

PIOTAL
MOMENTS
IN HISTORY

THE CONQUESTS OF GENGHIS KHAN

ALISON BEHNKE



CAN ONE MAN REALLY CHANGE THE WORLD?

If that man is Genghis Khan, the answer is yes. Born around A.D. 1161, Temujin, as he was named, grew up in humble surroundings. As a teenager, he fled from enemy raiders, but he became a fearless—and feared—man who commanded an army of thousands and an empire of millions. In fact, by the mid-1200s, Genghis Khan's Mongol Empire included much of the known world. Though he was responsible for the deaths of millions, he also showed tolerance for religious and cultural differences among the many peoples he conquered, and he brought stability and unification to a vast area where it had never before existed. Even today, the name Genghis Khan continues to instill fear in some and admiration in others. His election as Great Khan in approximately 1190 is one of history's most pivotal moments.



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Consultant: John Delury, Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of History, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island

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The image on the jacket and cover is a Persian illustration of Genghis Khan, preceeded in battle by his general, Jebe, during the invasion of the Khwarazam Empire. It is estimated to have been created in the fourteenth century.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AMONG THE MONGOLS 4

CHAPTER TWO

STRUGGLES ON THE STEPPES 24

CHAPTER THREE

FORGING A MONGOL NATION 40

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FOUNDATIONS OF AN EMPIRE . 58

CHAPTER FIVE

**STORMING THE GATES
OF CATHAY 72**

CHAPTER SIX

A WAVE CRASHING WESTWARD ... 90

EPILOGUE

IN THE GREAT KHAN'S WAKE 118

PRIMARY SOURCE RESEARCH 130

PRIMARY SOURCE: PORTRAITS 134

TIMELINE 136

GLOSSARY 143

WHO'S WHO? 145

SOURCE NOTES 150

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 152

FURTHER READING AND WEBSITES 153

INDEX 156

CHAPTER ONE

LIFE AMONG THE MONGOLS

If my horse dies then I'll die.

If my horse lives then I'll live.

—*Bodonchar, a mythical ancestor of
Genghis Khan, quoted in The Secret
History of the Mongols, ca. 1227–1240*

The stillness of early morning was suddenly shattered by the thundering beat of horses' hooves. Enemy raiders descended on the Mongol camp, sending its frightened people running for cover. One teenaged Mongol leaped onto his horse and galloped into the wilderness. He took cover on the slopes of a nearby mountain called Burkhan Khaldun. When the danger was over, the fugitive crept back to his camp, grateful for his survival. He gave thanks to the moun-

tain that had sheltered him, proclaiming Burkhan Khaldun to be his heavenly protector and a sacred site. He declared, “The mountain has saved my life and my horse. . . . Though I was frightened and ran like an insect, I was shielded by Mount Burkhan Khaldun. Every morning I’ll offer a sacrifice to Mount Burkhan. Every day I’ll pray to the mountain. Let my children and my children’s children remember this.”

And people would remember. For that teenager was the future Genghis Khan—the most powerful leader his Mongol people would ever know. Born as Temujin, he began life as a member of a small clan in eastern Asia and grew up in humble and difficult surroundings. But as khan, he exploded onto the world stage in the late A.D. 1100s and early 1200s. He became a great conqueror, forming the largest empire the world had yet seen—larger than that of Alexander the Great or of the ancient Roman Empire’s massive realm.

His impact on the world around him was enormous, and that impact still echoes in modern times. The Mongol conquests stirred fear in the hearts of Asians and Europeans. They affected Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims. Some historians believe that this period ignited mistrust among these groups that continues to this day. Simmering tensions and rivalries continue to cause violence in the wider Middle East. Such unrest may have some of its roots in the acts of Genghis Khan and his armies.

But Genghis Khan’s influence on the world around him was not strictly negative. In many ways, he proved himself a talented leader, as well as a very skillful military commander. He put into place a set of laws that guided millions of subjects. He united a vast array of peoples from different backgrounds



This sixteenth-century Persian illustration shows Genghis Khan leaning on his saddle while his horse grazes nearby.

and of different faiths and lifestyles. In ruling over his empire, he exhibited unusual tolerance of such differences for his era, yet his forces killed millions of people. He was admired by his followers and hated by his enemies. But it was precisely this combination of violence and vision—of ferocity and audacity—that made him one of the globe’s great conquerors.

SETTING THE SCENE

The future Genghis Khan was born in 1162 and raised on the high Mongolian plateau, located in east central Asia. In modern times, this land is part of the nation of Mongolia,

north of China and south of Russia. The area has an elevation of about 3,900 feet to almost 6,000 feet (1,189 to 1,829 meters) above sea level. Flat, mostly treeless grassland called steppes covers much of this high tableland. Rivers flow across the plains, creating some particularly fertile areas, and hills and mountains scattered around the plateau rise into the great blue Mongolian sky.

Several formidable landmasses and natural borders hem in Mongolia's steppes. Although the eastern edges are relatively open, to the west lie the Altai and Tianshan mountain ranges. South of the steppes lies the vast Gobi Desert. It covers more than 500,000 square miles (1.3 million sq. kilometers) in southern Mongolia and northern China. Part of an inland sea in prehistoric times, the modern Gobi is one of the driest places on the planet. In some years, it receives no rain at all. The Gobi is known as a "cold" desert, because winter temperatures can drop as low as -40°F (-40°C). That is not to say that the Gobi is not hot, however—high temperatures can soar to 100°F (38°C) and sometimes considerably higher. In many parts of the desert, rocky plains extend to the horizon in every direction. But the desert also has a harsh beauty and a natural magnificence that have awed people from the early Mongols to modern-day visitors.

UNCHARTED LANDS

In Genghis Khan's day, no European travelers or explorers had ever set foot in the Gobi Desert. None would until the mid-1200s, when the Italian explorer Marco Polo arrived.

Siberia makes a similarly daunting borderland to the north of Mongolia. Its dense forests and long winters make traveling through the region difficult.

In the time of Genghis Khan, these features of the landscape offered Mongolia natural defenses against enemies and invaders. They also presented challenges to the region's inhabitants, however. Freezing winds rushed down from the north in winter, bringing icy Siberian temperatures. Equally harsh at times were dry desert winds sweeping up from the Gobi. These gusts also sometimes brought dramatic thunderstorms to the region. Throughout the year, the plateau experienced dramatic temperature differences that could be as much as 140°F (79°C).

In the mid-1100s, the Mongols controlled parts of the eastern Mongolian plateau. They were not the only group in the region, however. In fact, in the early and middle twelfth century, Mongol numbers were relatively few and they were a fairly weak faction compared to other groups in the area. Other regional ethnic groups and communities—often called tribes—included the Tatars, Uighurs, Kirghiz, Naimans, Keraites, and Merkits. The exact divisions and relationships among these different groups remain unclear. Most historians believe that the



This ninth-century wall painting depicts two Uighur princes. It comes from Bezeklik, a group of artificial caves in China.

*“And so in the Year of the Tiger,
having set in order the lives
of all the people whose tents
are protected by skirts of felt,
the Mongol clans assembled
at the head of the Onan.
They raised a white standard
of nine tails
and proclaimed Genghis Khan
the Great Khan.”*

*—from The Secret History of the
Mongols, CA. A.D. 1228*

