

From Temüjin to Genghis Khan

The boy who was to become Genghis Khan was born in 1162, not far from the current Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar, and given the name Temüjin. As legend would have it, he was born with a clot of blood in his hand, a sign that he was to become a great conqueror. *[Read more: The Secret History of the Mongols]* Like all Mongolian boys, Temüjin learned to ride a horse at a very early age, to tend the family's animals and to hunt. His father was a chieftain, and well respected within the society of nomads, but there were many chieftains on the steppes and they were often in conflict with each other. Indeed, the people we call the Mongols were only one of many nomadic tribes, and there were several others – Merkits, Naimans, Keraites, Tatars, Uyghurs and so on – and the Mongols were not the largest among them. Each group was divided into clans and lineages, and many of the groups were in constant conflict with each other – over grazing rights, horses, women and treasure. They traded with each other to be sure, but they also raided each other's camps looking for women to take as wives and concubines or for children to capture and keep as domestic slaves. Indeed kidnapping was a common way to obtain a wife, especially for those who were too poor to be considered eligible husbands. The able-bodied men were usually the first to flee if a camp was under attack since they ran the highest risk of being killed and since the future of the group depended on their labor. Yet as a rule this constant, low-intensity, warfare did not result in many casualties. The object was to obtain resources, not to kill people or to conquer land. In fact, land mattered to the nomads only as pasture for grazing, and even the best pasture had to be given up once the animals were ready to move on.

Then disaster struck. Temüjin's father was killed, and when Temüjin was only eight he and his mother and siblings were cast out by their clan who decided that they did not have

enough food to feed them. Instead they were forced to eek out a living gathering plants on the steppe and hunting in the forests. Remarkably the family survived, although their camp too was raided and when Temüjin was taken prisoner and made into a slave. Once he managed to escape at the age of 17 he got married to a girl, Börte, to whom he had been betrothed already while his father was still alive. Yet Börte was soon abducted by a rivaling tribe. Together with a small band of followers, Temüjin successfully attacked the kidnappers and took back his wife. He meted out a terrible revenge on the perpetrators by killing the men who had offended against him and by enslaving their women and children.

This was arguably the event which set him off on his career as conqueror. His skills as a raider soon attracted wider attention and before long Temüjin concluded an advantageous treaty with a one of the traditional chieftains of the Mongols which gave him access to a far larger contingent of men. This was the band of warriors which he went on to leverage into an ever-increasing force as every successful raid attracted ever more of a following. The people who were loyal to him, he treated as members of his own family while those who crossed or betrayed him were treated mercilessly. In 1206, Temüjin called a *kurultai*, an assembly of the leading chieftains, and here he was elected *khagan*, the khan of khans. He took the name "Genghis Khan," meaning "fierce leaders," and the people he united came to be called "Mongols" after the name of his own tribe. Genghis Khan was now the supreme leader of perhaps one million people and some 15 to 20 million horses, sheep and goats.

Once in power Genghis Khan put in place a legal and institutional framework which would help break the cycle of violence in Mongol society and prevent the kinds of events that had wreaked havoc with his own life. One aim was to abolish the time-honored divisions into tribes, clans and lineages. Genghis Khan did this by doing away with

aristocratic titles and by promoting people according to merit. He was also keen to advance the careers of people from other tribes than his own – or indeed, once the foreign conquests had begun, of other people than Mongols – and in fact most of his inner circle of advisers were not members of his own family. Genghis Khan also decimalized the army, as it were. That is, he divided the men into *arban*, groups of ten men drawn from different sections of Mongol society, and each *arban* was ordered to live and fight together as loyally as brothers. That is, from the point of view of the government each group of ten men were treated as families and thereby as the new units not only of military but also of social life. The ten-groups were then multiplied by 10 to produce groups of 100, 1,000 and 10,000 soldiers. A group of 10,000 men, that is, soldiers, was known as a *tumen*.

A new legal code, the *yassa*, was also established which turned a long range of actions into criminal offenses, in particular those which Genghis Khan knew to be a cause of conflict. Thus the abduction of wives, and the sale of women, were declared illegal together with the enslavement of fellow Mongols. Theft of cattle or horses was made a capital crime and anyone who found a lost animal was obliged to return it or be condemned to death as a thief. There were further laws against raiding and looting and regulations for where and during which times of the year animals could be hunted. All children, moreover, were regarded as the legitimate offspring of their parents regardless of the circumstances under which they had been conceived and born. Freedom of religion was official recognized by the Mongol authorities. Although Genghis Khan himself was a Tengrist, there were Muslims, Christians and Buddhists among his fellow Mongols, and, as Genghis Khan realized, only complete freedom of religion could prevent conflicts among them. *[Read more: Tengrism]* The rules of the *yassa* were enforced by trials which were held in public and all Mongols, including Genghis Khan himself, were in theory bound by the letters of the law. All important matters,

including matters of succession and of foreign policy, were to be discussed and decided on in a *kurultai*, the parliament of chieftains.

What more than anything brought the Mongols together, however, was the decision to embark on military conquests abroad. Foreign conquests directed their attention outward and united them against their common enemies. Yet in line with Mongol traditions these were not wars as much as raids, and the object was not the occupation of land or the killing of enemies, but instead loot – of horses and slaves at first, and later of grain, treasure, and all kinds of productive resources. This more than anything was how Genghis Khan built support for his regime. He was an extraordinarily successful military commander and as such he was always able to provide for his people. Every city they captured was looted according to a set formula, with shares for everyone, from the 10 percent given to Genghis Khan and his family down to shares for orphans and widows. Yet the demands of the Mongol people seem to multiply over time and no one was ever satisfied with what they already had acquired. This is what set the Mongols on the path to loot the whole world.

To the south of the Mongols, between themselves and the Song dynasty in China, were a number of northern tribes who had managed to establish kingdoms of their own. The most successful of these were the Jürchen who had made war on the Song dynasty and forced them to move their capital to Hangzhou in the south of China. Another neighbor were the Tanguts, a kingdom of Tibetan-speaking people, and the Khanate of Kara-Khitan, a kingdom located further west on the steppes towards Russia. Genghis Khan took on these kingdoms and their armies one by one and before long he had defeated them all – the Tanguts in 1210, the Jürchen in 1214 and Khara-Khitan in 1218. There were rich spoils of war to be had from these conquests, in particular from the kingdom of the Jürchen who controlled some of the trading routes which brought Chinese merchandise

to Central Asia and beyond. *[Read more: The Silk Road]*

These military successes put the Mongols in contact with the Khwarazmian Empire in the far west. The Khwarazmians were the rulers of Persia, but also of present-day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and much of Afghanistan. Yet the Khwarazmians were a city-based empire, not a band of nomads, and they laid claims to all the resources and the historical heritage of the Persian states of antiquity. From the Khwarazmian point of view, the Mongols were nothing but an annoyance and initially Genghis Khan was convinced that the Khwarazmians indeed were too powerful to attack. Instead he dispatched a delegation of merchants and diplomats to their court asking for the right to trade. When some of the envoys were killed and others were returned to Mongolia with their faces mutilated, Genghis Khan was outraged. He dispatched another delegation which was treated in much the same manner. After this Genghis Khan felt he had no choice but to attack. After an exceptional ride through the deserts of Central Asia, his mounted warriors descended on the city of Bukhara, in today's Uzbekistan, and caught the Khwarazmians by surprise. Genghis Khan gathered the local potentates in the city's biggest mosque and explained to them that he was God's punishment for their sins. Then he killed them all and thoroughly looted the city. The neighboring city of Samarkand was captured in the same manner and as news of these spectacular attacks reached other parts of the empire, the Khwarazmians lost their self-confidence. Genghis Khan gave them an ultimatum – to surrender without a fight or to be annihilated. Within a year the entire empire was in the hands of the Mongols.

After this spectacular victory the Mongols were no longer simply a loose federation of horsemen but a proper empire in control of some of the richest cities in the world. They had possessions and thereby responsibilities. They were also suddenly a Middle Eastern power and before long they continued their raids with attacks on the Caucasus – Armenia, Georgia

and Azerbaijan – and Georgia, a Christian kingdom, was to become a particularly loyal ally. And once the Mongols were established in the Caucasus, they came into contact with the Kievan Rus, the fledgling Russian state in present-day Ukraine. However, in 1227 an unexpected uprising among the Tanguts, just south of the Mongol heartlands, forced Genghis Khan to return to the east, and this is where he died, 65 years old, under rather mysterious circumstances. Some say that he was wounded in a battle, others that he fell off his horse or perhaps that he was killed by a Tangut woman he had taken as a concubine. In any case, his body was carried back to Mongolia and buried in a grave without markings according to the customs of his tribe. Legend has it that the site was trampled by horses to make it impossible to find, that a forest was planted on top of it, or that a river was diverted to cover the spot. By the time of his death the Mongols controlled the center of the entire Eurasian landmass – from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea. *[Read more: Genghis Khan in today's Mongolia]*