day of historical judgment comes and the Mongol goods and bads are placed side by side on the balance scale, which way does the scale tip? Read the documents that follow and make your judgment: *The Mongols: How barbaric were the “Barbarians”?*

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