

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.3

How Did Chinggis Turn a Pastoral Nomadic Society Into an Efficient War Machine?

Before Chinggis, the Mongols were organized into tribes that fought and raided each other for plunder, for women (no marriages were allowed between members of the same tribe), and to avenge insults. Largely self-sufficient, they often raided, traded with, and extracted tribute from neighboring settled agricultural communities.

In most tribes, there were no specialists other than shamans and blacksmiths. Women and men both contributed to the economy, and the division of labor by sex was not rigid. Those men who could afford it married more than one wife, each of whom had her separate household, owned property outright, and had considerable freedom of action. Women rode, shot with bow and arrow, and hunted. They gave political advice and could rise to the rank of chief, though rarely. The senior wife had special status and respect, and her children were often favored as heirs. On campaign, wives, children, and flocks often went with the army. Women and even children could be drafted to ride on the fringes of battle to simulate larger numbers. It is unclear whether they ever took an active part in combat. The tribes were divided into nobles and commoners, and only members of noble lineages could become chiefs, though class differences were not strongly marked.

All Mongols were fighters, but Chinggis made a reorganized army the core of the society and the carrier of many of his reforms. Under him and his successors, the Mongol army had the following characteristics, many designed by Chinggis himself:

All males 15-70 served in the army, all as cavalry.

The army's 95 units of 10,000 soldiers were subdivided into units of 1,000, 100, and 10. Members of different tribes were mixed together in units of every size to ensure loyalty to the army above loyalty to the tribe. Allies and levies from conquered territories were also integrated into the fighting force, the latter usually being placed in the front ranks.

Absolute obedience to orders from superiors was enforced.

Officers had tight control over their troops' actions (plunder only with permission, no one allowed to transfer out of their unit).

Officers and men were bound to each other by mutual loyalty and two-way responsibilities.

No one in the army was paid, though all shared to varying degrees in the booty. All contributed to a fund to take care of those too old, sick, or hurt to fight.

During three months every year, large-scale hunting expeditions served as intensive military training simulations.

Cavalry troops had to supply their own bows and other military equipment, which had to meet officers' standards.

Gathering intelligence had high priority. Scouts were sent out, local knowledge sought, and traveling merchants rewarded for information.

Foreign experts and advisors were extensively used, notably Chinese and Persian engineers skilled at making and using siege weapons such as catapults and battering rams.

The highest level of government was Chinggis and his family, especially his sons by his senior wife and their descendants, known as the “Golden Family.” From among their members the Great Khans and after Chinggis Khan’s death the khans ruling the four successor empires were selected by agreement of the Kuriltai, the council made up of Chinggis’s family members and those others they invited.

Lack of clear-cut rules of succession opened the way for power struggles after the death of each ruler. Some earlier pastoral nomadic empires did not long survive the death of the leader who founded them. The Mongol state was unusual in surviving for as long as it did, even though it divided into four separate kingdoms, or khanates after about 1260.

Chinggis Khan’s administrators were picked for demonstrated high performance regardless of their wealth or social class. Among Chinggis’s closest advisors were people from both allied and conquered non-Mongol backgrounds, notably literate scholars and scribes from China, Persia, and the Inner Eurasian oasis towns