

## MONGOL SOCIETY

The people of Mongolia (located to the northwest of China in central Asia) would dramatically alter the interactions and history of Europe and Asia. The Mongols were pastoral nomads organized into families, clans, and tribes. Their unique portable tents, or *yurts*, gave them the flexibility to travel from one location to another. The Mongols were expert warriors who could ride for days, even sleeping and eating in the saddle. In the 13th century, they began to migrate from the steppes of central Asia toward better grazing lands to the south and southwest.

The leaders of Mongol tribal councils were always men. Women, however, were allowed the right to speak out in the tribal councils and also held considerable influence within their own family.

## MONGOL CONQUESTS

From 1206 to 1227, under the leadership of the formidable Temujin (who took the name Chinggis Khan, or "Universal Ruler"), the Mongols conquered vast portions of Asia. One of the great military strategists in world history, Chinggis Khan organized his military force into units independent of family ties. After breaking up tribes and forming new military units, Chinggis Khan chose talented leaders to take charge of his men. To show his power, he constructed a palace at Karakorum in Mongolia. Adopting Chinese siege warfare technology, he employed devices such as the catapult and gunpowder technology to further his conquests of other societies. Through his knowledge of steppe diplomacy, Chinggis Khan served to link Europe and Asia. After his death in 1227, his successors continued to acquire territory from China to Poland, creating the largest land empire in history. For easier administration, the empire was divided into four regional empires: China, central Asia, Persia, and Russia (the **Khanate of the Golden Horde**). Each Khanate was ruled by a descendant of Chinggis Khan.

### The Mongols in Persia

Sweeping into Persia in 1231, the Mongols massacred hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants, interrupted trade, and destroyed cities, some of which never recovered. In 1258, Islamic civilization was dealt a crippling blow when Mongols defeated the Abbasids in Baghdad. Throughout Southwest Asia, the invaders destroyed ancient **qanat** irrigation systems. Eventually, the Mongols allowed the Persians to rule their local territory as long as they paid tribute and maintained law and order. Mongols retained the highest governmental positions. Gradually, the Mongols in Persia assimilated to the local culture and often adopted Islam as their religion.

### The Mongols in Russia and Central Europe

The Khanate of the Golden Horde demanded tribute from the Russians. The Mongol invasion of Russia in 1237 was the only time in history that a winter invasion of Russia succeeded. Mongol rule created a long-standing mistrust between Russia and Westerners by keeping Russia isolated from the lifestyle and technology of the Western world. The lack of Mongol concern with promoting cultural interests kept Russian areas such as Moscow culturally impoverished, isolating them from the cultural and economic wealth of the European Renaissance. Inept administration maintained Russia's economic backwardness. During Mongol rule, Russian peasants became serfs of the Russian ruling class in exchange for their protection.

Moscow finally rose to prominence when Prince **Alexander Nevsky** of Novgorod cooperated with the Mongols. Acting as a tribute collector for the Mongols after 1328, Nevsky's government annexed those territories that did

not pay tribute, adding to the territory and power of Moscow. Granted the title of Grand Prince, Nevsky became the first of a line of princes who became leaders of Moscow and eventually all of Russia. In 1480, Ivan III of Moscow stopped paying taxes to the Mongol leader, effectively ending the Mongol presence in Russia. The Mongols continued to rule the Crimea until the end of the 18th century.

Even central Europe was not exempt from Mongol advances. In 1241 and 1242, the Mongols centered on the areas of present-day Poland, Hungary, and eastern Germany, reaching the outskirts of Vienna before they were finally turned back.

## The Mongols in China

The grand prize of the Mongol invaders was their occupation of China, where they set up a tribute empire beginning in 1270. Under the leadership of **Kublai Khan**, the grandson of Chinggis Khan and founder of the **Yuan dynasty**, the Mongol capital was moved to the site of present-day Beijing, solidifying the tradition of a centralized government in China. Kublai Khan also extended the length of the Grand Canal to connect the Huang He River with Beijing in order to haul food supplies, especially rice, into Beijing. He ended the Confucian system of education and reliance on civil service examinations. Although he promoted Buddhism, Kublai Khan supported the right of Daoists, Muslims, and Christians to exercise their faith.

Distrustful of the Chinese, the Mongols brought foreign merchants and administrators into China and largely remained separate from the Chinese. They outlawed marriage between Mongols and Chinese and forbade the Chinese from studying the Mongol written language. Mongol women refused to engage in the Chinese custom of foot-binding. They also retained their property rights, enjoyed more freedom to move about publicly, and had considerable control over their household.

In addition to its presence in China, the Yuan dynasty advanced into Vietnam, briefly occupying Hanoi but failing to conquer the country. Incursions into Cambodia, Burma, and Java proved unsuccessful, largely because the Mongols did not adapt well to the hot, humid climate of those areas. Attempts to conquer Indonesia and Japan also failed. Twice, in 1274 and 1281, massive Mongol forces were turned back from a successful invasion of the Japanese islands by a mighty wind the Japanese called **kamikaze**. The aborted invasion of 1281 was the largest seaborne invasion prior to World War II. The Yuan dynasty did occupy Korea from 1231 to 1350, requiring Koreans to pay tribute to the khan. The Mongol domination of China ended in 1368 when the Chinese defeated them and established the Ming dynasty.

## THE MONGOL PEACE

The Mongol presence in Eurasia led to a period of peace and prosperity for the continent. The so-called **Mongol Peace**, which endured from the 1250s to the 1350s, ensured the safety of travelers along trade routes in Eurasia and resulted in increased trade volume between Asia and Europe, most notably along the Silk Roads. The Mongols established foreign embassies and maintained diplomatic relations with Korea, Vietnam, India, and western Europe. The Mongols also resettled people in new lands and recruited craftsmen to better the lifestyle of those they ruled.

## The Black Death

Increased trade was a contributing factor to the spread of the bubonic plague, or the **Black Death**, as Europeans called the disease. The plague had been unknowingly brought into China by Mongol invaders, whose food sacks had been invaded by infected rats and fleas. Appearing initially in southwestern China in the 1330s, the bubonic plague first spread throughout China and central Asia. By the late 1340s, it had spread throughout Southwestern Asia and then into Europe and northern Africa. Mongol invaders catapulted plague-infested bodies over the city walls of the Black Sea port of Kaffa in 1346, further transmitting the epidemic. Following the path of the trade routes, the disease spread from city to town, wiping out nearly half the population in areas it infected. Merchants in the Mediterranean compounded the problem by carrying plague from port to port.

By 1351, the plague had almost run its course in Europe. Approximately one-third of the European population had died, resulting in massive shortages of labor. Workers were demanding high wages, and when some authorities froze wages, rebellions broke out. The prestige of the Church declined as Europeans questioned its inability to halt the progress of the epidemic among them. Some areas of China reported losses of up to two-thirds of their population. The ravages of the plague exacted a 100-year recovery period in Europe and China. In Egypt, the Middle East, and other areas of the Islamic empire, recovery took even longer. Population levels in Egypt failed to recover completely until the 19th century.

## THE FALL OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Poor administration and economic distress brought down the Mongol empire. In Persia, the Mongols' excessive spending caused them to print relatively valueless paper money. The resulting inflation caused merchants to close their shops. When the Mongol rule in Persia ended in 1355, the Persian government returned to local rule until the Turks reinstated centralized government in the late 14th century.

In China, the people rebelled against the valueless paper money. The devastation brought by the bubonic plague further weakened the Mongol rule. The desire of the Chinese to reassert their cultural identity after long years of Mongol rule strengthened the ability of the Ming dynasty to return China to the Chinese. Even though they were ousted by the Chinese in 1368, the Mongols remained a constant threat to the northwestern borders of China into the 18th century.