

# Genghis Khan

## and the Mongol Empire

**How did a ruthless Mongol tribal leader establish the largest empire in the world, the likes of which we probably will never see again?**



SO WROTE GENGHIS, THE GREAT KHAN: "THE GREATEST PLEASURE IS TO VANQUISH YOUR ENEMIES, AND CHASE THEM BEFORE YOU, TO ROB THEM OF THEIR WEALTH AND SEE THOSE DEAR TO THEM BATHED IN TEARS, TO RIDE THEIR HORSES AND CLASP TO YOUR BOSOM THEIR WIVES AND DAUGHTERS." THE 13TH-CENTURY MONGOL LEADER IS SHOWN ABOVE ON A SILK ALBUM LEAF.

THE MONGOLS WERE A GROUP OF NOMADIC ASIAN tribes that emerged as a cohesive nation at the beginning of the 12th century, their ancestors having come from the northern Siberian forests. Skilled as hunters, trappers, fishermen, and herdsmen, the Mongol tribes were a relatively prosperous people. The area they roamed, in what is today Mongolia, was divided into three states ruled by tribes of Turkish descent. In the far west were the Naimans; in the central region dwelt the Kereits; and in the west lived the warlike Tatars, who were often in alliance with the Chinese against the other Turkic tribes or the Mongol nomads.

The growth of the Mongol empire from these disorganized nomadic roots into a dominant power was largely, if not completely, the work of one man, known as Genghis Khan, or "Universal Monarch." His given name was Temuchin, celebrating the victory of his father Yesukai—a great and respected leader who had united a large number of Mongol tribes—over a Tatar adversary of the same name.

When Temuchin was nine, he left home to live with the tribe of his future bride. While he was away, Yesukai was poisoned by Tatars and died. Temuchin returned home. Almost immediately, the tribes his father had led disbanded, some helping themselves to Yesukai's possessions. Soon Temuchin and his family were destitute, subsisting on wild plants and roots—nourishment the Mongols thought shameful.

Slowly, Temuchin began to rebuild his father's empire. He was a violent and valorous youth, and tales spread of his exploits against the Taijiuts, an unfriendly neighboring tribe. Mongol youths began showing up to offer their services at Temuchin's burgeoning camp. They achieved a miraculous victory against the Taijiuts, whose army outnumbered their own by 17,000 men. Temuchin's political and military strength continued to grow, and at the start of the 13th century his power was great enough to attack the other Turkic tribes, beginning with the Tatars who had slain his father. By 1204, he had eliminated all three. In 1206 he was proclaimed supreme ruler of the Mongol peoples and received the title Genghis Khan, by which the world has known him since.

### **RULE FROM THE SADDLE**

These early conquests were a mere hint of what he would do next. For the rest of his life, Genghis Khan would rule the Mongol people from a horse's saddle, endlessly slaughtering, enslaving, and subjecting region after terrified region. He began with the Chin rulers of North China. In 1213, Mongol warriors poured through the Great Wall and seized all the land north of the Yellow River. After that, they turned and began to march west, crushing armies and sacking towns. They rarely knew defeat, and their emerging dominance was the source of considerable confusion in Europe. Beleaguered Christian crusaders thought



GENGHIS KHAN (ABOVE, IN A PERSIAN MINIATURE) UNITED DISCORDANT MONGOL TRIBES TO FORM THE MOST POWERFUL ARMY OF ITS TIME. SO EFFECTIVE WAS KHAN'S ARMY THAT IN ONE DAY HIS SOLDIERS COULD DEMOLISH LAND 60 MILES AWAY, RETURN HOME, AND THEN (OR SO IT IS SAID) COME BACK THE NEXT DAY. KHAN (LEFT, SHOWN IN BATTLE) WAS OFTEN BARBAROUS AND INHUMANE TOWARD HIS OPPONENTS: HE PUNISHED ONE OF HIS ENEMIES BY POURING MOLTEN SILVER INTO HIS EARS AND EYES.

(hopefully) that they were a mighty army led by a Christian king, come from the east to deliver the Holy Land from Muslim rule. Jews thought they might be one of the lost tribes of Israel.

In 1220, the Mongols attacked Merv, in what is now Iran, killing most of the inhabitants and sparing not even the dogs and cats. Three years later, after extending their empire all the way to the Indus River, Genghis Khan and his triumphant troops returned to their homeland.

Shortly after his return, on August 25, 1227, Genghis Khan died while resting in his summer quarters. The cause of death is unknown. Tenacious to the end, he made his last command: to delay the announcement of his death

until all the garrisons were in place, a ploy that defended against opportunistic raiders.

#### KHAN'S LEGAL LEGACY

Khan's death did not leave the empire in disarray. He had established the Yasak (legal code) of the Mongol government years before; it combined his rules and ideas and the traditional Mongol laws. Notably, the code decreed that the clergy of conquered peoples were exempt from taxation and conscription. Whether this was a testament to the respect Genghis Khan held for his enemies—or an example of his voracious need to increase the learning and power of his empire—is debat-



THIS IMAGE OF GENGHIS KHAN AND HIS SON AND GRANDSON—BOTH OF WHOM SUCCEEDED HIM AFTER HIS DEATH—APPEARED IN A LITERARY TEXT DATING FROM 1318.

able. Whatever the reason, much of the Mongol government was made up of conquered officials. Muslims, Jews, and Christians held high office. Khan's prime minister was Chinese. His grandson, Kublai, even had a European, Marco Polo, among his administrators.

Following his death, Genghis Khan's third son Ogadai became the ruler of the Mongol nation. Ogadai was an able and powerful ruler, and the nation prospered under his command. He built the capital city of Karakorum and extended the empire toward Europe, capturing the Russian cities of Moscow and Kiev.

In 1241, Ogadai's armies surged through Poland, taking everything east of the Danube and invading Croatia. Europe braced for an attack—but it never came. Ogadai died in November 1241, and his armies withdrew. It had been the Mongols' westernmost campaign.

Following Ogadai's death, his son Guyuk became the khan, but died shortly after assuming the mantle. A council of Mongol princes chose Mangu, the eldest son of Genghis Khan's youngest son, as their next ruler.

Soon civil strife and disunity began to creep into the kingdom, with Guyuk's sons opposing the appointment of Mangu. A plot to overthrow Mangu was discovered, resulting in the loss of many princely heads. In the end, Mangu ruled successfully, adding several minor conquests to the still-powerful empire until his death during a battle in 1259.

Following the death of Mangu, the empire dissolved into many states. He is considered the last khan of the unified Mongol empire, the largest nation the world has ever known.

A DRAWING FROM THE MING DYNASTY SHOWS A MONGOL ARCHER ON HIS HORSE. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MON-

GOLS' POWERFUL STEEDS CANNOT BE OVERSTATED, WITH HORSES KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF MONGOL MILITARY STRATEGY.







"GENGHIS KHAN," WROTE MARCO POLO, WHO AT ONE POINT IN HIS TRAVELS WAS THE GUEST OF KHAN'S GRANDSON KUBLAI, "WAS A MAN OF GREAT WORTH AND GREAT ABILITY AND VALOR." HERE IN A 13TH-CENTURY PAINTING, KHAN'S ROYAL TENT IS GUARDED BY FOUR OF HIS MINIONS.

## MONGOLIAN MILITARY STRENGTH



The Mongol armies rarely outnumbered their enemies, but their organization and tactical skill were unparalleled. They were ruthless and merciless in battle, and their prisoners, if indeed there were any, made up the front lines of their next attack. In this way, wrote papal emissary John de Plano Caprini, "with the

inhabitants of one country they would destroy another."

A favorite maneuver of Genghis Khan was to use his swift Mongol horsemen to sweep around an enemy's flank, which would disrupt their formation. He would then sneakily attack them from behind. On long campaigns, the Mongol armies would bring many more horses than warriors, which

allowed each warrior to ride a fresh mount every day. The speed of the Mongol warriors atop these well-rested animals left many a foe floundering in disarray.

Another advantage the Mongols enjoyed over their adversaries was a collapsible boat, which allowed their troops to easily cross rivers that halted the progress of competing armies.

## The Mongol Empire (Overview)

*I am the flail of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.*  
—Genghis Khan, around AD 1220, after burning the mosque of Bukhara in Central Asia

The largest land-based empire that the world has ever seen was the Mongol Empire of the 13th century AD. Under Genghis Khan and his successors, the Mongols conquered an area that included Central Asia; all of China; Korea; modern-day Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan; and even Ukraine and Hungary in Eastern Europe. Many of the great medieval trade routes from the Far East into Europe lay largely within the borders of the Mongol Empire.

### Life on the Steppes



The Mongol Empire had its roots in the nomadic tribes of the Central Asian steppes, roughly the area now known as Mongolia. Life on the steppes was not suited to growing crops. Instead, the steppes—high, dry, treeless grasslands interrupted by mountains—were ideal for raising sheep and horses. Sheep provided meat, milk, cheese, skins, wool, and even fuel in the form of dried dung. Horses provided mobility for hunting and for carrying people and belongings, which helped the tribes migrate each year from higher summer pastures to more sheltered winter pastures. Even horse milk found a use as a fermented alcoholic drink known as koumiss.

Housing was provided by circular, felt tents called yurts, or *gers*. Layers of felt were stretched over a light wooden frame, with more or fewer layers depending on the season. The felt was greased for protection against cold and rain, and the circular shape helped the yurt to resist high winds. Smaller tents could be loaded onto pack animals for transport, but larger tents were moved on special wagons. In the center of the yurt was a hearth for cooking, with a smoke hole for ventilation, and the floor was covered with skins or rugs. Some yurts were painted white and decorated. One may still see yurts in Mongolia today.

The southern steppe dwellers traded with China for grain, luxuries, and metals, including metal for weapons. China was aware that if the nomads united they could successfully invade. Therefore, Chinese officials did their best to prevent any one Mongol leader from gaining too much power by building up that leader's rivals.

### Conquests of Genghis Khan

As nomads, the Mongols had no central social structure or government. Individual tribes were led by chiefs, who settled disputes and gave orders in time of war. Among themselves, the different tribes fought constantly. By 1206, however, one leader had become dominant. In a *kuriltai* (great assembly), he was acclaimed as the supreme chief, or khan, of the Mongols and was known from that time forth as Genghis Khan.



Genghis quickly launched an invasion of northern China, controlled by the Jin dynasty. By 1215, the capital city had fallen, although the conquest of the Jin state was not completed for another 20 years.

On the western side of the Mongol reaches, hostilities broke out in 1218 with Shah Ala ad-Din Muhammad of the Khwarezm dynasty in Central Asia. The shah's armies were defeated, and by 1220-1221, the Mongols had reached the Caspian Sea on the border between Asia and Europe.

### The Mongol Army

Under Genghis, the Mongol Army was the most efficient army of its time. The strength of the army lay in its effectiveness and mobility, which were the results of many factors, including training, discipline, and high-quality weapons and equipment.



Riding and hunting from an early age trained young Mongols to be expert horsemen and archers. All adult males up to 60 years of age were eligible for military service. They took part in an annual hunt for game that was also a training exercise, completed in military units. Genghis added discipline to traditional Mongol raiding practices—for example, by insisting that no one stop to loot defeated enemies until the battle was completely won. A string of three to five horses per warrior allowed men to exchange mounts when one tired or was killed. The development of a special saddle and stirrups and the fact that most warriors had learned to shoot with

a bow and arrow while in a gallop added to their mobility. Superb planning and tactics by Genghis and his generals also played an important role in his victories.

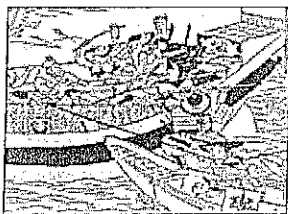
The Mongol policy was to spare cities that surrendered but to show no mercy to those that fought. Within areas that were conquered by the Mongols, there was tolerance for a variety of religious beliefs. However, resistance to Mongol rule was considered to be rebellion against heaven.

It is impossible to be sure just how large the Mongol Army was. Historians estimate that in 1206, when Genghis was proclaimed the leader of the Mongols, the army may have consisted of about 100,000 men. At his death in 1227, it may have been 130,000.

### Genghis Khan's Successors

After Genghis' death, his empire was divided, as he had directed, among four of his sons, with his third son, Ogadai, designated as the great khan, or overall ruler of the empire. During Ogadai's reign, the Mongols completed the conquest of the Jin dynasty of northern China. Ogadai also founded the city of Karakorum, capital of the Mongol Empire.

Following the conquest of the Jin, the Mongols launched an invasion of Russia and Eastern Europe under the leadership of Batu, a grandson of Genghis who ruled over the part of the Mongol Empire bordering Europe. Ultimately, he set up a system of supervision and taxation over the Russians but left them largely to govern themselves. The area of the Mongol Empire ruled by Batu was ultimately known as the Golden Horde and lasted until the late 15th century.



In the east, Kublai Khan, another of Genghis' grandsons, completed the conquest of southern China by 1279, but the Mongol invasions of Japan failed, largely due to adverse weather. Although he was technically the great khan, Kublai actually controlled only China, Mongolia, Korea, and Tibet. Moving his capital from Karakorum to the Chinese city of Beijing, he became the first emperor of the Chinese Yuan dynasty, which lasted until 1368. After Kublai, the separate pieces of

the Mongol Empire went their own ways.

### The Mongol Empire: Discussion

1. The Mongol Army was able to conquer a very large land area in Asia and later Europe. What made it so effective?
2. What do you think made people willing to follow someone like Genghis Khan?
3. How did the Mongol conquests contribute to the spread of culture and ideas in Asia and parts of Europe?

## 11.4 The Mongol Khan's Ultimatum to the Nations of Europe

Contact between the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan and his successors and Western Europeans was slight, although detachments of the Mongol forces had stationed themselves in Russia at the doorstep of Eastern European states and had gone so far as to raid and devastate parts of Poland and Hungary. These Tartars (as the Mongols were often called) would maintain a lengthy presence in Russia under the designation of "The Golden Horde." From time to time popes would dispatch emissaries with letters to the Khan. That the Khan was not particularly impressed is made clear in his imperious reply.

**Source:** Christopher Dawson, ed., *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, for the Medieval Academy of America, 1980), pp. 83-84. (First published by Sheed & Ward, London, 1955, as *The Mongol Mission*; reprinted by Harper & Row 1966).

### The Strength of God, the Emperor of all men, to the Great Pope, Authentic and True Letters

Having taken counsel for making peace with us, You Pope and all Christians have sent an envoy to us, as we have heard from him and as your letters declare. Wherefore, if you wish to have peace with us, You Pope and all kings and potentates, in no way delay to come to me to make terms of peace and then you shall hear alike our answer and our will. The contents of your letters stated that we ought to be baptized and become Christians. To this we answer briefly that we do not understand in what way we ought to do this. To the rest of the contents of your letters, viz: that you wonder at so great a slaughter of men, especially of Christians and in particular Poles, Moravians and Hungarians, we reply likewise that this also we do not understand. However, lest we may seem to pass it over in silence altogether, we give you this for our answer.

Because they did not obey the word of God and the command of Chingis Chan and the Chan, but took council to slay our envoys, therefore God ordered us to destroy them and gave them up into our hands. For otherwise if God had not done this, what could man do to man? But you men of the West believe that you alone are Christians and despise others. But how can you know to whom God deigns to confer His grace? But we worshipping God have destroyed the whole earth from the East to the West in the power of God. And if this were not the power of God, what could men have done? Therefore if you accept peace and are willing to surrender your fortresses to us, You Pope and Christian princes, in no way delay coming to me to conclude peace and then we shall know that you wish to have peace with us. But if you should not believe our letters and the command of God nor hearken to our counsel then we shall know for certain that you wish to have war. After that we do not know what will happen, God alone knows.

Chingis Chan, first Emperor, second Ochoday Chan, third Cuiuch Chan.

### Questions:

1. What is the Khan's response to requests that he be baptized?
2. How does the Khan justify the slaying and seizure of the land of Eastern European Christians?
3. What is the letter's general tone? What does the Khan command and what consequences does he state could arise from noncompliance?