

from
**THE HISTORY OF THE
WORLD CONQUEROR**
1250s

‘Ata Malek Joveyni

After invading China in 1215, Genghis Khan (also Chingiz-Khan) turned west and launched a wave of destruction in Central Asia. His wrath was provoked when a governor in the Muslim empire of Khwārezm massacred a group of Mongol traders. In 1220, Genghis Khan retaliated by attacking the Khwārezm sultan, or ruler, at the city of Samarkand (also Samarqand). The Mongol troops destroyed the city and its fortress and earned a lasting reputation for brutality. In the following account, the Persian historian ‘Ata Malek Joveyni (also ‘Ata-Malik Juvaini) describes the battle at Samarkand.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Causes

According to Joveyni, why were the people of Samarkand defeated by the Mongols?

Of the Conquest of Samarqand

It was the greatest of the countries of the Sultan’s empire in width of territory, the most pleasant of his lands in fertility of soil and, by common consent, the most delectable of the paradises of this world among the four Edens.

*If it is said that a paradise is to be seen in this
world, then the paradise of this world is Samarqand.
O thou who comparest the land of Balkh therewith, are
colocynth and candy equal to one another?*

Its air inclines to mildness, its water is embraced in the favour of the North wind and its earth by the force of its exhilaration has acquired the property of the fire of wine.

*A country whose stones are jewels, whose soil is
musk and whose rain water is strong wine.*

When the Sultan withdrew from the conflict, the control of firmness having slipped from his hands and the attraction of constancy having been replaced by that of flight, while perplexity and doubt had taken abode in his nature; he deputed the protection of most of his lands and territories to his generals (*quvvād*) and allies (*ansār*). Thus to Samarqand he has assigned a hundred and ten thousand men, of whom sixty thousand were Turks, with their khans, who were the Sultan’s

élite . . . The rest of the army consisted of fifty thousand Taziks,¹ picked men (*mufradān*) each of whom was in himself . . . the cream of the armies; together with twenty elephants of perfect shape . . .

*Who twisted columns and played with serpents
And wore coats of mail that exhibited many colours,*

to be a protection (*farzīn-band*) to the king's horse and foot upon the field of battle, that they might not avert their faces from attack and assault. Moreover, the numbers of the townspeople themselves were such as to be beyond computation. And in addition to all this, the citadel had been greatly strengthened, several lines of outworks (*fasīl*) had been drawn around it, the walls had been raised to the Pleiades² and the moat sunk through the dry earth to the water beneath.

When Chingiz-Khan arrived at Otrar³ the news had been spread abroad of the strengthening of the walls and the citadel of Samarqand and the great size of its garrison; and everyone was of the opinion that it would be a matter of years before the town could be taken, to say nothing of the citadel. Following the path of circumspection he held it expedient to purge the surrounding country before proceeding against the town. First of all, he advanced against Bokhara⁴, and when his mind had been set at rest by the capture of that city, he concerned himself with the question of Samarqand. Turning his reins in that direction he drove before him a great levy raised in Bokhara; and whenever the villages on his path submitted, he in no way molested them; but wherever they offered resistance, as in Sar-i-Pul and Dabusiya, he left troops to besiege them, while he himself made no halt until he reached Samarqand. When his sons had disposed of the affair of Otrar, they too arrived with a levy raised in that town; they chose the Kōk-Sarai for Chingiz-Khan's encampment. The other troops also, as they arrived, encamped round about the town.

For a day or two Chingiz-Khan circled the town in person in order to inspect the walls, the outworks and the gates; and during this period he exempted his men from fighting. At the same time he dispatched Yeme and Sübetei, who were two of the great *noyans*⁵ and enjoyed his special trust, in pursuit of the Sultan together with thirty thousand men. . . .

Finally, on the third day, when the flare of the sun's flame had risen from the darkness of the pitchy night's smoke and the nocturnal blackness had retired to the seclusion of a corner, so many men, both Mongols and levies, were assembled together that their numbers exceeded those of the sand of the desert or drops of rain. They stationed themselves in a circle round about the town; and Alp-Er Khan, Shaikh Khan, Bala Khan⁶ and some other khans made a sally into the open, drew up opposite the army of the world-subduing Emperor and discharged their

1. Taziks: Iranians

2. Pleiades: stars

3. Otrar: a city in the Khwārezm empire; the governor of this city was the one who massacred the merchants

4. Bokhara: (also Bukhara) city in what is now Uzbekistan

5. *noyans*: Mongol nobles

6. Alp-Er Khan, Shaikh Khan, Bala Khan: Khwārezm military rulers

arrows. Many horse and foot were slain on either side. That day the Sultan's Turks engaged in constant skirmishes with the Mongols—for the light of the candle flares up a little before going out—killing some of the Mongol army, capturing others and carrying them into the town, while a thousand of their own number likewise fell.

Finally,

*When for the benefit of the earth the fire of heaven
was hidden by the earth's smoke,*

everyone retired to his quarters. But as soon as the deceitful shield-bearer again struck his sword upon the cloud of night, Chingiz-Khan mounted in person and stationed his troops in a circle round about the town. Both inside and outside the troops assembled and made ready for battle; and they pulled up the girth of combat and hostility until the time of evening prayer. From the discharge of mangonels and bows, arrows and stones were set in flight; and the Mongol army took up a position at the very gates and so prevented the Sultan's troops from issuing forth on to the field of battle. And when the path of combat was closed to them, and the two parties had become entangled on the chess-board of war and the valiant knights were no longer able to manoeuvre their horses upon the plain, they threw in their elephants; but the Mongols did not turn tail, on the contrary with their King-checking arrows they liberated those that were held in check by the elephants and broke up the ranks of the infantry. When the elephants had received wounds and were of no more use than the foot-soldiers of chess, they turned back trampling many people underneath their feet. At length, when the Emperor of Khotan had let down the veil over his face,⁷ they closed the gates.

The people of Samarqand had been rendered apprehensive by this day's fighting, and their passions and opinions were divergent: some were desirous of submission and surrender, while others feared for their lives; some, by heavenly decree, were restrained from making peace, while others, because of the aura diffused by Chingiz-Khan, were prevented from doing battle. Finally, on the next day

*When the shining sun spread its glory, and the black
raven of the firmament shed its feathers,*

the Mongol troops being bold and fearless and the people of Samarqand irresolute in mind and counsel, the latter put the idea of war out of their heads and ceased to resist. The *cadi* and the *shaikh-al-Islam*⁸ together with a number of wearers of the turban hastened to approach Chingiz-Khan: they were fortified and encouraged by the breakfast of his promises and with his permission re-entered the town.

At the time of prayer they opened the gate of the *musalla* and closed the door of resistance. The Mongols then entered and that day busied themselves with the destruction of the town and its outworks. The inhabitants drew their feet beneath the skirt of security, and the Mongols in no way molested them. When the day had clad itself in the black garb of the heathen Khitayans,⁹ they lit torches and

7. when the Emperor of Khotan had let down the veil over his face: when the sun set

8. *cadi* and the *shaikh-al-Islam*: wise men; judges and priests

9. When the day had clad itself in the black garb of the heathen Khitayans: when it became night

continued their work until the walls had been levelled with the streets and there was everywhere free passage for horse and foot.

On the third day . . . the greater part of the Mongols entered the town, and the men and women in groups of a hundred were driven out into the open in the charge of Mongol soldiers; only the *cadi* and the *shaikh-al-Islam* together with such as had some connection with them and stood under their protection were exempted from leaving the town. More than fifty thousand people were counted who remained under such protection. The Mongols then caused a proclamation to be made that if anyone sought safety in the corner of concealment his blood should be forfeit. The Mongols and the [other] troops busied themselves with pillaging; and many people who had hidden in cellars and cavities were [discovered and] slain.

The mahouts brought their elephants to Chingiz-Khan and demanded elephant fodder. He asked them what the elephants lived on before they fell into captivity. They replied: 'The grass of the plains.' Whereupon he ordered the elephants to be set free to forage for themselves. They were accordingly released and finally perished [of hunger].

When the king of the heavens had sunk beneath the ball of the earth, the Mongols departed from the town, and the garrison of the citadel, their hearts cut in two with fear and terror, could neither stand and resist nor turn and flee. Alp Khan, however, made a show of valour and intrepidity: issuing forth from the citadel with a thousand desperate men he fought his way through the centre of the Mongol army and joined up with the Sultan. The next morning, when the heralds of the Lord of the planets rose up striking their swords, the Mongol army completely encircled the citadel, and discharging arrows and projectiles from either side they devastated the walls and outworks and laid waste the Juy-i-Arziz.¹⁰ During the space between the two prayers they took the gates and entered the citadel. A thousand brave and valiant men withdrew to the cathedral mosque and commenced a fierce battle using both naphtha and quarrels. The army of Chingiz-Khan likewise employed pots of naphtha; and the Friday mosque and all that were in it were burnt with the fire of this world and washed with the water of the Hereafter. Then all in the citadel were brought out into the open, where the Turks were separated from the Taziks and all divided into groups of ten and a hundred. They shaved the front of the Turks' heads in the Mongol fashion in order to tranquillize them and allay their fears; but when the sun had reached the west, the day of their life drew to its close, and that night every male Qanqli¹¹ was drowned in the ocean of destruction and consumed by the fire of perdition. There were more than thirty thousand Qanqli and Turks, commanded by Barishmas Khan, Taghai Khan, Sarsigh Khan and Ulagh Khan,¹² together with some twenty of the Sultan's chief emirs . . .

When the town and the citadel equalled each other in ruin and desolation and many an emir, and soldier, and townsman had taken a sip at the cup of destruction,

10. **Juy-i-Arziz:** a famous artificial waterway

11. **Qanqli:** people of Turkic origin

12. **Barishmas Khan, Taghai Khan, Sarsigh Khan and Ulagh Khan:** leaders of the Sultan's Turkish army

on the next day, when the eagle . . . which is the heavenly Jamshid had raised its head above the mountain-tops of the earth and the fiery countenance of the sun was lit up upon the round tray of the sky, the people who had escaped from beneath the sword were numbered; thirty thousand of them were chosen for their craftsmanship, and these Chingiz-Khan distributed amongst his sons and kinsmen, while the like number were selected from the youthful and valiant to form a levy. With regard to the remainder, who obtained permission to return into the town, as a thanksgiving because they had not shared the fate of the others nor attained the degree of martyrdom but had remained in the ranks of the living, he imposed [a ransom of] two hundred thousand dinars on these suppliants and deputed the collection of this sum to Siqat-al-Mulk and 'Amid Buzurg, who belonged to the chief officials of Samarqand. He then appointed several persons to be *shahnas* of the town and took some of the levies with him to Khorasan,¹³ while the others he sent to Khorazm¹⁴ with his sons. And afterwards, several times in succession levies were raised in Samarqand and few only were exempted therefrom; and for this reason complete ruin overran the country.

This event occurred in Rabi' I, 618.¹⁵

Source: Excerpt from *The History of the World-Conqueror* by Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, translated from the text of Mirza Muhammad Qazvini by John Andrew Boyle, Ph.D., Volume 1 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958), pp. 115–123. Used with permission of Manchester University Press.

13. **Khorasan:** a region in Central Asia, located in present-day Iran, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Afghanistan

14. **Khorazm:** (also spelled Khwārezm) a kingdom in Central Asia, lying in present-day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

15. **Rabi' I, 618:** the Muslim date of the battle, May–June 1220

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

During the night after the first battle, Genghis Khan and his army surrounded Samarkand, trapping their opponents inside the city. Then the people of Samarkand became divided. Some wanted to fight, and others wanted to surrender. Fearing the Mongols, the townspeople decided not to resist and opened the city gates. The Samarkand soldiers continued to fight, but they were no match for the Mongols.