

# **Genghis Khan The Mongols and Asia to 1300**



**Author  
Unknown**

# Genghis Khan, The Mongols and Asia to 1300

**T**HE KNIGHTS AT THEIR TOURNAMENTS, IN THEIR FINERY, ARMOUR AND EMBLEMS OF ANCESTRY, believed they were the foremost warriors in the world, while Mongol warriors thought otherwise. Mongol horses were small, but their riders were lightly clad and they moved with greater speed. These were hardy men who grew up on horses and hunting, making them better warriors than those who grew up in agricultural societies and cities. Their main weapon was the bow and arrow. And the Mongols of the early 1200's were highly disciplined, superbly coordinated and brilliant in tactics.

The Mongols were illiterate, religiously shamanistic and sparsely populated, perhaps no more than around 700,000 in number, living in good-sized felt tents. They were herdsmen around an area called Karakorum. They had been moving across great distances on the grassy plains -- steppe lands -- north and east of China, frequently fighting wars over turf. Before 1200 they had been fragmented, with various tribes fighting one another -- their divisions encouraged by neighbors such as the Ruzhen (Jin) of northern Manchuria, who wished to see the Mongols remain weak.

In the late 1100's and early 1200's a Mongol military leader named Temujin (Temüjin) was creating a confederation of tribes, Mongol and non-Mongol but which would be called Mongol. He was a good manager, collecting under him people of talent. And, when necessary, he warred. In 1202 his forces fought and defeated the Tatars to his immediate east. He had no hope of them, so he put the surviving men to the sword and distributed the women and children among other tribes.

With Temujin's defeat of the Tatars, the aging Mongol khan, Ong, declared Temujin as his adoptive son and heir. Ong's natural son, Senggum (Senggüm), had been expecting to succeed his father, and he organized an assassination of Temujin. Someone leaked the plans to Temujin, whose forces defeated forces loyal to Senggum, and Temujin became ruler over

of the Mongols. In 1206, at the age of 42, Temujin took the title Universal Ruler, which translates to Genghis Khan, and he addressed his joyous supporters thanking them for their help and their loyalty.

Like others, Genghis Khan's subjects saw themselves at the centre of the universe and the greatest of people — favoured, of course, by the gods. And they justified Genghis Khan's conquests in previous years by claiming that he was the rightful master not only over the "peoples of the felt tent" but the entire world.

Genghis Khan continued organizing. He improved his military organization, which was also to serve as a mobile political bureaucracy, and he broke up what was left of old enemy tribes, leaving as ethnically homogeneous only those tribes that had demonstrated loyalty to him. He introduced record keeping, taking advantage of his move years before to have his native language put into writing. He created official seals. He created a supreme officer of the law, who was to collect and preserve all judicial decisions, to oversee the trials of all those charged with wrongdoing and to have the power to issue death sentences.

Genghis Khan's first military action was to secure his northern, Siberian, border. He subjugated reluctant tribes there, and he then felt ready to deal with powers to his south -- to act on his mandate as the rightful ruler of the entire world. In 1209 he led a large army against the Tangut (who occupied what had been northwestern China). And in 1210 the Tangut kingdom recognized Genghis Khan as its overlord. The Tangut monarch pledged to supply future Mongol military operations with troops, and he presented Genghis Khan with a princess as a new wife.

In 1211, Genghis Khan and his army pushed against the Ruzhen (who ruled in northeastern China). The Ruzhen had a large and effective army but they were hard pressed by both the Mongols and a border war with the Tangut. The Ruzhen (Jin) were also attacked by southern China, the Song dynasty emperor wishing to take advantage of the Ruzhen's fight against the Mongols and to liberate northern China. But the Ruzhen drove the southern Chinese armies into retreat. Genghis Khan and his army overran Beijing and pushed into the heartland of northern China. They

ravaged the countryside, gathering information and booty, and then they pulled back from most of Ruzhen territory, staying put at key northern frontier passes. The Ruzhen emperor negotiated with the Mongols and agreed to pay them tribute in exchange for an end to hostilities.

Genghis Khan had not yet committed himself to the conquest of the whole of China, and in 1217 he returned to Mongolia, leaving one of his best generals in charge of Mongol positions in the Far East. Genghis Khan was concerned about a hostile power beyond his realm to the west -- a recently formed Islamic empire, Khwarazm, which extended from Persia to Transoxiana. Genghis Khan wanted trade with the lands to his west. He wanted goods for the Mongol nation, including weapons. That trade ended when subjects of the Khwarazm shah seized a Mongol caravan of several hundred merchants. Khwarazm claimed that spies had been in the caravan. Genghis Khan sent envoys to the shah. The shah saw his rule as superior to that of the Mongol's and he had the chief of Genghis Khan's envoys killed and the beards burned off the others and these others sent back to Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan launched a war against Khwarazm, the Mongols believing that their gods were superior to Allah. In 1219, Genghis Khan and his Mongol army drove through Transoxiana, engaging in difficult assaults against prosperous cities such as Bukhara (now Uzbekistan) and Samarkand. In reprisal for resistance to Mongol advances, and reprisal for uprisings against Mongol occupation, the Mongols laid waste to various cities, including Samarkand, and put the people of those cities to the sword. According to a Muslim writer, Genghis Khan drew from some old fashioned religion and told the Muslims, I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent punishment like me upon you.

The Mongols pushed into Persia. While Genghis Khan was consolidating his conquests there, a force of 40,000 Mongol horsemen pushed through Azerbaijan and Armenia. They crushed Georgian crusaders, captured a Genoese trading fortress in Crimea and spent the winter along the coast of the Black Sea. Then, as they were headed back home they met 80,000 warriors led by Prince Mstislav of Kiev. The battle of Kalka River (1223) commenced, and the Mongols routed the prince's army.

In 1225, Genghis Khan returned to Mongolia. He now ruled everything between the Caspian Sea and Korea. He looked forward to the Mongols continuing their ways while benefiting from caravan trade and drawing tribute from agricultural peoples in the west and east. Genghis Khan created an efficient pony express system. He declared freedom of religion for the areas he had conquered. And wishing for order and tax producing prosperity he forbade troops and local officials to abuse people.

Soon again Genghis Khan was at war. He believed that the Tangut (in northeastern China) were not living up to their obligations to his empire, and he was unwilling to expand in China until the Tangut were thoroughly subdued. In 1227, around the age of sixty-five, while leading the fighting against the Tangut, Genghis Khan, it is said, fell off his horse and died.

In terms of square miles conquered, Genghis Khan had been the greatest conqueror of all time -- greater than Alexander the Great. The Mongol nation believed that he had been the greatest man of all time and a man sent from heaven. Among the Mongols he was known as the Holy Warrior, and not unlike the Jews who continued to see hope in a conquering king (messiah) like David, Mongols were to continue to believe that one day Genghis Khan would rise again and lead his people to new victories.

### **More Conquest by the Great Khan Ögödei**

Mongol royalty, like other royalty including the sons of King David, had been fighting over who was to be Genghis Khan's heir -- while Genghis Khan was still living. To end the dispute Genghis Khan chose as his successor a third son, Ögödei. In 1229, after Genghis Khan's death, a great Mongol assembly confirmed the succession of Ögödei as the Great Khan. Ögödei began his rule aiming to live up to his mandate as ruler of the world. In earnest he began drafting conquered people into his armies. About one in ten young men from agricultural societies went into the Mongol infantry or to assist in siege warfare against fortified cities. And tent dwellers (nomadic herdsman) joined the Mongol cavalry.

In 1231 Ögödei sent an army to police Korean defiance of an agreement made in 1218 to pay annual tribute. In 1232 the Koreans rebelled and a

struggle ensued that was to last for decades. Ögödei also sent his armies against the Jurzhen, and in 1234 his armies completed the conquest of northern China. In the mid-thirties Ögödei sent armies against Slavic principalities in Eastern Europe, but resistance by the Asiatic tribes between the Volga and Ural rivers was greater than he had expected, delaying for several years his plans of conquest west of the Ural Mountains. Finally in 1237 his army pushed against the Russians, conquering the cities of Vladimir, Kolmna and Moscow in 1238. In 1240 his army destroyed the city of Kiev.

At Liegnitz (in what is now Poland) although outnumbered, his army destroyed a German army of heavily armoured knights. His army pushed through Hungary, and in 1241 it reached the outskirts of Vienna. Then, mysteriously to Europeans, the Mongols pulled back from Vienna -- while holding onto over-lordship in Russia and other conquered territories. To the Europeans it seemed as though they were saved by a miracle. To the Mongols it was something different. The Mongol retreat from central Europe was in response to Ögödei's death. High ranking army leaders believed they had to return to confirm the selecting of a new ruler.

## **From Ögödei to Möngke**

Ögödei had been like a lot of sons of men who had fought their way to power and established a dynasty -- something less than his father. Ögödei had been a profligate spender of money, burdening his conquered subjects with unpredictable increases in taxes for his sudden needs of money. And torn between duty and his having tired of it, Ögödei had begun drinking so heavily that a functionary had been assigned to count the number of wine goblets that he emptied daily. He had died at the age of fifty-six after a binge of drinking during a hunting trip.

However burdensome, there was no shortage of young men from Genghis Khan's extended family eager to become the next Great Khan. Ögödei's widow, Töregene, began administering Ögödei's estate, ruling her late husband's realm in his name and acting as regent for her eldest son. Military operations slowed, including a reprieve of the fighting in Korea. Fighting began among men in the extended family. In 1246, one of them,

Güyük, was able to buy support and win selection as Ögödei's successor. He showered gifts on people whose support he continued to seek, from princes to lowly scribes, as if money was in endless supply. He became heavily indebted to merchants and his short reign came to an end in 1247. This was not before Pope Innocent IV sent an envoy to the Great Khan, asking him not to invade Europe and believing that he could be converted to Roman Christianity. The new Great Khan adhered to the standing belief that it was the leader of the Mongols who had the right to rule the world, and he replied to the Pope, demanding his submission.

The selection of the new Great Khan went to Möngke, another of Genghis Khan's many sons. A plot by rivals to assassinate him at his coronation was uncovered, and this was followed by torture, purges, trials, confessions and much letting of blood -- purges within the royal family as well as among government officials.

Möngke attempted to establish efficiency in governing all of his subjects. The postal relay system was freed of being jammed by elites using it for their personal benefit. He established predictable taxation that permitted planning by growers. He demanded that local rule not interfere with productive work. The death penalty was to apply to officers who seized vegetables from the gardens of Chinese peasants. Princes were forbidden to issue orders without approval from the imperial court. Officials, civil and military, were forbidden to enter areas where they had no jurisdiction. Military campaigning was to be done without devastating agricultural land or devastating cities, actions seen as reducing potential tax revenues for the imperial treasury. Private property was to be respected. Theft and brigandage were to be punished, with death the punishment even for minor offences.

In Mongol society, meanwhile, women had more independence than those in Islamic and western societies. Mongol women could own property and pursue litigation. And they served as auxiliaries in the military, remaining hidden in the encampment during combat but joining the fight if an emergency made that necessary. Under Möngke's rule, clergymen and monks were exempted from labour on community projects (the *corvée*). Under Möngke as under Genghis Khan, people were allowed to worship

as they chose. Buddhism, Islam and Christianity flourished. And, in 1252, Möngke's regime made official the worship of Genghis Khan.

In the 1250's, France's king, Louis IX was concerned about the Holy Land and hoped for an alliance with the Mongols in order to destroy Islam. The Mongols were not interested, but they did begin expanding from Persia toward Mesopotamia. Old habits die hard and, as usual, cities that resisted were destroyed and their people put to the sword -- as a warning to other cities.

In 1258 a Mongol army led by Möngke's brother, Hülegü, attacked Baghdad. Some Christians in Baghdad used the coming of the Mongols as an opportunity to free themselves from Muslim rule or to avenge past wrongs, and Mongols military leaders were willing to use the conflict between Christians and Muslim rulers to their advantage. Baghdad resisted the Mongol advance and was utterly destroyed, with Christians and Shi'a Muslims in the Mongol army reported to have been the most fervent participants in butchering religious opponents -- Baghdad's Sunni Muslim inhabitants -- with Christians and Shi'a Muslims being spared.

Baghdad was conquered, bringing to a permanent end the Abbasid caliphate and Baghdad as an Islamic spiritual capital. In modern times, before the 20th century, some Muslims who were to wonder how their great civilization had declined and were to put blame on the Mongols rather than to find fault with anything Islamic. But Islamic empire had suffered a setback only, and Islam had successes ahead of it.

In 1259 Hülegü's army entered Damascus. The Christians greeted the Mongol army with joy, and with Mongol rule having come to Damascus the Christians there found themselves able to demonstrate hauteur to the Muslims of the city. After conquering Damascus, the Mongol army headed southward towards Egypt, but in September 1260 their advance was stopped by the Mamelukes.

Meanwhile, Möngke had announced his decision to conquer the rest of China. In 1258, after two years of preparation, his army invaded China's Sichuan province. There, in 1259, Möngke died in battle. Möngke was to

be the last of the Great Khans to rule from Karakorum and the last to exercise authority over the entire Mongol empire. After Möngke's death another fight ensued over who was to become the Great Khan. Succeeding Möngke was one of his brothers, who would be known as Kubilai Khan -- a 41-year-old grandson of Genghis Khan who had been fighting alongside Möngke in China. Others in the west, wishing to be the Great Khan declared themselves as such and established independent kingdoms, bringing division to the Mongol empire.

## **Kubilai Khan and China, Korea and Japan**

Kubilai Khan wished to pursue the subjugation of southern China before it could develop into a more powerful adversary. Southern China also attracted Kubilai Khan by its wealth, including grain surpluses and towns along China's southern coast that were prospering from seaborne trade. China from around the Yangzi River to the south would be the largest area, have the largest population and have the greatest resources of any area yet conquered by the Mongols. Kubilai Khan tried to persuade the Song emperor to subjugate himself peacefully, and when this did not happen he drove his army of various ethnicities (including Chinese and Persians) deeper into China, while his navy, manned by Jurzhen and Koreans, sailed south along China's coast. The drive took sixteen years, the conquest ending around 1276 -- the year after a tradesman from Venice, Marco Polo, arrived at Kubilai Khan's capital, Beijing.

Kubilai Khan relied on his military to suppress any attempt by the Chinese to rebel. Kubilai Khan interfered little in China's economy, and Confucianists were left without much influence, giving Chinese merchants a temporary break. The Mongols assimilated little with the Chinese, Kubilai Khan not wishing to see his army of occupation becoming Chinese. Nevertheless a little mixing between conquerors and the conquered took place -- mainly Mongol soldiers taking Chinese wives.

After consolidating his rule in China, Kubilai Khan sent envoys to demand tribute from Japan and threatened reprisals if they did not. From the palace at Kyoto the Japanese answered that their nation had divine origins and therefore was not to be subject to anyone, and they began preparing a

defence. Skeptical about Japan's claim, Kubilai Khan felt that he could not permit a little power like Japan to defy him. In 1274 he launched an assault on Japan from southern Korea -- a Mongol, Chinese and Korean force, with 600 to 900 ships, 23,000 troops, catapults, combustible missiles, bows and arrows. Bad weather compelled the invasion force to return from Japan's southern most major island -- Kyushu. In the summer of 1281 Kubilai Khan tried again, this time sending some 4000 ships. For fifty-three days the Japanese held the invaders to a narrow beachhead on Kyushu. Then a hurricane struck. The Mongols withdrew again, only half of his force making it back to China. The Japanese interpreted their good fortune as he work of their gods. labeling the hurricane as a god wind -- kami-kaze. It would be the last attempt to invade Japan until 1945, when kamikaze would also be a word of significance.



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