

The Man who almost Conquered the World

Haywards Heath & District Probus Club



Introduction

As a boy, he was rejected by his clan, yet as an adult, he clawed his way to power, coming to believe he was destined to rule the world. And he nearly succeeded. His name was Genghis Khan.

Genghis Khan (Mongol Emperor from 1206 until he died in 1227) is a name that resonates with all who have heard of his harrowing exploits. History portrays him as a brutal emperor who massacred millions of Asian and Eastern European people. However, he brought law and civilisation to Mongolia and is regarded as a hero in his native land. His Mongolian Empire also practised religious and racial tolerance and valued the leadership of women.

The Upstart Warlord

In the early 13th century, Wanyan Yongji, mighty emperor of the Jin¹, sent a message to an upstart warlord who had dared to invade his territory. "Our empire is as vast as the sea," it read. "Yours is but a handful of sand. How can we fear you?" It was a bold statement, but one that was, on the face of it at least, fully justified. The Jin dynasty of northern China was perhaps the most powerful polity on Earth at the time. They had unimaginable wealth, gunpowder and an enormous army equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry, such as catapults. What's more, they could call upon the protection of one of the foremost engineering feats of all time, the Great Wall of China. So why should they be concerned about a nomad army riding roughshod over their land? But there were a couple of problems.² The Jin weren't facing any old bunch of nomads, and the man commanding them wasn't just any old leader. He was Genghis Khan.



Picture Credit: "Genghis Khan: The Exhibition" by williamcho is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

¹ The Jin dynasty (or the Jin Empire) was a Chinese dynasty traditionally dated from 266 to 420 AD. It was founded by Sima Yan, eldest son of Sima Zhao, who was made the King of Jin and posthumously declared one of the founders of the dynasty, along with Sima Zhao's elder brother Sima Shi and father, Sima Yi. It followed the Three Kingdoms period (220–280 AD), which ended with the conquest of Eastern Wu, culminating in the reunification of China proper.

² Source: History Extra, [HERE](#).

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Who was Genghis Khan?

Genghis Khan³ (birth name: Temüjin Borjigin) was born in Delüün Boldog⁴ in 1162, the son of the chief of the Yakka Mongols. He died in 1227 at the age of 65. According to legend, he was born with a blood clot in his clenched fist, foretelling his emergence as a great leader. He was a tall fearsome-looking man, had a long beard, and likely sported red hair and green eyes. Although he would have looked Asian, the mixing of European and Asian characteristics was quite common in Mongolia at the time.

He was the founder and first Great Khan and Emperor of the Mongol Empire. It became the largest contiguous Empire in history, stretching from the Pacific Ocean to eastern Europe. He came to power by uniting many of the nomadic tribes of Northeast Asia. After founding the Empire and being proclaimed Genghis Khan (meaning 'Universal, oceanic, and firm/strong ruler and lord'), he launched the Mongol invasions that conquered most of Eurasia, reaching as far west as Poland and the Levant in the Middle East.⁵ As well as modern-day Mongolia, Khan's Empire included most of China, Korea, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and some parts of Russia. He conquered most of Eurasia, reaching as far west as Poland and as far south as Egypt.

Campaigns initiated in his lifetime include those against the Qara Khitai, Khwarezmia, and the Western Xia and Jin dynasties, and raids into Medieval Georgia, the Kievan Rus', and Volga Bulgaria. These campaigns were often accompanied by large-scale massacres of the civilian populations. Because of this brutality, which left millions of humans dead in his pursuit of power, Genghis Khan is considered by many to have been a brutal ruler. By the end of his life, the Mongol Empire occupied a substantial portion of Central Asia and China. Due to his exceptional military successes, Genghis Khan is often considered the greatest conqueror of all time.

Beyond his military accomplishments, Genghis Khan also advanced the Mongol Empire in other ways. He decreed the adoption of the Uyghur script⁶ as the Mongol Empire's writing system. He also practised meritocracy and encouraged religious tolerance in the Mongol Empire, unifying the nomadic tribes of Northeast Asia. Present-day Mongolians regard him as the founding father of Mongolia. He is also credited with bringing the Silk Road under one cohesive political environment bringing relatively easy communication and trade between Northeast Asia, Muslim Southwest Asia, and Christian Europe, expanding the cultural horizons of all three areas.

Upbringing

Little is known about Genghis Khan's early life due to the lack of contemporary written records, and the few sources that give insight into this period often contradict. Temüjin had three brothers **Hasar**, **Hachiun**, and **Temüge**, one sister **Temülen**, and two half-brothers **Begter** and **Belgutei**. Like many of the nomads of Mongolia, Temüjin's early life was difficult.⁷ His father arranged a marriage for him and delivered him at age nine to the family of his future wife, **Börte** of the tribe **Khongirad**. Temüjin was to live there serving the head of the household Dai Setsen until the marriageable age of 12.

While heading home, his father ran into the neighbouring **Tatars**, who had long been Mongol enemies, and they offered his father food, thereby poisoning him. Upon learning this, Temüjin returned home to claim his father's position as chief, but the tribe refused him and abandoned the family, leaving it without protection.

For several years, the family lived in poverty, mainly surviving on wild fruits, **ox carcasses**, **marmots** (squirrels), and other small game killed by Temüjin and his brothers. Temüjin's older half-brother **Begter** began to exercise power as the oldest male in the family and would eventually have the right to claim Hoelun (who was not his own mother) as a wife. Temüjin's resentment erupted during one hunting excursion when Temüjin and his brother **Khasar** killed **Begter**.

³ Also named officially as Genghis Huangdi.

⁴ Located near the sacred mountain **Burkhan Khaldun** and the Onon and Kherlen Rivers, in modern-day northern **Mongolia**, close to the current capital **Ulaanbaatar**.

⁵ Source: Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan

⁶ The Old Uyghur alphabet was used for writing the Old Uyghur language, a variety of Old Turkic spoken in Turfan and Gansu that is the ancestor of the modern Western Yugur language.

⁷ See: *Lee, Sieun (2016). Molecular Genealogy of a Mongol Queen's Family and Her Possible Kinship with Genghis Khan. University of Mongolia. ISBN 978-0-8153-4149-9.*

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In a raid around 1177, Temüjin was captured by his father's former allies, the **Tayichi'ud**, and enslaved, reportedly with a **cangue** (a sort of portable stocks). With the help of a sympathetic guard, he escaped from the **ger** (yurt) at night by hiding in a river crevice. The escape earned Temüjin a reputation. Soon, **Jelme** and **Bo'orchu** joined forces with him. They and the guard's son **Chilaun** eventually became generals of Genghis Khan. At this time, none of the tribal **confederations** of Mongolia were united politically, and an arranged marriage was often used to solidify temporary alliances. Hoelun, Temüjin's mother, taught him many lessons, especially the need for strong alliances to ensure stability in Mongolia.⁸

The Conquering of Russia and Brilliant Military Tactics

Conquering Russia⁹

Genghis Khan and his sons waged major wars on two fronts simultaneously and conquered Russia in winter – both feats that eluded Napoleon and Hitler. How was this possible for a land of two million illiterate nomads? The answer was a quantum leap in military technology, which brought mounted archery to its acme. The speed and mobility of Mongol archers, the accuracy of their long-range shooting, their uncanny horsemanship – all allied to Genghis's ruthless 'surrender or die' policy and his brilliant perception that this gave him the possibility of living off tribute from the rest of the world – combined to make the Mongols unbeatable. As the military historian Basil Liddell Hart pointed out, Genghis was a military innovator in two critical respects: he realised that cavalry did not need to have infantry backup, and he grasped the importance of massed artillery barrages.

Most historians claim this astonishing achievement resulted from massacres and bloodshed not seen again until the 20th century.

Brilliant Military Tactics¹⁰

The early success of the Mongol army owed much to the brilliant military tactics of Genghis Khan, as well as his understanding of his enemies' motivations. He employed an extensive spy network and was quick to adopt new technologies from his enemies:

- The well-trained Mongol army of 80,000 fighters coordinated their advance with a sophisticated signalling system of smoke and burning torches.
- Large drums sounded commands to charge, and further orders were conveyed with flag signals.
- Every soldier was fully equipped with a bow, arrows, a shield, a dagger and a lasso.
- They also carried large saddlebags for food, tools and spare clothes. The saddlebag was waterproof and could be inflated for use as a life preserver when crossing deep and swift-moving rivers.
- Cavalrymen carried a small sword, spears, body armour, a battle-axe or mace, and a lance with a hook to pull enemies off of their horses.

The Mongols were devastating in their attacks. Because they could manoeuvre a galloping horse using only their legs, their hands were free to shoot arrows. The entire army was followed by a well-organized supply system of ox carts carrying food for soldiers and beasts alike, military equipment, shamans¹¹ for spiritual and medical aid, and officials to catalogue the booty.

The Secret History of the Mongols

Genghis Khan's birth name was *Temüjin*, a word derived from the Mongol word *temür* meaning "of iron", and *jin* denoting agency, and together mean *Temüjin* meaning "blacksmith". *The Secret History of the Mongols* reports that *Temüjin* was born grasping a blood clot in his fist, a traditional sign that he was destined to become a great leader. *The Secret History* is regarded as the single most significant native Mongolian account of Genghis Khan. Linguistically, it provides the richest source of pre-classical Mongolian and Middle Mongolian and is considered a piece of classic literature in both Mongolia and the rest of the world.

⁸ This section is from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genghis_Khan

⁹ Source: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/the-brutal-brilliance-of-genghis-khan/>

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.biography.com/dictator/genghis-khan>

¹¹ Shamanism is a religious practice that involves a practitioner interacting with what they believe to be a spirit world through altered states of consciousness, such as a trance.

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You can read about The Secret History in the book titled: *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan* (Note the spelling of Genghis) available at Amazon from [HERE](#).

Why the Dynasty Ended...

Attribution: National Palace Museum, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Paint and ink on silk. For the full page, see [Image:YuanEmperorAlbumGenghisFull.jpg](#)



In 1206, Genghis Khan, a fierce tribal chieftain from northern Mongolia, began to take over the world. His ruthless tactics and loyal horde swept across Asia, and one territory after another fell under the overwhelming force of the Mongol Empire, which would eventually stretch from the eastern shores of China. A series of successful forays in Hungary and Poland made even Europe seem within reach of conquering. By 1240, my paternal grandfather's home city Kiev (now capital of modern-day Ukraine), had been sacked. But this unstoppable wave of victories in Europe suddenly ended. Almost as soon as the Mongols set their sights on Austria, they abruptly returned to Asia.

A study reported on in the journal *Scientific Reports*¹² looked at a different kind of record to solve the mystery of the horde's abrupt exit from central Europe: tree rings. The rings revealed that a cold and wet period set in for years, leading "to reduced pastureland and decreased mobility, as well as hampering the military effectiveness of the Mongol cavalry".¹³

Death, Succession and Cessation

In early 1227 a horse threw Genghis Khan to the ground, causing internal injuries. He pressed on with the campaign against the Xi Xia, but his health never recovered. He died on 18th August 1227, just before the Xi Xia were crushed. When he died, his son Ogodei inherited a territory that extended from northeast China to the Caspian Sea, just north of modern-day Iran. In total, it measured an astonishing 11 million square miles.

"Whether measured by the total number of people defeated, the sum of the countries annexed, or by the total area occupied, Genghis Khan conquered more than twice as much as any man in history," wrote historian Jack Weatherford in his book, *'Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World'*.

After Genghis' death, Ogodei Khan perpetrated his father's legacy, expanding the territory to the east and west, conquering the remainder of northwest China and pushing into Russia, aided by favourable wet conditions that allowed the Mongol armies to bring thousands of horses across the Gobi desert. After Kiev was sacked in 1240, the horde rapidly advanced west, their cavalry and siege tactics laying waste to the cities of Europe. The vast Mongol army armed with Chinese gunpowder overran Hungary in early March 1241. Ogodei's troops slaughtered an estimated one million Hungarians - the military, clerics, nobles, knights, and peasants. It was one of the bloodiest defeats of the medieval period.

Some nine months later, Ogodei Khan died unexpectedly and his widow, Toregene, took power as the Great Khatun. The following year, everything changed. The marauding horde suddenly turned south, moving through modern-day Serbia, and headed back through Russia.

Although subsequent khans staged occasional raids on European cities, the major war campaign was over. Several hypotheses exist as to why the army abandoned their western front, but none is convincingly sufficient to explain the change in course.

¹² See: <https://www.nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/srep25606>

¹³ According to a press release - see: <http://www.newshub.co.nz/world/european-winter-may-have-ended-the-mongol-conquest-2016052613>

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The Good and the Bad

It can be said of Genghis Khan that starting from obscure and insignificant beginnings, he brought all the nomadic tribes of Mongolia under the rule of himself and his family in a rigidly disciplined military state. However, the devastation and murderous attrition wreaked on the people in territories subsumed into the Mongol Empire is likely to be remembered more than the good he brought to the table. No living thing was spared, including small domestic animals and livestock. Skulls of men, women, and children were piled in large, pyramidal mounds.

The 13th century chronicler **Matthew Paris** called the Mongol Empire a "detestable nation of Satan that poured out like devils from Tartarus so that they are rightly called Tartars." He was making a play on words with the classical word Tartarus (Hell) and the ancient tribal name of **Tatar** borne by some of the nomads, but his account catches the terror that the Mongols evoked.¹⁴

Sources and Further Reading

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¹⁴ Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Genghis-Khan> ¹⁴ See: <http://www.newshub.co.nz/world/european-winter-may-have-ended-the-mongol-conquest-2016052613>

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Genghis-Khan>