

# TIME

## 13th Century: Genghis Khan (c. 1167-1227)

The world conqueror swept through Asia like an apocalypse and set in motion forces more powerful than the sword.

By Howard Chua-Eoan | Friday, Dec. 31, 1999

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Temujin was born clutching a blood clot the size of a knucklebone. His name was war booty, taken from a captive rival by his proud warrior father and tacked on like a medal to his firstborn son. But history echoes with another of his names, a title Temujin would receive 39 years later. In 1206, by acclamation of all the Mongols, he became Genghis Khan, the "Oceanic Ruler" who in the next two decades would father an empire that rolled across Eurasia, linking the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea as it amassed kingdoms as loot and nations as slaves. The legacy of Genghis Khan is as terrifying as genocide and as dreadful as the plague. But this is the paradox: it is also as seductive as Xanadu and as momentous as the discovery of America.

His forebears were a blue-gray wolf and a fallow doe. The coupling of these legendary ancestors, of predator and prey, produced a human being from whom all Mongols would claim descent. But such fantastical beginnings did little to ease the early life of the world conqueror-- unless the myth was an omen for living like a wild animal in the steppes around Lake Baikal. His father Yesugei was poisoned by enemies and his widowed mother Hoelun chased away from their tribe with her brood, including her eldest, nine-year-old Temujin. The outcasts ate field mice and marmots even as they fought off thieves out for their horses, the most precious of nomad property. Bitterness cultivated a heart of iron. After a half-brother grabbed a fish he had hooked, Temujin would kill the offending sibling in a hail of arrows. He never showed remorse. His mother was furious at the waste of a potential soldier in the revenge she envisioned. "We have no one to fight with us," she hectored, "except our own shadows."

Out of the shadows, however, Temujin would create a nation and the most disciplined fighting force on the planet. First, he escaped the wild by making a good marriage. That alliance would lead to more critical alliances as Temujin learned to ply diplomacy and a ruthless militancy. Soon, his almost supernatural generalship would win him fiercely loyal followers, enough to offset a multiplicity of traitors and false friends. He vanquished the fractious tribalism of the Mongols by dispersing clansmen among regiments in an army that used death as discipline and looting as reward. Conquered peoples were divided among the armies, swelling the ranks of fighters. Similarly, the technology of the conquered cultures was absorbed like more booty and

enrolled in an intercultural war of conquest. Thus the elaborate catapults developed in Central Asia were deployed against the stout walls of China. And the explosive bombs and rockets pioneered in China were used in Mesopotamia and Europe.

Terror, however, was the Khan's greatest weapon. Cities that resisted the Mongols were made into examples. Their populations were slaughtered indiscriminately, with survivors marched before the Mongol armies to buffer counterattacks: human shields nearly eight centuries before Saddam Hussein. Cities that surrendered without a fight were spared, their citizens merely enslaved.

The great Khan's strategies led to the subjugation of the advanced civilizations of northern China and Persia. His sons and grandsons would extend the empire. Batu would command armies that struck deep into Russia and swept through Poland into Germany, Hungary and the Balkans. Kublai Khan, who would later build his stately pleasure dome in the city of Shangtu (Coleridge's Xanadu), conquered southern China and Burma. His brother Hulegu would not only destroy Baghdad but also devastate its irrigation network. Mesopotamia has never fully recovered.

The immense wealth of the Mongol empire and the suddenly free passage from west to east attracted merchants and adventurers, whose goods and tales would change the world. Marco Polo's stories became the dreams of Christopher Columbus. The quest for a passage to Cathay, the medieval name for northern China, would propel countless explorers through serendipitous discoveries in America. (In 1634, for example, the Frenchman Jean Nicolet left Quebec in search of China and discovered Green Bay, Wis.) Meanwhile, Franciscan missionary diplomats sent by the Pope to seek an alliance with the Khan against Islam brought back a black powder to a fellow Franciscan, the Oxford scientist Roger Bacon, the first European to write about gunpowder.

However, the most indirect, though by no means benign, gift of the Khan was the plague. Originating in the jungles of southern China and Burma, bubonic plague traveled with Mongol armies and then from caravan to caravan till it reached the Crimea in 1347. From there it would take a third of all Europeans. Bereft of labor and talent, the fledgling nation states were pressed to maximize tax collection, bureaucracy and state control of the force of arms, leading to the heightened competitiveness of the West just as Europe's ships sailed for the riches of a distant empire. The rest is the history of another world conquest.