

Bedtime Biography: Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World

Introduction

Bedtime Biographies are best when listened to. Check out the audio version to get the full experience! Genghis Khan's reputation today is fraught, to say the least. Across the world, myths and legends recount tales of a man who embodied brutality itself - a man who destroyed civilizations and murdered for sport. But how accurate really is this characterization? Was Genghis Khan a destroyer of civilizations, or a uniter of them? Was he a ruthless conqueror, a fair leader - or a bit of both? Was he born into greatness, or did he have to earn it? Find out in this bedtime biography.

Chapter 1

A teenaged girl and her husband galloped furiously across the steppes of central Asia, pursued by three horsemen from a different tribe. The man - Chiledu - attempted to create a diversion by circling around the base of a nearby mountain. But the girl - Hoelun - knew her husband's efforts were doomed to fail. These lands belonged to their attackers, and the cargo she and her husband were carrying was far too valuable to ignore. Hoelun was probably no more than sixteen years old. Yet she was about to make a decision that would forever change the course of history. When Chiledu returned to her, Hoelun disclosed her plan. She'd surrender to their attackers, allowing herself to be kidnapped in order to give her husband a chance to live on. It took a lot to persuade Chiledu to leave her, but after some time, he finally agreed to her plan. Hoelun's pursuers soon caught up to her. As the horsemen approached, she saw for the first time, the man, Yesugei, who was soon to become her new husband - and the father of her first child. According to legend, Hoelun's first child emerged from her womb in 1162 clutching something in his right fist. Nervously, Hoelun peeled back the boy's tiny fingers. Between them was a large black blood clot. Hoelun struggled to determine the significance of this strange sign. Was it a prophecy of doom or great fortune? Good or evil? A blessing or a curse? The child, as you might have guessed, was the boy who would one day become Genghis Khan. At this point in his life, though, he was called Temujin. Not much is known about the life of young Temujin. The details that survive are sparse - but telling. His father, Yesugei, already had a wife and son when he kidnapped Hoelun. This meant that Hoelun's rank in Yesugei's clan was low, and the child she bore held little value. In fact, Yesugei even once accidentally left the young Temujin behind when the clan was moving to another camp. Even so, things worsened for them after he died. Yesugei was no longer there to help the clan fight and hunt - which meant they had little incentive to continue harboring his entire family. He had left behind two wives and seven children - which, to the clan, just meant nine extra mouths to feed. One day, the clan made the decision to move south, in search of a warmer territory. Ahead of the migration, they decided to leave Hoelun, Yesugei's other widow, and all of their children behind. Before the last of the village were packed and ready to depart, an old man from a low-ranking family spoke up and objected to what the clan was doing to Yesugei's family. In response, one of the deserting clansmen declared that the old man had no right to criticize the decision. Then, without another word, he turned and speared the old man to death. The young Temujin saw this and ran to help the dying man, but there was nothing he could do. He sobbed as the life eked from the man's body. At that moment, Temujin's belief that your value as a person should be dependent on deeds rather than social rank, started to form. This man, who had no relation to him at all, who came from a low rank in the clan, had shown him kindness for

no apparent reason. It was a lesson Temujin would never forget. By all accounts, Temujin's family should have quickly died, cold and alone on the steppes. But they didn't, thanks to the strength and determination of Hoelun. Day and night, Hoelun ran up and down the river, collecting berries and roots for her young children, while Temujin carved arrows to hunt rats with. The family lived on the verge of starvation, warming themselves with pelts made from the skins of dogs and mice – but they survived. The tragedies of Temujin's early life left a lasting impression on him and shaped his rise to power. One particularly haunting incident involved his older half-brother, Begter. The family lives of Mongol herders typically rested on a strict hierarchy. Children were expected to obey their parents unquestioningly and, in the absence of a parental figure, the eldest brother in a family had the right to exert power over his siblings. He could assign them tasks, and give and take whatever he wanted from them. For Temujin, this often meant that he had to defer to Begter's authority. One day, for instance, Temujin shot and killed a lark – but Begter claimed it for himself, perhaps for no other reason than to enforce his status as the head of the family. Eventually, Temujin couldn't tolerate his half-brother's behavior anymore. One day, after a fight with his mother about this tension, he and his full brother, Khasar, stormed out of their family's abode in search of Begter, with their bows and arrows in tow. Before long, the pair found Begter sitting on a small knoll overlooking the steppe. Silently, Temujin gestured to Khasar to circle around to the front of the knoll. Khasar was, after all, the better shot. Temujin would approach from the back. Both brothers crept silently toward their half-brother and readied their weapons. When they were in position, they sprung out of the grass, bows aimed, and fired. Begter was hit and started bleeding. In Mongol culture, it's considered profane to come into direct contact with blood. And so to avoid it, the two brothers ran off, leaving Begter to die alone on the steppe. The incident shook Temujin's family life. The brothers had committed a deeply taboo act that transformed them from mere outcasts into criminals. They'd spend the coming years on the run, and Temujin would ultimately be captured by another clan and held prisoner for an unknown number of years. Besides the repercussions of this event, what it demonstrated was how Temujin already possessed the characteristics he would later become famous for. His tactical acumen and leadership skill was obvious in his decision to direct Khasar – the better archer – to the front of the knoll where Begter was resting. Even more importantly, he'd shown his willingness to take revenge, even if it meant killing family members – and, in the process, violating important traditions and customs.

Chapter 2

Temujin and his childhood friend, Jamuka, stood in front of a tree at the edge of a steep cliff. They'd come together to make vows of sworn brotherhood to one another – vows they'd already taken twice before in their younger years. This time, though, they were doing it as two grown men. The two exchanged horses and golden sashes. Through these gifts, Temujin and Jamuka were offering parts of their souls and symbols of their manhood. That day, they swore never to forsake each other. Temujin's small band would now join with Jamuka's and learn about the herding way of life. For a while, Temujin was content with that arrangement, allowing Jamuka to take the lead. But Temujin was still the man who'd once preferred to kill his older half-brother rather than submit to his dominance. And so over the next few months, as Jamuka began to treat Temujin less like an equal and more like a younger brother, Temujin's resentment grew. He couldn't stand it. One day, after Jamuka had snubbed him in a particularly offensive way, Temujin consulted with his mother about how he should respond. In the discussion, Borte, Temujin's wife, interjected. She insisted that Temujin break with Jamuka and that his

people – and whomever wished to follow them – should set out on their own. Taking this advice, a group, joined by many of Jamuka’s people and led by Temujin, fled the camp in secret. That night marked the start of two decades of warfare between the two blood brothers. They’d begun their relationship as the closest of friends and transformed, tragically, into the bitterest of enemies. As time went on, Jamuka and Temujin began separately amassing groups of followers. Various Mongol families and clans would throw their allegiance behind one or the other, forming alliances that were constantly shifting due to convenience or pragmatic concerns. Years went by without either of the two gaining the upper hand. Then, finally, in the summer of 1189, when Temujin was twenty-seven years old, he decided to make a bold move. He would claim the title of khan – chief of the Mongols. By doing so, Temujin hoped to attract more of Jamuka’s followers and thereby really become khan, in more than name only. After Temujin Khan claimed his title, he assembled a new power structure for his clan, selecting assistants, archers, and bodyguards. Significantly, he made his appointments based on the merits of the individuals in question – rather than whether or not they were related to him. For Mongol society at the time, this was a radical change. With that in place, Temujin Khan was emboldened to start conducting raids on foreign, non-Mongol clans. His authority and following grew to greater and greater heights. As it did, he started instituting even more radical reforms. One of them concerned the policy of looting. Traditionally, the Mongols rushed to loot a clan they’d defeated, allowing any surviving clanspeople to flee. This, however, enabled the defeated warriors to eventually return for a counterattack. Instead, Temujin ordered his people not to allow anyone to flee. They were to subdue any surviving warriors, ensuring a complete victory. Only then could they begin looting. And when they did, all goods were to be brought to him before being redistributed fairly among his followers. In addition, he implemented policies aimed at fostering unity by, for example, encouraging intermarriage between clans. He reorganized his warriors into squads of ten, which inspired a sense of comradeship that ignored traditional bonds of kinship, lineage, and ethnicity. Finally, he established a rule that everyone in the clan had to perform one day of community service per week to reinforce the idea of total equality among the clanspeople. After years of raids and consolidating power, Temujin Khan ranked as the best military leader on the steppe. But he still deferred to the authority of Ong Khan, who controlled the central territory. Ong Khan realized this and knew that Temujin’s rise meant his power was at risk. It would’ve been reckless to take Temujin on head-to-head, so he opted for a trick instead. This is what it was: Temujin had requested a marriage between his son and Ong Khan’s daughter. Ong Khan accepted the proposal – at least, ostensibly. In reality, he planned to use the opportunity to wipe out Temujin and his family. Unfortunately for Ong Khan, Temujin was informed about his intended treachery in the nick of time. And so far from home and in unfamiliar lands, Temujin ordered the band of followers he’d brought with him to disperse and flee before they could be killed. What would Temujin Khan do now, on the run and far away from his people’s home? And what would his people do in the absence of their leader?

Chapter 3

What happened in the wake of Ong Khan’s betrayal became the stuff of legends among the Mongol people. After being on the run all day, Temujin eventually reached the shores of Lake Baljuna. He and the nineteen men that had come with him were at risk of starving in this remote, inhospitable land. But, suddenly, a wild horse approached from the north. A potential source of food, Temujin’s brother, Khasar, rode out and killed the animal so the group could eat. In Mongol culture, horses are considered the most

important and honored animal. So, its appearance in such a dire situation was a sign of divine intervention and support for the band of men. The horse fed them and gave them the strength to push onward. At the end of the meal, Temujin toasted his men, thanked them for their loyalty, and swore he would always remember what they'd done. In return, the men swore eternal allegiance to him. The agreement came to be known as the Baljuna Covenant. Its significance took on mythic proportions and formed a kind of origin story for what was soon to become the Mongol Empire. After cementing the covenant, Temujin decided to go on the counterattack while Ong Khan was still basking in his victory. His army began to knit itself back together across the steppe, and they raced together toward the feast held by Ong Khan. When they arrived, they swooped down on the revelers and fought Ong Khan's armies over the next three days. Temujin's army didn't just defeat Ong Khan's - they swallowed it whole. Ong Khan's closest advisors scattered in different directions across the steppes. His son was abandoned by his own servants and died of thirst in the desert. As for what happened to Ong Khan himself - only rumors remain. One year later, in 1204, Temujin Khan fought his final battle over the one last clan that resisted his leadership. He'd won total control over all the territories of Mongolia - an area that was, at that time, the size of modern Western Europe. All that was needed now was a title to match. He chose to name his people Yeke Mongol Ulus, or the Great Mongol Nation. For himself, he rejected traditional titles like Gur-Khan, or khan of all khans. Instead, he chose the name his followers likely already called him: Chinggis Khan, from the word chin meaning strong, firm, unshakeable, and fearless. From that point on, Genghis Khan began the work of building an empire - the largest empire, in fact, that the world had ever seen. Straight away, Genghis Khan established his Great Law - a new set of rules designed to stamp out the causes for the tribal feuds and wars that had traditionally plagued his people. The Great Law was revolutionary for its time. It didn't require recourse to a higher power, divine revelation, or ancient code. Instead, it drew from the traditional customs of the Mongol people and simply got rid of any practices that hindered the progress of the new society. He abolished, for instance, the kidnapping of women, forbade the capture and enslavement of any Mongol, and made stealing an animal a capital offense. He also proclaimed that khans must always be elected by a khuriltai - a traditional Mongol council. And most importantly, khans would not be exempt from any of these rules. The Great Law wasn't set in stone, though. Instead, it was a living document that continued to develop over the final two decades of Genghis Khan's life. At this point, Genghis Khan had united all the nomadic peoples of the steppes. What, now, was their objective? In considering this question, he started spoiling for fights with so-called enemies as a means of keeping his people unified against a common foe. So, in 1207, Genghis Khan sent his eldest son, Jochi, to campaign in the area the Mongols called Sibir - what's now called Siberia. He returned with thousands of new recruits, clan leaders, and valuable goods including rare furs and hunting birds. Despite wins like this, the north didn't offer much for Genghis Khan and his people. The real treasures lay to the south, where craftsmen worked to create beautiful textiles and sturdy metals.

Chapter 4

In the thirteenth century, the area south of Mongolia - or modern-day China - consisted of many independent states and kingdoms. All together, they comprised about a third of the world's population. In this region, between 1207 and 1209, Genghis Khan subdued the Tangut people and, in 1211, decided to invade and conquer a group that had once been an ally, the Jurchen. His raid on the Jurchen would eventually develop into a war that would be fought for the next fifteen years, and the lands he took would be

bequeathed to his descendants for generations to come. After Genghis Khan and the Mongols defeated the Jurchen, they brought back with them caravans of people, animals, and goods. Particularly vast was their bounty of silk. The Mongols were so replete with the textile that they used the surplus as packing material and wrapping for their other goods. Back home, the Mongols enjoyed their new silk goods along with lacquered furniture, paper fans, porcelain bowls, metal armor, board games, jugs of perfume and makeup, precious jewelry, and carved saddles. Along with them came people: princes, priests, pharmacists, translators, astrologers, artists, and goldsmiths. The downside of this newfound wealth was that the Mongols' appetite for luxury was growing insatiable. Each caravan Genghis Khan brought back was met with demands for more still. The new craftsmen, for example, needed more raw materials to continue working, and feeding the new mouths required a continuous influx of barley and wheat. Ultimately, Genghis Khan knew that he could no longer afford to keep his people in the steppes isolated. He needed to organize their supply lines, maintain production, and coordinate movements. Genghis Khan was nearly sixty years old in 1219. He himself was content to live out the rest of his days in peace and quiet. He had more goods than he knew what to do with, and now, he wanted to use them to stimulate trade. In particular, he was interested in the goods on offer in the Middle East, west of the Mongolian home base. There, Muslim craftsmen produced steel – the finest of all metals – and glass. The area from modern Afghanistan to the Black Sea was an empire called Khwarizm, and was controlled by Turkic sultan, Muhammad II. Genghis Khan sought a trade partnership with the sultan and Khwarizm, so he sent an envoy who proposed a peaceful agreement. When the sultan cautiously agreed, Genghis Khan sent a delegation of 450 merchants and retainers with a caravan of goods. They travelled in from the northwestern part of Khwarizm through the province of Otrar. Rather than letting them pass through peacefully, the governor of the region launched an attack. He seized the goods and killed all the merchants and their drivers. When news of this reached Genghis Khan, he was enraged. He sent another envoy to the sultan to request that he punish the governor for the attack. But, rather imprudently, the sultan escalated the tension instead. He killed some of the envoys and mutilated the faces of the others before sending them back to the khan. Consumed with rage, the khan immediately withdrew to the nearby mountaintop of Burkhan Khaldun, where he prayed for the strength to enact the appropriate vengeance. Then, after three days and nights, he descended from the hill and prepared for war. Genghis Khan rode for the west in 1219, and with that, kicked off a campaign that was to last four years. In that time, the Mongols swept through and captured the major cities of central Asia with ease. In four years, the Mongols crushed every army from the Himalayas to the Caucasus, the Indus to the Volga. The Muslim lands he conquered were the richest, most technologically and intellectually advanced countries in the world at that time. Everywhere they went, the Mongols promised justice to those who surrendered, and swore destruction to those who didn't. To many of the people they conquered, the Mongols were the epitome of ruthlessness. Chroniclers of the era often described Genghis Khan in apocalyptic terms. The khan himself encouraged this kind of talk, fanning the flames with propaganda about how many people his warriors had killed in battle. Given the high literacy rate of the Muslim people, many could read about Genghis Khan and his exploits – and learn to fear him. At this point, Genghis Khan was in his sixties and not in the best of health. In Mongol society, there was a taboo against discussing or preparing for death. But he knew that his empire would soon require a transition, and so he called together a khuriltai to discuss precisely that subject. He appointed his third son, Ogodei, as his official successor, and then allotted lands and herds to each son. Then, before he died, Genghis launched one last campaign against the Tangut. They were a clan he'd first invaded back in 1207, and whom he still held a grudge against for failing to assist in his

campaign against the Khwarizm. However, there was no getting around it: the Khan's health was failing. A few days before the Mongols' final victory over the Tangut, he passed away. His body was cleaned and dressed in a plain white robe, felt boots, and a hat, then wrapped in a white felt blanket stuffed with sandalwood. This felt coffin was secured with three golden straps, and a procession carried him to his burial place. Afterward, soldiers guarded the area, ensuring that no one except Genghis Khan's family members and a few specific warriors could enter. After his death, Genghis Khan's children took up their father's mantle. They and their descendants were responsible for bringing even more glory - not to mention territory - to the Mongol Empire. At its peak, the Empire stretched across an area the size of the entire continent of Africa. And it came with the diversity of climates and cultures to match. On a modern map, the Mongol Empire would stretch over thirty countries and encompass over 3 billion people, from the frigid Siberian tundra to the sweltering Indian plains. No less impressive was the Mongol Empire's ability to stand the test of time. Genghis Khan's direct descendants ruled in parts of Asia and Europe for seven centuries, and soldiers continued to guard his burial place for nearly eight centuries. His last ruling descendent, Alim Khan of Uzbekistan, was only deposed by the Soviet Union in 1920! Curiously, unlike other empires, the Mongols didn't introduce any new technological breakthroughs, religions, books, or agricultural methods. Instead, their great gift was in their ability to pass all of these things from one culture to another. It's telling that Genghis Khan likely built more physical bridges than any other ruler in history. Genghis Khan and the Mongols undoubtedly caused destruction and shock in the lands that they conquered. But they also contributed to a rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and improved civilization. Who knows what the modern world would look like if it hadn't been for Genghis Khan?

The End

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