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The Mongol Empire



Written by David L. Dreier

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Table of Contents

Brutal Conquerors from Asia	4
Horsemen and Warriors.....	5
Genghis Khan	6
The Mongols Attack China	8
The Mongol Armies	9
The Use of Terror.....	11
Establishing an Empire.....	12
The Death of Genghis Khan	13
New Leaders, New Conquests	14
Kublai Khan.....	16
Division of the Empire	19
The End of Mongol Rule	21
The Influence of the Mongols	22
Seeking Genghis's Burial Place.....	23
Glossary	24

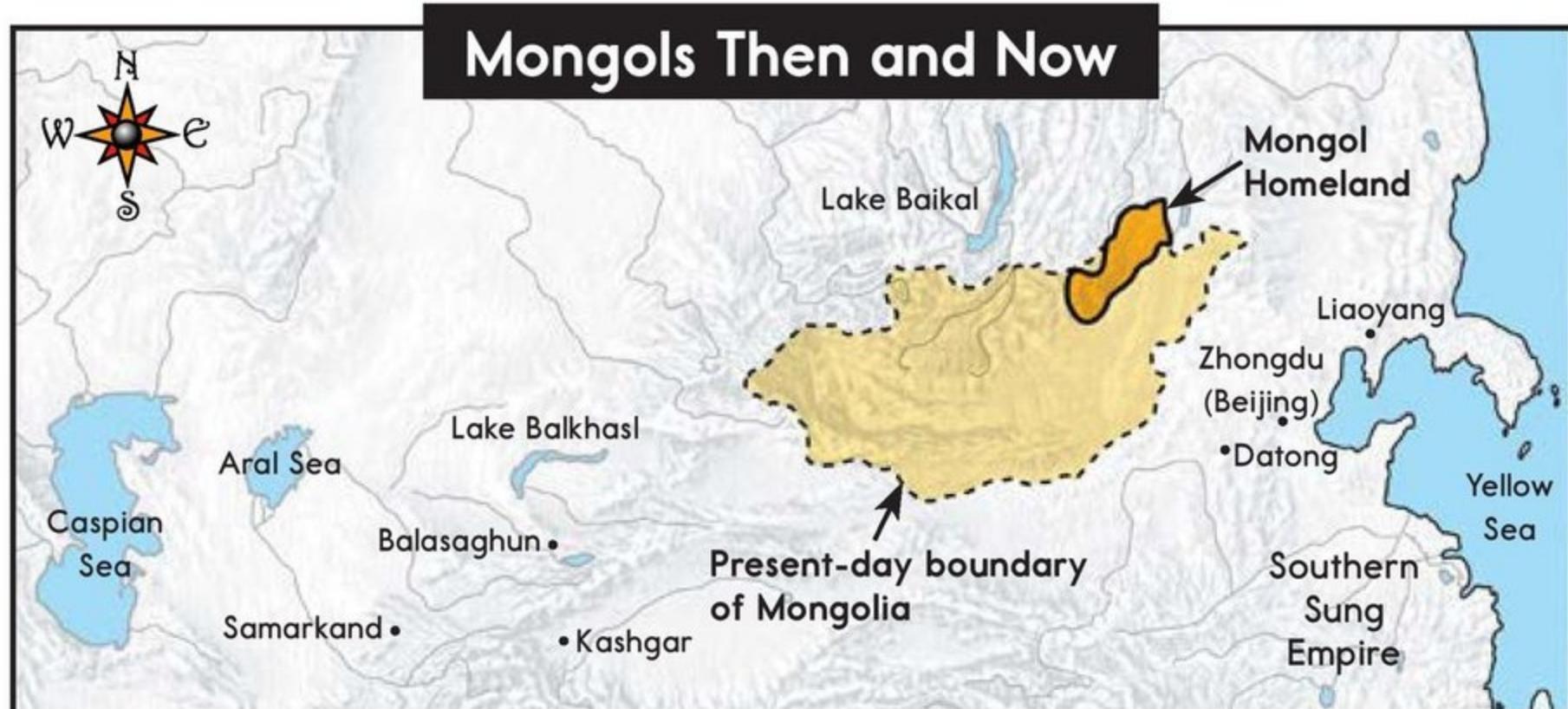


This shows what it might have looked like when the Mongols rode into battle.

Brutal Conquerors from Asia

Few episodes in history have been as astonishing as the conquests of the Mongols. During the 1200s, these horsemen from Asia established the largest land **empire** ever created.

Traditionally, the Mongols have been viewed as brutal conquerors because as they expanded their empire, their armies often leveled entire cities, massacring the people who dwelled in them. However, much of this brutality happened under the leadership of Genghis (*JEHNG-gihs*) Khan and his children.



Horsemen and Warriors

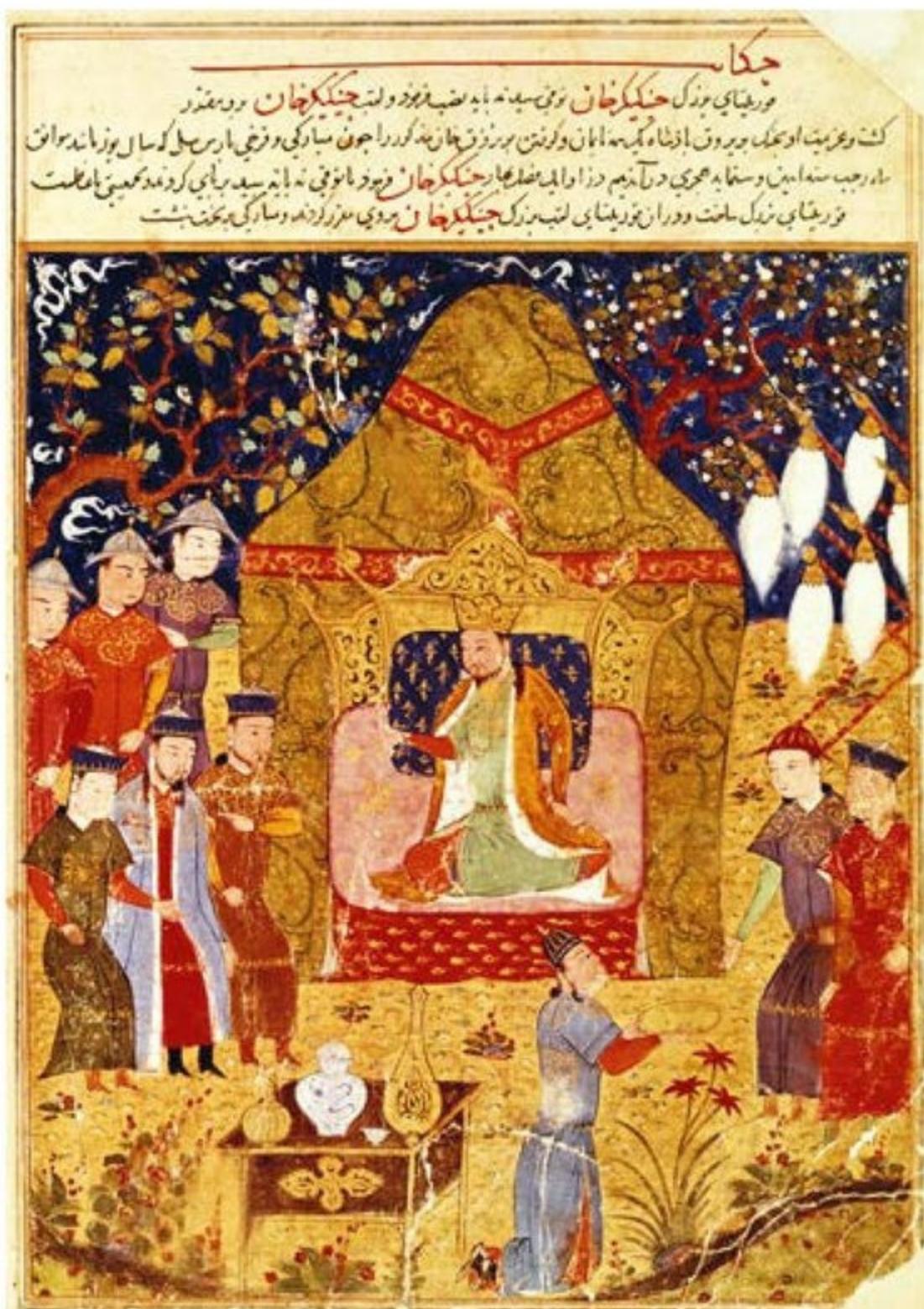
The Mongols were a **nomadic** people, numbering perhaps two million. They lived in felt tents called *yurts* on the enormous steppes, or grasslands, of eastern Asia, which today is known as Mongolia.

The people were divided into groups called *tribes* with a leader called a *khan*. The Mongols were expert horsemen and warriors; their lives consisted of endless rounds of hunting and **feuding**. When the Mongols needed things—horses, food, or mates—they often organized raiding parties and stole them from other tribes.

Because they were not united, the Mongols posed no threat to anyone outside of Mongolia. But with their fighting skills, they had the potential to become a powerful army. All they needed was a leader to knit all the groups into one nation.

Genghis Khan

In 1162, the wife of a minor Mongol leader gave birth to a boy named Temujin. When he was nine, Temujin's father was murdered by members of another tribe. Most of Temujin's youth was spent helping his fatherless family survive in the harsh environment of the Asian steppes.



Genghis Khan in his tent

Then, he built up an army and trained it to be a disciplined war machine. Finally, he used his army to defeat every one of the Mongol tribes that would not join him.

By the time he was in his teens, Temujin was demonstrating great intelligence and leadership abilities. He was also ruthless in defeating his enemies.

In adulthood, Temujin became the khan of his tribe. As khan, he made **alliances** with other Mongol tribes.



A Chinese artist's
woodcut of
Genghis Khan

By 1206, all the Mongols recognized their leader as Temujin. At a meeting that year, the leaders of the Mongol tribes proclaimed him *Genghis Khan*, which meant "Universal Ruler." In one of his first actions as ruler, Genghis issued a set of laws designed to make the Mongols stop feuding and become a unified nation.

Genghis Khan dreamed of the unified Mongols conquering other lands and taking their peoples' wealth. And so, in 1209, he led his forces toward China.

What Was His Title?

The leader of the Mongols is usually called Genghis Khan. However the first part of the title has long been spelled several ways, including Genghiz and Jenghis. In recent years, a number of historians have insisted that none of these spellings give the correct pronunciation of the name. They say a better spelling is Chingis or Chinngis.

The meaning of the title has also been debated. Although many scholars think the name meant "Universal Ruler," others disagree. They have suggested other meanings, such as "Invincible Prince" and "Spirit of Light."



Some Mongolians still live in tentlike houses, called *yurts*, on the Asian steppes, which are like the Great Plains of North America.

The Mongols Attack China

At the time of Genghis Khan's rise to power, China was divided into three major parts: the Xi Xia (*SHEE SHEE-yuh*) Empire of the west, the Jin Empire of the north, and the Sung Empire of the south.

Genghis Khan conquered Xi Xia in 1209. He then attacked Jin. In 1215, after ferocious battles that left countless Chinese dead, the Mongols entered the Jin capital, Zhongdu (present-day Beijing). They plundered it and left it a smoking ruin.

All of China except the Sung Empire was now under Mongol control. But Genghis Khan decided that the conquest of the Sung could wait. Instead, he turned his eyes toward the vast lands west of China. In a relentless pursuit of wealth, his armies would soon create **havoc** in that part of the world.

The Mongol Armies

In the following years, the Mongols defeated every army they faced. They broke into every city that tried to defend against them, conquering enormous territories. So what made the Mongol armies so overwhelming?

It wasn't the numbers. Although the Mongol armies were big, they weren't gigantic. They usually totaled around 100,000. The maximum size of the armies has been estimated at 250,000. But for most battles, the Mongol forces were often divided, attacking widely separated enemies, which caused them to be greatly outnumbered—but they always won.

Historians believe the Mongols were unbeatable because they were the most highly trained and highly disciplined soldiers the world had seen for a thousand years. They fought in organized units that coordinated their movements with flags, drums, and other signals.



Modern Mongolians show pride in their history by re-enacting important battles.

In open combat, the Mongols fought on horseback. They wore leather armor and helmets



made of leather and metal. One of their main weapons was a small, powerful bow that could fire arrows with great force and accuracy. For close combat, they used lances, battle axes, and short curved

The Mongols were probably the first to use this kind of bow in battle.

swords called *scimitars* (*SIM-ih-tahrs*). They also used gunpowder weapons, such as simple grenades and firelances—bamboo tubes that spewed flames and sparks.

The Mongols not only learned how to make gunpowder from the Chinese, but they also learned how to smash down the walls of cities. They hired Chinese engineers who built and operated large machines called *siege engines*. These devices included catapults for hurling heavy rocks and ballistas that fired huge arrows. No city was able to withstand the pounding it got from the Mongols' siege engines.

The Use of Terror

Genghis Khan always tried to make a deal with his enemies. This was his offer: Surrender and you will be spared. Resist and you will be wiped out.

A city that opened its gates to the Mongols was left unharmed. It was simply required to pay the Mongols **tribute**. Wealth was what Genghis wanted most. If he could get it without a fight, that suited him fine.

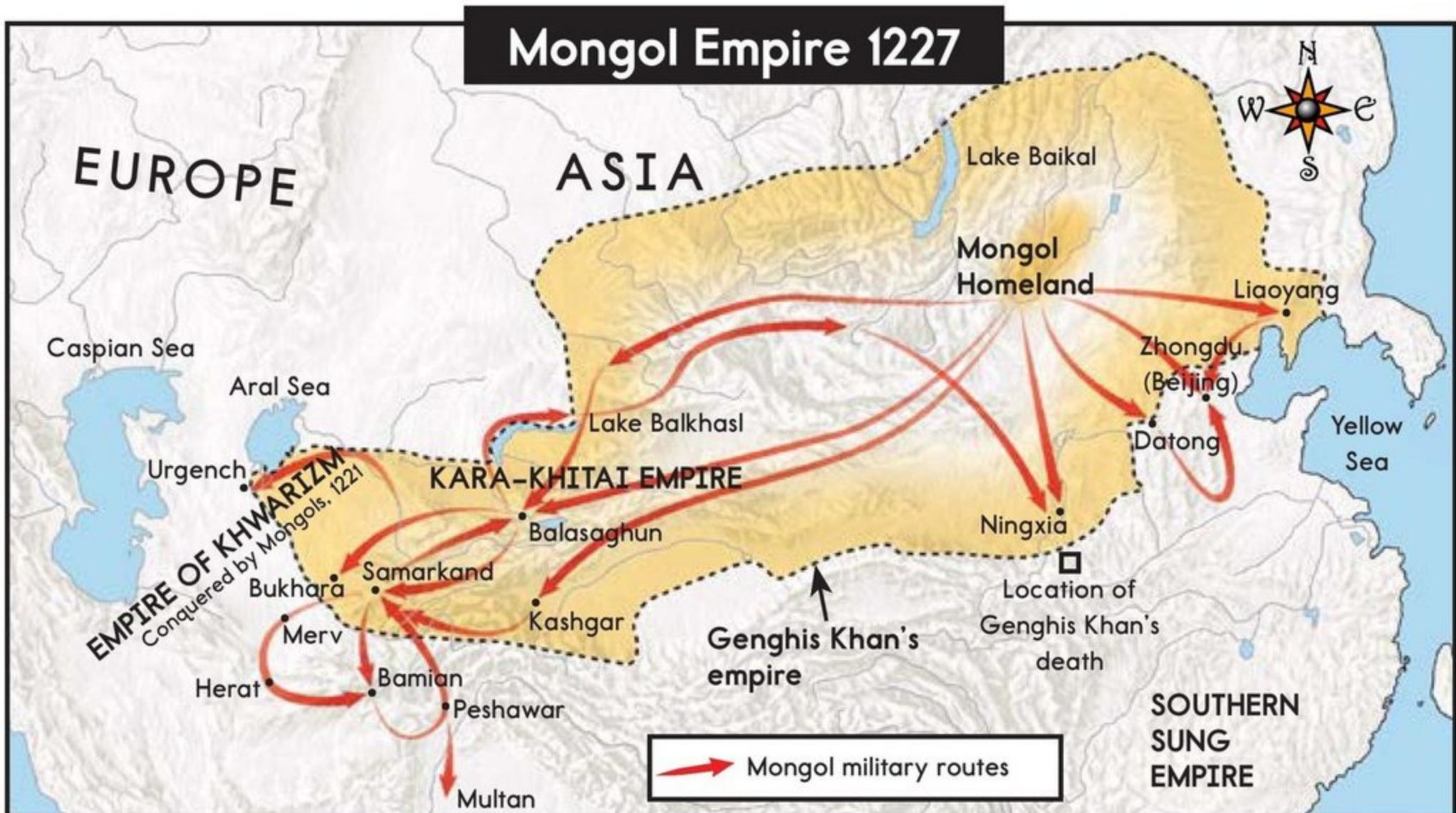
Cities that tried to hold out behind their walls, or that sent soldiers out to fight, soon regretted it.

The Mongols never failed to take a city. After they broke in, they pillaged the city and then burned it to the ground. The Mongols took captive any inhabitants they thought might be useful to them. They killed everyone else.



An older Genghis Khan in a garden

This policy created widespread terror. As a result, many cities surrendered to the Mongols at once.



Establishing an Empire

For a dozen years after the China campaign, the Mongols conquered everything in their path. Mongol armies were led not only by Genghis Khan, but also by his four sons.

By 1227, when Genghis Khan turned 65, the Mongols had established an empire. It stretched from the east coast of northern China to the Persian Gulf, the western boundary of present-day Iran. That was a distance of about 5,600 kilometers (3,500 mi). Throughout that vast area, **vassal states** paid annual tribute to the Mongols.

There would be more conquests, making the empire even larger. But Genghis Khan would not take part in them. His days were coming to an end.

The Death of Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan died in the summer of 1227 while leading another attack against Xi Xia. That Chinese vassal state was being punished for refusing to supply troops for a recent Mongol campaign.

The cause of Genghis's death is uncertain. Many historians think he died from internal injuries received when he fell from a horse.



This tortoise marks a corner of the ancient Mongol capital city Karakorum.

Soldiers placed the khan's body in a felt coffin fastened with three golden straps. Then they transported it back to Mongolia. There, the great leader was buried in a secret place.

According to Mongol accounts, 800 men on horseback rode back and forth over the gravesite to obscure it. Then they, and all others who had any knowledge of the gravesite, were killed. Thus, no one would ever be able to reveal where Genghis Khan was buried.

New Leaders, New Conquests



Ogadei

Genghis Khan left his empire to his four sons. They each received a large area to rule as a khan. However, it was Genghis Khan's wish that his third son, Ogadei (*oh-GAH-day-ee*), be the overall ruler.

The Mongols officially gave Ogadei the title of Great Khan in 1229. Ogadei

established a Mongol capital on the steppes and built a palace with strong walls made of black stone. Ogadei called the capital *Karakorum*, which meant either "Black Stones" or "Black Walls."

Ogadei launched a new series of conquests. Mongol armies brought Russia and other parts of eastern Europe under their control. In 1241, they were about to invade western Europe, but then Ogadei died. The invasion was called off until a new Great Khan was chosen.



A Persian manuscript from the 1300s shows the Mongol siege of Bagdad, Iraq, in 1258.

By the time Ogadei died, his three brothers were also dead. Genghis Khan's grandsons competed bitterly for the position of Great Khan. For ten years, the Mongol world was in turmoil. Finally, in 1251, order was restored. That year, a grandson named Mongke was proclaimed Great Khan.

Mongke resumed the Mongol conquests. He sent his brother Hulegu to subdue the Middle East. In 1258, Hulegu attacked the Muslim capital of Baghdad, in what is now the country of Iraq. When the city fell, Hulegu ordered one of the most terrible slaughters ever carried out by a Mongol army. By some estimates, 800,000 people were killed.

While Hulegu's army was in the Middle East, another army was in China. Mongke was determined to finally destroy the Sung Empire, the empire Genghis never defeated.

Kublai Khan



Kublai

The leader of the attack on China was another brother of Mongke's named Kublai. The campaign was not going well, so Mongke joined the fight. But in 1259 he died suddenly.

A small assembly of Mongols then proclaimed Kublai

the new Great Khan. He became known as Kublai Khan. But most Mongols never accepted him as their supreme leader. They thought he was becoming less Mongolian and more like the Chinese. The Mongol world was beginning to lose its unity.

To make matters worse, the Mongols finally suffered a defeat. In 1260, a Mongol army lost a battle in what is now the country of Israel. That ended the Mongol conquests in the West. The people of western Europe, who had feared that they would be the next victims of these terrifying invaders from Asia, were now safe.

But in the East, Kublai Khan continued the effort to conquer the Sung. And in 1264, he turned his back on the Mongolian capital, Karakorum, and settled permanently in China. He established a new Mongol capital in northern China on the site of Zhongdu, the destroyed Jin capital. He called it *Khanbalik*, meaning “City of the Khan.” He built an enormous palace there.

In 1279, Kublai Khan won a final victory over the Sung Empire. That year, he established a new **dynasty** to rule China, the Yuan (*yoo-WAHN*) Dynasty. All of China was now under Mongol rule.



Marco Polo

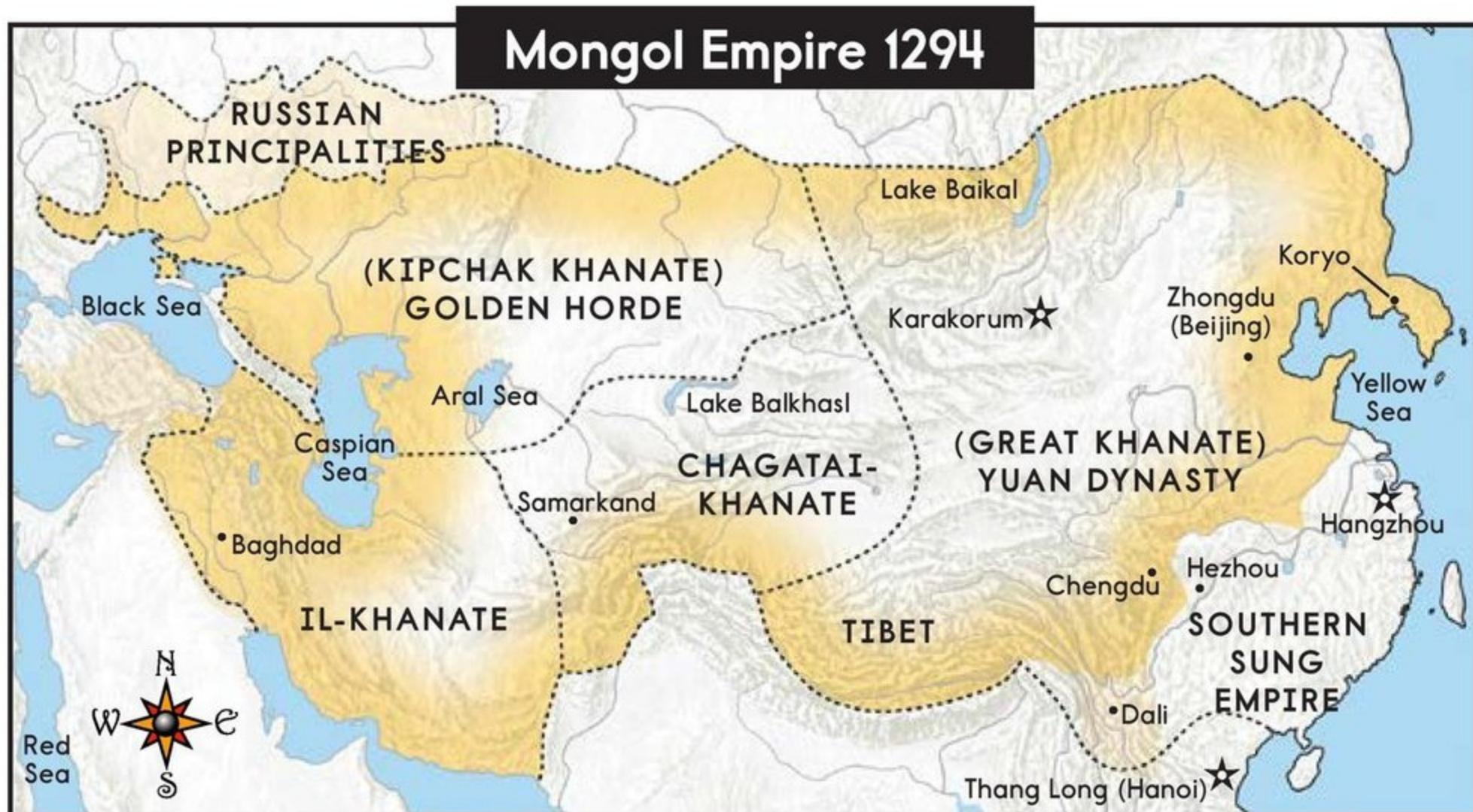
The famous Italian merchant and traveler Marco Polo spent seventeen years in China (1275–1292) during the reign of Kublai Khan. He marveled at the capital of Khanbalik (also spelled Cambaluc). He was especially impressed by the Great Khan’s palace. He said it was “the greatest palace that ever was.” Marco Polo traveled to Khanbalik on what was known as the Silk Road, a trade route leading from Europe to China.

Kublai Khan settled in as the ruler of China. Although he was khan of all the Mongols, he no longer had much interest in the rest of the empire. He devoted all of his time to the Yuan Dynasty. His government mostly excluded the native Chinese. All the best jobs were filled with Mongols and other foreigners.

Kublai Khan, though, still had a taste for conquest. He extended his rule over some areas south of China, but he failed to conquer the island nation of Japan. Twice he sent large fleets of ships to Japan, but both fleets were destroyed by terrible storms. Kublai gave up annexing Japan into the empire.



The Mongol conquests—both east and west—were finally coming to an end. The Mongol empire was now bigger than the present areas of the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Central America combined. For a while, under Mongol rule, the world was at peace.



Division of the Empire

Kublai Khan died in 1294, yet even before his death, the Mongol Empire had been **fragmenting**. It was simply too huge to be governed from a single location. With Kublai's death, the division became complete. The empire split into four large parts called khanates, each ruled by its own khan. There was no longer a Great Khan.

The largest khanate was the Yuan Dynasty, centered in China. The other khanates were the Il-Khanate in Persia and what is now Iraq; the Chagatai Khanate, in central Asia; and the Kipchak Khanate in Russia which became known as the Golden Horde. The khanates maintained relationships with one another, but they were all independent; yet one by one, they were overthrown.

Spread of Culture from East to West

As the Mongol armies traveled, so did the craftspeople that helped make up their nomadic communities. Stringed instruments, such as this Mongolian horse head fiddle and paper money from Kublai Khan's Yuan Dynasty, are just two of the goods that were adapted and became part of the cultures of people the Mongols conquered.



A Mongolian horsehead fiddle (top);
a fiddle maker carving a horsehead
to put atop a fiddle (middle);
paper money from Kublai Khan's
Yuan Dynasty (bottom)

The End of Mongol Rule

With their fighting days over, the Mongols ceased to be hardened warriors. They became corrupt and weak. The people they ruled, sensing that weakness, revolted against them.

In 1335 the Il-Khanate in Persia became the first Mongol khanate to be overthrown. The Yuan Dynasty was next. A rebel leader named Chu Yuan-Chang led a successful revolution against the Mongols. In 1368, he established a new Chinese ruling family, the Ming Dynasty.

The last **bastion** of Mongol power was the Golden Horde.

A Russian prince, Ivan III, finally overthrew it in 1480. With the end of the Golden Horde, the Mongols were defeated.

In 2006, the Mongolian president, N. Enkhbayar, unveiled a statue of Genghis Khan as part of a festival to bring tourism to Mongolia.





This mausoleum contains artifacts from the reign of Genghis Khan, whose burial site remains unknown.

The Influence of the Mongols

The Mongolian people remember the Mongol Empire with pride. They especially honor the memory of Genghis Khan, who is a national hero.

Most other people in the world look back with horror on the period of the Mongol invasions. It was a time of unbelievable bloodshed and destruction. Historians estimate the number of people killed by the Mongols ranges from 60 million to 150 million.

Some historians claim that such numbers are ridiculous. They say the Mongols couldn't possibly have killed that many people, and perhaps they're right. Even World War II, the largest war ever fought, didn't cause that many deaths. We will never know what the true number was as detailed records were not kept, but the number was well into the millions.

Seeking Genghis's Burial Place

During the 2000s, **archaeologists** have been searching for the burial place of Genghis Khan. In 2001 and 2004, groups of archaeologists announced that they had made important finds of Mongolian ruins and tombs. As of yet, the remains of Genghis Khan had still not been located.

Some historians also argue that the Mongol Empire brought benefits to the world. They point out that the empire, once established, brought peace across Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, this period in history is called the Mongol Peace.

The Mongol Peace made it possible for travelers to cross all of Asia and the Middle East in safety. The Mongols encouraged trade, helping people not only in Europe, but also in **isolated** areas to learn more about one another. According to at least one historian, the Mongol Peace actually set the stage for the Renaissance, the rebirth of culture and learning that began in Italy in the 1300s.

So, should the world be thankful for the Mongol invasions? One can guess what the victims of Genghis Khan's Mongols would have thought about that question.

Glossary

alliances (<i>n.</i>)	close associations between countries or other groups who work together (p. 6)
archaeologists (<i>n.</i>)	scientists who study the remains of ancient cultures (p. 23)
bastion (<i>n.</i>)	a stronghold; a well-protected place (p. 21)
dynasty (<i>n.</i>)	a sequence of rulers in a country from the same family (p. 17)
empire (<i>n.</i>)	a collection of nations or people ruled by one person who has total authority (p. 4)
feuding (<i>n.</i>)	fighting between two groups (p. 5)
fragmenting (<i>v.</i>)	breaking into smaller pieces (p. 19)
havoc (<i>n.</i>)	destruction; chaos; disorder (p. 8)
isolated (<i>adj.</i>)	far away from other people or things (p. 23)
nomadic (<i>adj.</i>)	moving from place to place without a permanent home (p. 5)
tribute (<i>n.</i>)	a payment made by one group to another group, often for protection or to avoid war
vassal states (<i>n.</i>)	governments that are politically or militarily controlled by another even though they rule their own people (p. 12)

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Front cover: Genghis Khan from a woodcut made in the 1800s

Back cover: A Persian manuscript from the 1300s shows the Mongol siege of Baghdad, Iraq, in 1258.

Title page: Various kinds of arrowheads that the Mongols used

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