

Biography of Genghis Khan

In less than 100 years, Genghis Khan and his descendants established the largest empire in the world, exceeded only by the British Empire in the 19th century. Through cunning diplomacy, spiritual mission, and brute force, Genghis Khan unified the incompatible Mongols and then set out east and west to swiftly conquer vast parts of Asia. The Mongol army swept down on cities and villages, taking anything as booty or victims.



By 1280, Mongol rule stretched from China's Yellow Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, a total of 12 million square miles. Among the descendants of Genghis Khan, the most well-known is his grandson, Kublai Khan, admired for his enlightened rule and famous for his luxurious lifestyle. During its brief existence, the Mongol Empire was responsible for an estimated 30 to 40 million deaths, the destruction of several major dynasties, and altering the development of many other civilizations. Yet, at the same time, Genghis Khan and his descendants increased Europe's knowledge of the Asia, established major trade routes between East and West, and unified large regions in western Russia and China that remain united today.



Genghis Khan was born in north central Mongolia and named "Temujin" after a Tatar chieftain that his father, Yesukhei, had captured. According to the "Secret History of the Mongols" (a contemporary account of Mongol history), Temujin was born with a blood clot in his hand, a sign in Mongol folklore that he was destined to become a leader. His mother, Hoelun, taught him the grim reality of living in turbulent Mongol tribal society and the need for

alliances.

When Temujin was 9, his father took him to live with the family of his future bride, Borte. On the return trip home, Yesukhei encountered members of the rival Tatar tribe, who invited him to a peace-making meal, where he was poisoned for past wrongdoings against the Tatars. Upon hearing of his father's death, Temujin returned home to claim his position

as clan chief. However, the clan refused to recognize the young boy's leadership and ostracized his family of younger brothers and half-brothers to near-refugee status. The pressure on the family was great, and in a dispute over the spoils of a hunting expedition, Temujin quarreled with and killed his half-brother Bekhter, confirming his position as head of the family.

At 16, Temujin married Borte, cementing the alliance between the Konkirat tribe and his own. Soon after, Borte was kidnapped by the rival Merkit tribe and given to a chieftain as a wife. Temujin was able to rescue her and soon after she gave birth to her first son, Jochi. Though Borte's captivity with the Konkirat tribe cast doubt on Jochi's birth, Temujin accepted him as his own. With Borte, Temujin had four sons and many other children with other wives, as was Mongolian custom. However, only his male children with Borte qualified for succession in the family.

When Temujin was about 20, he was captured in a raid by former family allies, the Taichi'uts, and temporarily enslaved. He escaped with the help of a sympathetic captor and joined his brothers and several other clansmen to form a fighting unit. Temujin began his slow ascent to power by building a large army of more than 20,000 men. He set out to destroy traditional divisions among the various tribes and unite the Mongols under his



rule. Through a combination of outstanding military tactics and merciless brutality, Temujin avenged his father's murder by decimating the Tatar army and ordered the killing of every Tatar male less than 3 feet tall. Temujin's Mongols then defeated, the Taichi'ut, using a series of massive cavalry attacks, and had all the Taichi'ut chiefs boiled alive. By 1206, Temujin also had defeated the powerful Naiman tribe, thus giving him control of central and eastern Mongolia.

The early success of the Mongol army owed much to the brilliant military tactics of Genghis Khan and 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 signaling 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 bow,

arrows, shield, dagger, and lasso. He also carried large saddlebags for food, tools, and spare clothes. The saddlebag was waterproof and could be inflated to serve as a life preserver when crossing deep and swift-moving rivers. Cavalrymen carried a small sword, javelins, body armor, a battle-ax or mace, and a lance with a hook to pull enemies off their horses. They were devastating in their attacks. Because they could maneuver 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, as well as military equipment, shamans for spiritual and medical aid, and officials to catalog the booty.

Following the victories over the rival Mongol tribes, other tribal leaders agreed to peace and bestowed on Temujin the title of "Genghis Khan," which means "universal ruler." The title carried not only political importance, but also spiritual significance. The leading spiritualist declared Genghis Khan the representative of Mongke Koko Tengri (the "Eternal Blue Sky"), the supreme god of the Mongols. With this declaration of divine status, it was accepted that his destiny was to rule the world. Religious tolerance was practiced in the Mongol Empire, but to defy the Great Khan was equal to defying the will of God. It was with such religious fervor that Genghis Khan is supposed to have said to one of his enemies, "I am the wave of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you."

Genghis Khan wasted no time in capitalizing on his divine stature. While spiritual inspiration motivated his armies, the Mongols were probably driven as much by environmental circumstances. Food and resources were becoming scarce as the population grew. In 1207, he led his armies against the kingdom of Xi Xia and, after two years, forced it to surrender. In 1211, Genghis Khan's armies struck the Jin Dynasty in northern China, lured not by the great cities' artistic and scientific wonders, but rather the seemingly endless rice fields and easy pickings of wealth.

Although the campaign against the Jin Dynasty lasted nearly 20 years, Genghis Khan's armies were also active in the west against border empires and the Muslim world. Initially,



Genghis Khan used diplomacy to establish trade relations with the Khwarizm Dynasty, a Turkish-dominated empire that included Turkestan, Persia, and Afghanistan. But the Mongol diplomatic mission was attacked by the governor of Otrar, who possibly believed the caravan was a cover for a spy mission. When Genghis Khan heard of this affront, he demanded the governor be extradited to him and sent a diplomat to retrieve him. Shah Muhammad, the leader of the Khwarizm Dynasty, not only refused the demand, but in defiance sent back the head of the Mongol diplomat.

This act released a fury that would sweep through central Asia and into eastern Europe. In 1219, Genghis Khan personally took control of planning and executing a three-prong attack of 200,000 Mongol soldiers against the Khwarizm Dynasty. The Mongols swept through every city's fortifications with unstoppable savagery. Those who weren't immediately slaughtered were driven in front of the Mongol army, serving as human shields when the Mongols took the next city. No living thing was spared, including small domestic animals and livestock. Skulls of men, women, and children were piled in large, pyramidal mounds. City after city was brought to its knees, and eventually the Shah Muhammad and later his son were captured and killed, bringing an end to the Khwarizm Dynasty in 1221.

Scholars describe the period after the Khwarizm campaign as the Pax Mongolica. In time, the conquests of Genghis Khan connected the major trade centers of China and Europe. The empire was governed by a legal code known as Yassa. Developed by Genghis Khan, the code was based on Mongol common law but contained edicts that prohibited blood feuds, adultery, theft, and bearing false witness. Also included were laws that reflected Mongol respect for the environment such as forbidding bathing in rivers and streams and orders for any soldier following another to pick up anything that the first soldier dropped. Infraction of any of these laws was usually punishable by death. Advancement within military and government ranks was not based on traditional lines of heredity or ethnicity, but on merit. There were tax exemptions for religious and some professional leaders, as well as a degree of religious tolerance that reflected the long-held Mongol tradition of religion as a personal conviction not subject to law or interference. This tradition had practical applications as there were so many different religious groups in the empire, it would have been an extra burden to force a single religion on them.

With the annihilation of the Khwarizm Dynasty, Genghis Khan once again turned his attention east to China. The Tanguts of Xi Xia had defied his orders to contribute troops to the Khwarizm campaign and were in open revolt. In a string of victories against Tangut cities, Genghis Khan defeated enemy armies and sacked the capital of Ning Hia. Soon one Tangut official surrendered after another, and the resistance ended. Genghis Khan hadn't quite extracted all the revenge he wanted for the Tangut betrayal, however, and ordered the execution of the imperial family, thus ending the Tangut lineage.



Genghis Khan died in 1227 soon after the submission of the Xi Xia. The exact reason is uncertain. Some historians maintain he fell off a horse while on a hunt and died of fatigue and injuries. Others contend he died of respiratory disease. Genghis Khan was buried without markings according to the customs of his tribe, somewhere near his birthplace close to the Onon River and the Khentii Mountains in northern Mongolia. According to legend, the funeral escort killed anyone and anything they encountered to conceal the location of the burial site, and a river was diverted over his grave to make it impossible to find.

Before his death, Genghis Khan bestowed supreme leadership to his son Ogedei, who controlled most of eastern Asia, including China. The rest of the empire was divided among his other sons.

