

Dividing it all up

Once the Mongol princes returned from Europe in 1241, a prolonged struggle ensued over succession which pitted Genghis Khan's grandchildren against each other and which for a while resulted in an open civil war between them. During the coming decade, the Mongols were too occupied with this domestic strife to pay much attention to their empire. It was only with the election of Möngke Khan in 1251 that the foreign conquests resumed. This time around the first target were the Muslim caliphates in the Middle East. Although Persia had been conquered already by Genghis Khan himself, the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, despite its military weakness, had not been subject to sustained attacks. It was Hülëgü, Möngke's brother, who was in command of these armies and in accordance with the traditions of Mongol diplomacy he began by dispatching envoys to Baghdad with a list of grievances and demands. In November 1257, when the caliph refused to provide him with the answers he wanted, Hülëgü marched on the city. Baghdad was besieged and, once gunpowder had been used to undermine the walls, it surrendered. Baghdad was probably the richest city in the world at the time, and the loot lasted for a full seventeen days. In the end the caliph was rolled up in a carpet and trampled to death by horses, and in the confusion the attackers set fire to the city. The destruction of Baghdad, 1258, is remembered to this day as the event which put an end to the "golden age" of the Muslim caliphates. [*Read more: Arabian Nights*]

Their presence in the Middle East put the Mongols in contact with the Ayyubid caliphate in Cairo, defended by their army of Mamluks. The Mamluks were slaves in the service of the sultans and they were soldiers who in several respects resembled the Mongols themselves. Many of them were descendants of nomadic tribes from Caucasus and the area north of the Black Sea who were used to fighting on horseback, and they were as highly

trained and disciplined as ever the Mongols. In September 1260, at Ain Jalut, near the Sea of Galilee in what today is Israel, the Mongols were defeated by the Mamluks. Although they had lost battles before, the Mongols would always come back to avenge their losses and exact a terrible punishment on their enemies. Yet after Ain Jalut this did not happen and the Mongols never made it to Cairo. Indeed, the way Baghdad was destroyed and Damascus too looted but Cairo spared, decisively moved power within the Muslim world to the Ayyubids. Instead the empire had found its westernmost frontiers.

Their presence in the Middle East also put the Mongols in contact with the Faranj, the armies of Catholic Europe that set off on a series of crusades to recapture the lands which their religious scriptures regarded as holy. That is, the Crusaders were in the Middle East to make war on the armies of the Muslim caliphates. To the Europeans, the Mongols seemed at first to be heaven sent. Any enemy of the Muslims, they argued, must be a friend of theirs, and in this case the forces in question were most likely those of Prester John, that legendary Christian ruler who was said to have founded a mighty kingdom somewhere in the far east. [Read more: Prester John and Nestorian Christians] Even once they realized that this was not the case, the Crusaders were keen to form an alliance with a powerful military force that could attack their Muslim enemies from the east. The Europeans, represented by the pope in Rome or by the king of France, first communicated directly with the Great Khan in Mongolia and envoys were dispatched to Karakorum, the Mongol capital. The Great Khan reciprocated by sending envoys to Rome. Soon enough, however, diplomatic dispatches were instead directed to the Mongols in Persia since they were the ones who were directly in charge of the Mediterranean wars. Several missions were conducted back and forth, with Mongol envoys sharing holy communion with the pope in Rome and even traveling as far as to London to meet the English king. [Read more: Rabban Bar Sauma, envoy to the pope] These exchanges all followed the

same pattern: first the Europeans asked the Mongols to convert to Christianity, then the Mongols responded with demands for submission and tribute. Not surprisingly perhaps no agreement was ever reached, although several Christian kingdoms in the Middle East, such as the Crusader state of Antioch submitted and paid regular tributes to the Mongols. Although Hülëgü's armies invaded Syria several times, they never coordinated their attacks with the Crusaders in a meaningful fashion. In the end not only the Mongols but also the Faranj were defeated by the Mamluk armies.

Soon enough the Mongols who conquered and sacked the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad came to think of themselves as a separate political entity, and their leader, Hülëgü, to think of himself not as a general or a governor working for the Great Khan in Mongolia but as a khan with a khanate of his own. This realm, made up of Persia and big chunks of Central Asia and the Middle East, came to be known as the "Ilkhanate," or "subordinate khanate." Much as the Arabs who conquered these lands before them, the Ilkhanate khans and their courts came to be heavily influenced by the local, essentially Persian, culture. That is, in a radical transformation of their own ways of life, the Mongols got off their horses and became sedentary. After Hülëgü's own time, Islam was adopted as the official religion of the state and the khans became great supporters of scholarship and the arts. The most celebrated example is the astronomical observatory at Maragheh which in addition to astronomers had mathematicians, philosophers and medical doctors in residence. Yet, much as in the case of the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate began to fall apart in the first half of the fourteenth-century, and eventually it was broken up into a number of small successor states. The most famous successor was the state which Timur, or Tamerlane, in the fourteenth-century once again for a short while turned into an empire. *[Read more: Tamerlane and the astronomers of Bukhara]*

The only neighbors the Mongols had not successfully attacked were the Chinese, and this is surprising given both how relatively close China was and how singularly wealthy the country. Already Genghis Khan had, as we saw, successfully occupied the nomadic buffer states located between the Mongols and China – the Jürchen, the Tanguts and Kara-khitan – but he had made no sustained attacks on China itself. It was only once Möngke was elected *khagan* in 1251 that China came into focus. China at this time was equivalent to the Song dynasty, 960–1279 CE. The Song is one of the most celebrated dynasties of China, responsible for economic prosperity, rapid technological advances, and some of the best ink paintings in the history of Chinese art. Militarily, however, they were weak and the Jürchen had successfully put pressure on them since the early twelfth-century. In order to defend themselves the Song emperors moved their capital to the southern city of Hangzhou, close to today's Shanghai. Although this move no doubt constituted an embarrassment, the Song continued to thrive economically, and they still controlled some sixty percent of China's population. Hangzhou, amazed visitors reported, had the most beautiful women in the world and no fewer than 12,000 bridges across the canals of the city.

Möngke Khan had picked his brother Kublai to be in charge of the invasion of China, but Kublai was far too fat to ride a horse and he had no aptitude for war. He moved only reluctantly against the Chinese, complemented by the generals who Möngke himself dispatched. The strategy was to attack the Song court in a diversionary pattern, starting with an invasion of Sichuan to the west and Yunnan to the south-west. If the Mongols gained control of these areas, went the plan, they could attack the Song from all sides at once. Yet the death of Möngke Khan in 1259, and the subsequent struggle over succession, meant that China once again became a less important concern. Although the wars eventually resumed, it took another twelve years before Kublai Khan could declare himself emperor of China, and another ten years after that

before he decisively had defeated the last of his remaining adversaries. The last Song emperor, an 8-year-old boy, committed suicide together with his prime minister and 800 members of his family. From 1279, China was again united and Kublai Khan the holder of the mandate of heaven and the emperor of a new dynasty, the Yuan. In fact, Kublai was not only emperor of China but he continued to claim the title of *khagan* of all Mongols, although his right to this title was disputed by his brothers.

While the attacks on China were going on, the Mongols successfully invaded the Korean peninsula where the kings quickly submitted themselves and agreed to pay regular tributes. Kublai Khan also tried to invade Japan, and he assembled an army of some 100,000 men for the purpose, but the ships which they constructed were not quite seaworthy and besides the invaders were unlucky with the weather. [*Read more: The kamikaze*] A first invasion in 1274 had to be aborted and a second invasion in 1281 failed miserably. Japan, as a result, was never occupied. Cut off from China by the presence of the Mongols, Japan came to depend far more on its own domestic resources. Kublai Khan also tried to invade Java, in today's Indonesia, and his armies conducted campaigns in Vietnam, Thailand and Burma. But the weather in Southeast Asia was hot and humid, the expeditions were hampered by disease, and the tropical terrain was not suitable for soldiers on horseback.

Kublai Khan's favorite wife died in 1281, and his favorite son and chosen successor died in 1285. After that he grew increasingly despondent and withdrew from the daily business of government. He fell ill in 1293 and died himself in 1294. The last years of the Yuan dynasty were marked by struggle, famine and distress among ordinary people. The reigns of the later Yuan emperors were short and marked by intrigues and rivalries. Uninterested in administration, they were separated both from the army and from people at large. The Yuan dynasty was eventually defeated by the Ming, a native Chinese dynasty,

which replaced them in 1368. The Mongols retreated to Mongolia, forming what is known as the "Northern Yuan dynasty," 1368–1691 CE, but they never rescinded their claims to the Chinese throne. They ruled Mongolia until 1635 when they were deposed by the Manchus, descendants of the Jürchen tribes which Genghis Khan had defeated so easily four hundred years earlier. The Manchus went on, in 1644, to become the new rulers of all of China.