

The Last Great Nomadic Changes: From Chinggis Khan to Timur

Summary: The nomads of central Asia during the 13th century returned to center stage in world history. The Mongols ended or interrupted the great postclassical empires while extending the world network of that era. Led by Chinggis Khan and his successors, they brought central Asia, China, Persia, Tibet, Iraq, Asia Minor, and southern Russia under their control. The states formed dominated most of Asia for one and half centuries. The Mongol success was the most formidable nomadic challenge to the global dominance of the sedentary, civilized core civilizations since the 1st century C.E.. The Mongols often are portrayed as barbarian, destructive conquerors, but their victories brought much more than death and destruction. In their vast possessions peoples lived in peace, and enjoyed religious toleration and a unified law code. Peaceful contacts over long distances opened. Mongol territory was a bridge between the civilizations of the Eastern Hemisphere as products and ideas moved among civilized and nomadic peoples.

The Mongol Empire of Chinggis Khan. The Mongols were nomadic herders of goats and sheep who lived off, and traded, the products of their animals. Boys and girls learned to ride as soon as they could walk. The basic unit of social organization, the tribe, was divided into kin-related clans. Great confederations were organized temporarily for defensive and offensive operations. Males held dominant leadership positions; women held considerable influence within the family. Leaders were elected by free males. They gained their positions through courage and diplomatic skills and maintained authority as long as they were successful.

The Making of a Great Warrior: The Early Career of Chinggis Khan. Mongolian peoples had held brief periods of power in central Asia. They established kingdoms in north China in the 4th and 10th centuries C.E. Kabul Khan in the 12th century defeated a Qin army, but Mongol organization declined after his death. His grandson, Chinggis Khan, originally named Temujin, was a member of one of the clans disputing Mongol leadership at the end of the 12th century. After surviving defeat and capture Temujin gained strength among the Mongols through alliances with more powerful groups. After defeating his rivals he was elected supreme ruler (*khagan*) of all Mongol tribes in 1206 .

Building the Mongol War Machine. Mongol males were trained from youth to ride, hunt, and fight. Their skillfully-used powerful short bows, fired from horseback, were devastating weapons. The speed and mobility of Mongol armies, when joined to the discipline brought by Chinggis Khan, made them the world's best military. The armies, divided into 10,000-strong fighting units (*tumens*), included both heavy and light cavalry. A separate messenger force made possible effective communication between units. Harsh discipline, enforced through a formal code, brought punishments and rewards for conduct. Another unit, employing spies, secured accurate information for campaigns. New weapons, including gunpowder and canon, were used.

Conquest: The Mongol Empire under Chinggis Khan. Chinggis Khan set forth to conquer the known world. In 1207 the Mongols defeated and forced the northwestern China Tangut kingdom of Xi-Xia to become a vassal. They next attacked the Qin empire established by the Jurchens. In these first campaigns the Mongols developed new tactics for capturing fortified urban centers. Cities that resisted were sacked; their inhabitants were killed or made slaves. Submission avoided this fate; tribute was paid for deliverance.

First Assault on the Islamic World: Conquest in China. After the Chinese successes the Mongols moved westward, first defeating the Mongolian-speaking Kara-Khitai state, and then the Khwarazm empire of the Turkic ruler Muhammad Shah II. The victory over Khwarazm brought many Turkic horsemen into Chinggis Khan's army. The Mongol leader spent the rest of his life fighting in China. The Xi-Xia kingdom and the Qin empire were destroyed. At the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227 the Mongols ruled an empire stretching from Persia to the North China Sea.

Life under the Mongol Imperium. The Mongols were both fearsome warriors and astute, tolerant rulers. Chinggis Khan, although illiterate, was open to new ideas and wanted to create a peaceful empire. He

established a new capital in the steppes at Karakorum and drew there talented individuals from all conquered regions. Chinggis followed shamanistic Mongol beliefs, but tolerated all religions. He used the knowledge of Muslim and Chinese bureaucrats to build an administrative structure for the empire. A script was devised for the Mongolian language, and a legal code enforced by special police helped to end old quarrels. The Mongol conquests brought peace to much of Asia. In urban centers artisans and scholars freely worked. Commerce flourished along secure trade routes.

The Death of Chinggis Khan and the Division of the Empire. When Chinggis died in 1227 the vast territories of the Mongols were divided among three sons and a grandson. His 3d son, Ogedei, a talented diplomat, was chosen as grand khan. He presided over further Mongol conquests for nearly a decade.

The Mongol Drive to the West. The armies of the Golden Horde, named after the tent of the khans, were ready to move westward. By the 13th century Kiev was in decline and Russia was divided into many petty kingdoms. They were unable to unite before the Mongols (called Tartars by Russians). Batu, Chinggis Khan's grandson, invaded in 1236 and defeated Russian armies one by one. Resisting cities were razed. In 1240 Kiev was taken and ravaged. Novgorod was spared when its ruler submitted peacefully.

Russia in Bondage. The Russians became vassals of the khan of the Golden Horde, a domination lasting for two and one-half centuries. Russian princes paid tribute. Peasants had to meet demands from both their own princes and the Mongols. Many sought protection by becoming serfs. The decision inaugurated a major change in rural social structure: serfdom endured until the mid 19th century. Some cities, especially Moscow, benefited from the increased commercial possibilities brought by Mongol rule. It grew at the expense of nearby towns and profited as tribute collector for the khans. The metropolitan of Moscow was made the head of the Russian Orthodox church. When the power of the Golden Horde declined, Moscow led Russian resistance to the Mongols. The Golden Horde was defeated at Kulikova in 1380. Later attacks by Timur finished breaking the Mongol hold on Russia. They remained active in the region through most of the 15th century, but from the end of the 14th century Moscow was the center of political power in Russia. The Mongol occupation was very important for Russian history. Their example influenced military and political organization. Most significantly, the Mongols isolated Russia from developments in western European civilization.

Mongol Incursions and the Retreat from Europe. Christian western Europe initially had been pleased by Mongol successes against Islam. The attitude changed when the Mongols moved westward; they invaded Hungary in 1240 and raided widely in central and southeastern Europe. Europe escaped more serious invasion when the death of Ogedei, plus the resulting succession struggle, forced Batu to withdraw. Satisfied with their rich conquests in Asia and the Middle East, the Mongols did not return to Europe.

The Mongol Assault on the Islamic Heartlands. Hulegu, a grandson of Chinggis Khan and ruler of the Ilkhan division of the Mongol empire, moved westward against Mesopotamia and North Africa. Baghdad was seized and destroyed in 1258. Islam, with the fall of the Abbasid dynasty, had lost its central authority; many focal points of its civilization were devastated. A major Mongol victory over the Seljuk Turks in 1243 opened Asia Minor to conquest by the Ottoman Turks. The Mongol advance halted in 1260 when the Mamluks of Egypt, led by Baibars, won victory at Ain Jalut. Hulegu, faced with other threats to his rule, including the conversion of the khan of the Golden Horde to Islam, did not resume the campaign.

The Mongol Impact on Europe and the Islamic World. The Mongols brought the Muslim world new military knowledge, especially the worth of gunpowder. Trade and cultural contact between different civilizations throughout Eurasia became much easier. The trading empires established in their dominions by Venetians and Genoese provided experience useful for later European expansion. An unintended consequence was the possible transmitting of the fleas carrying the bubonic plague - the Black Death - from China and central Asia to the Middle East and Europe.

The Mongol Interlude in Chinese History. The Mongol advance into China resumed after Ogedei's election. Kubilai Khan, another grandson of Chinggis Khan, during the mid-13th century led the Mongols against the Song. In 1271 Kubilai's dynasty became the Yuan. As his conquests continued, Kubilai attempted to preserve the distinction between Mongols and Chinese. Chinese were forbidden from learning the Mongol script and intermarriage was prohibited. Mongol religious ceremonies and customs were retained. Kubilai refused to reestablish exams for the civil service. Despite the measures protecting Mongol culture, Kubilai was fascinated by Chinese civilization. He adopted much from their culture into his court; the capital at Tatu (Beijing) was in Chinese style. A new social structure emerged in China. The Mongols were at the top; their nomadic and Islamic allies were directly below them. Both groups dominated the highest levels of the administration. Beneath them came first the north Chinese, and then ethnic Chinese and peoples of the south.

Gender Roles and the Convergence of Mongol and Chinese Cultures. Mongol women remained aloof from Confucian Chinese culture. They refused to adopt foot binding, and retained rights to property and control in the household, and freedom of movement. Some Mongol women hunted and went to war. Chabi, wife of Kubilai, was an especially influential woman. The Mongol interlude in China was too brief, and Mongol numbers too small, to change Confucian patterns. The freedom of women declined under Kubilai's successors.

Mongol Tolerance and Foreign Cultural Influences. The openness of Mongol rulers to outside ideas, and their patronage, drew scholars, artists, artisans, and office-seekers from many regions. Muslim lands provided some of the most favored arrivals; they were included in the social order just below the Mongols. They brought much new knowledge into the Chinese world. Kubilai was interested in all religions; Buddhists, Nestorian and Latin Christians, Daoists, and Muslims were all present at court. He welcomed foreign visitors. The most famous was the Venetian Marco Polo.

Social Policies and Scholar-Gentry Resistance. The ethnic Chinese, the vast majority of Kubilai's subjects, were never reconciled to Mongol rule. The scholar-gentry regarded Mongols as uncouth barbarians with policies endangering Chinese traditions. The refusal to reinstate the examination system was especially resented. The Mongols also bolstered the position of artisans and merchants who previously not had received high status. Both prospered as the Mongols improved transportation and expanded the supply of paper money. The Mongols developed a substantial navy that helped conquest and increased commerce. Urban life flourished. Mongol patronage stimulated popular entertainments, especially musical drama, and awarded higher status to formerly despised actors and actresses. Kubilai's policies initially favored the peasantry. Their land was protected from Mongol cavalrymen turning it into pasture, and famine relief measures were introduced. Tax and labor burdens were reduced. A revolutionary change was formulated - but not enacted - for establishing elementary education at the village level.

The Fall of the House of Yuan. By the time of Kubilai's death, the Yuan dynasty was weakening. Song loyalists in the south revolted. Mongol expeditions of 1274 and 1280 against Japan failed. Other Mongol forces were defeated in Vietnam and Java. Kubilai's successors lacked talent and the Yuan administration became corrupt. The suffering peasantry were called upon by the scholar-gentry to drive out the "barbarians." By the 1350s the dynasty was too weak to control all of China. Famines stimulated local risings. Secret societies dedicated to the overthrow of the dynasty formed. Rival rebels fought each other. Many Mongols returned to central Asia. Finally, a peasant leader, Ju Yuanzhang, triumphed and founded the Ming dynasty.

In Depth: The Eclipse of the Nomadic War Machine. The incursions of small numbers of militarily-skilled nomads into the civilized cores have had a major impact on world history. The nomads destroyed entire civilizations, stimulated great population movements, caused social upheavals, and facilitated cultural and economic exchanges. The Mongol and Timurid invasions were the high-point of nomadic success. During the 14th century the impact of the Black Death upon nomads gave sedentary peoples numerical superiority. Sedentary civilizations became better able to centralize political power and to mobilize resources for developing superior military organization. With the Industrial revolution sedentary dominance became permanent.

Conclusion: The Mongol Legacy and an Aftershock: The Brief Ride of Timur. The Mongol impact on conquered peoples varied considerably. Sedentary farms and city inhabitants often felt the destructive side of their legacy. But the Mongols decisively influenced human history in many ways. They provided the opening for the rise of Moscow as the central force in the creation of the Russian state. In the Islamic world they ended Abbasid and Seljuk power and prepared the way for the Mamluks and Ottomans. The Mongol empire promoted trade and cultural exchanges among civilizations and brought stable government and religious toleration to much of Asia. It also facilitated the spread of the Black death. When the peoples of Eurasia began to recover from the effects of Mongol expansion, a new leader, the Turk Timur-i Lang, brought new expansion. Timur, a highly cultured individual from a noble, landowning clan, in the 1360s moved from his base at Samarkand to conquests in Persia, the Fertile Crescent, India, and southern Russia. Timur is remembered for the barbaric destruction of conquered lands. His rule did not increase commercial expansion, cross-cultural exchanges, or internal peace. After his 1405 death Timur's empire fell apart. The last great challenge of the steppe nomads to Eurasian civilizations had ended.

KEY TERMS

Chinggis Khan: grandson of Kabul Khan; born in 1170s; elected supreme Mongol ruler (khagan) in 1206; began the Mongols rise to world power; died 1227.

tumens: basic fighting units of Mongol forces; made up of 10,000 cavalymen divided into smaller units.

Tangut: rulers of Xi-Xia kingdom of northwest China; during the southern Song period; conquered by Mongols in 1226.

Muhammad Shah II: Turkic ruler of Muslim Khwarazm; conquered by Mongols in 1220.

Karakorum: capital of Mongol empire under Chinggis Khan.

shamanistic religion: Mongol beliefs focused on nature spirits.

Batu: grandson of Chinggis Khan and ruler of Golden Horde; invaded Russia in 1236

Ogadei: 3rd son of Chinggis Khan; succeeded him as Mongol khagan.

Golden Horde: one of four regional subdivisions of the Mongol empire after the death Chinggis Khan; conquered and ruled Russia during the 13th and 14th centuries..

Metropolitan: head of Russian Orthodox church; located at Moscow; gained power during the Mongol era.

Prester John: a mythical Christian monarch whose kingdom supposedly had been cut off from Europe by the Muslim conquests; some thought he was Chinggis Khan.

Ilkhan khanate: one of four regional subdivisions of the Mongol empire after the death of Chinggis Khan; eventually included much of Abbasid empire.

Hulegu: grandson of Chinggis Khan and ruler of Ilkhan khanate; captured and destroyed Abbasid Baghdad.

Mamluks: Muslim slave warriors; established dynasty in Egypt; led by Baibars defeated Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260.

Kublai Khan: grandson of Chinggis Khan; conquered China; established Yuan dynasty in 1271.

Tatu: Mongol capital of Yuan dynasty; present-day Beijing.

Chabi: influential wife of Kubilai Khan; demonstrated refusal of Mongol women to adopt restrictive social conventions of Confucian China.

Nestorians: Asian Christian sect; cut off from Europe by Muslim invasions.

Romance of the West Chamber: famous Chinese dramatic work written during the Yuan period.

White Lotus Society: secret religious society dedicated to overthrow of Yuan dynasty;.

Ju Yuanzhang: Chinese peasant who led successful revolt against Yuan; founded Ming dynasty.

Timur-i Lang: last major nomad leader; 14th century Turkic ruler of Samarkand; launched attacks in Persia, Fertile Crescent, India, southern Russia; empire disintegrated after his death in 1405.