

Introduction

In the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries, the Mongols created the largest contiguous empire the world has ever known. In 1206, Temüjin, an orphan and a former slave, united the many feuding clans which occupied the steppes north of China and declared himself "Genghis Khan," meaning "fierce ruler." Once this feat was accomplished he turned to military conquests abroad. The Mongols armies were spectacularly successful. Their soldiers, consisting only of cavalry, were fast, highly disciplined and well organized, and they wielded their bows and lances while still on horseback. Since most land between Europe and Asia was sparsely populated and quite unprotected, the Mongols quickly overran enormous areas while most of the actual warfare consisted of sieges of towns. Once they had mastered the art of siege warfare, the cities too fell into their hands. But the Mongols fought in the jungles of Southeast Asia too, they built a navy, and tried to invade both Java and Japan. In 1241 they completely obliterated the European armies that had gathered against them and in 1258 they besieged, sacked and burned Baghdad. At the height of their power, the Mongols controlled an area stretching from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean, northward to Siberia, eastward and southward into the Indian subcontinent, Indochina and Iran, and westwards as far as the Arabian peninsula and the coast of the Mediterranean. It was a territory about the size of the African continent, considerably larger than North America, and although the Mongols counted only about one million people at the time, the lands they once controlled today comprise a majority of the world's population.

The Mongols were known as merciless warriors who destroyed the cities they captured, sparing no humans and occasionally killing also their cats and dogs. Yet apart from their military superiority, they had nothing much to impart to the rest of the world. The Mongols made no technological

breakthroughs, founded no religions, built no buildings, and their craftsmen had not even mastered simple techniques such as weaving, pottery or bread-making. Rather, by conquering such a vast territory, and by unifying it under the same law, they managed to connect parts of the world which previously never had been connected, or not connected as closely and efficiently. The results were profound and revolutionary. Throughout their empire, the Mongols guaranteed the security of travelers and they encouraged trade by reducing taxes and facilitating travel. Indeed, during the so called Pax mongolica, the “Mongol peace,” exchanges along the caravan routes of Central Asia became more intense than ever. This was when the Mongol court in Karakorum would exchange diplomats with the pope in Rome; when Persian businessmen would go to China on regular visits; and when Ibn Battuta, the celebrated Moroccan globetrotter, would travel everywhere it was possible to go. [Read more: Ibn Battuta, the Greatest Traveler of All Time]

The Mongol empire lasted only some 150 years. The empire began to crack already by the middle of the thirteenth-century and in the early fourteenth-century it was disintegrating. In 1368, the Mongols lost control over their most prized possession – China. The cause of this decline had less to do with external enemies than with domestic strife. When Genghis Khan’s grandchildren by the middle of the thirteenth-century were ready to take over the realm, the question of succession turned out to be impossible to settle. The outcome was a civil war which turned brothers against each other and eventually resulted in the division of the empire into four separate parts – the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Yuan dynasty in China, and the Chagatai khanate in the traditional Mongolian heartlands. Although these entities were intimately related to each other in various ways, there were also constant conflicts between them. The Black Death, a contagious disease which spread quickly along the caravan routes in the fourteenth-century, decimated the population and

made travel and exchange into deadly activities. At the end of the fourteenth-century, the Mongol empire was once again a small kingdom confined to the steppes north of China and its last remnant was swallowed up by the Qing dynasty in 1635. Other vestiges and descendants lived on, most successfully in the form of the Mughal empire in India, founded in 1526 by Babur who counted himself as a direct descendant of Genghis Khan. [Read more: [The Mughal Empire](#)]