The Great Khan: The Ruler of the Largest Empire Known to Man

(1162-1240)

The life of Genghis Khan is a contradiction of triumph and tragedy. His younger life was filled with cruelty which made him into the leader he became – cruel to his enemies but fair to his followers. Mongol tribes were illiterate, enduring many hardships, and were always fighting over turf.**[[1]](#footnote-1)** There was constant quarreling and scheming which led to a life that was violent and unpredictable**.[[2]](#footnote-2)** “*Before the appearance of Genghis Khan, they had no chief or ruler. Each tribe or two tribes lived separately; they were not united with one another, and there was constant fights and hostility between*,” wrote Ata Malik Juvyni, a Persian writer.**[[3]](#footnote-3)**  He was a ruthless, unjust conqueror and yet the Mongols looked to him as a hero because he made their lives better.

More has been written about Genghis Khan than any other figure in Asian History; however, much of it is misleading, inaccurate or prejudicial.**[[4]](#footnote-4)** Very little is known of his personal life or what he looked like**.** Most accounts describe him as tall, strong with flowing long hair, and a beard**.[[5]](#footnote-5)** Fourteenth century Persian chronicler, Rashid at-Din claimed “Genghis had red hair and green eyes,” but he never knew the Khan in person so his account is questionable. Images were created after his death by people who never saw him.[[6]](#footnote-6) He possessed great energy, genius, and understanding, as well as born and bred to conquer,[[7]](#footnote-7) but could be incredibly cruel to his enemies.[[8]](#footnote-8) According to the “Secret History of the Mongols” Temujin was “born with a blood clot in his hand” [[9]](#footnote-9) a sign in Mongol folklore that he was destined to become a leader. Even though hisempire did not continue long after his death, he was recognized as a man with ideas way ahead of his time, and in that sense, he was able to triumph over a tragic beginning. From the time Temujin was born until his early 20’s, when he became the leader of his tribe and began his journey as Genghis Khan, he faced hardship after hardship. However, each challenge made him stronger and more determined to become a masterful warrior and leader of men.

Born about 1162 as a Kiyat Mongol**,** he was named Temujin which means iron or blacksmith.[[10]](#footnote-10) He spent his early days collecting dung, grooming horses, herding sheep and yaks.[[11]](#footnote-11) He was betrothed at nineto a neighboring chief’s daughterand lived in her village. After four years, he returned home when his father was poisoned by rival Tartars at a Tartar feast.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Kiyats didn’t want to follow such a young boy, so the tribe kicked his Mother and six siblings out with only a few horses and one warrior. Temujin killed his older half-brother and took over as provider of his poverty-stricken household.[[13]](#footnote-13) Captured and enslaved at age 20 by the clan that abandoned the family,[[14]](#footnote-14) he managed to escape with the help of an old warrior and joined his brothers and other clansmen to form a fighting unit.[[15]](#footnote-15) They avenged his father’s murder by destroying every male in the clan who was more than 3 feet tall. In 1178, he married Borte;[[16]](#footnote-16) but shortly after the wedding,the Kiyat village was attacked by a rival Merkit tribe.[[17]](#footnote-17) His wife was carried off and given to the chieftain as a wife.[[18]](#footnote-18) Temujin joined forces with the Kiyats to raidthe Merkit stronghold and rescue his wife. Shortly after returning home, she gave birth to their first son, Jochi. Even though there was some doubt, Temujin accepted him as his own. A total of four sons with Borte were qualified for succession.[[19]](#footnote-19)

## Temujin knew he must end the old way of Mongol fighting.[[20]](#footnote-20) He knew the Mongols would not be strong unless they were united so he began building a reputation as a warrior attracting a large numberof followers.[[21]](#footnote-21) He was believed to be a “bogdo,” a man gifted by Heaven.[[22]](#footnote-22) He began launching campaigns deep into central Asia because of the need for more animals and to prevent starvation.[[23]](#footnote-23) He approached his former warriors and demanded the tribute due to a chieftain. He would put competent allies rather than relatives in key positions and executed the leader of enemy tribes.[[24]](#footnote-24) Genghis called his generals the “Raging Torrents” and began alliances with heads of important tribes. His victories were swift and the Mongols became feared fighters. By his early 20’s, he was a mighty warrior and leader[[25]](#footnote-25) By 1205 he had vanquished all rivals including his former best friend, Jamuka.[[26]](#footnote-26) When other chieftains sought his help, he demanded their allegiance.

In 1206 a great Kuriltai (council) was summoned to choose a ruler for all the nomad tribes. All the chieftains voted for Temujin and gave him the new name of Genghis Khan, Lord of the Steppes, and ruler of the world.[[27]](#footnote-27) The leading shaman declared Khan the supreme god of the Mongols carrying not only political importance, but spiritual significance.[[28]](#footnote-28) Said to Temujin by Altan, Khuchar, Sach-bekit:

## *“We appoint you as our Khan. If you will be our Khan, we will go as vanguard against the multitude of your enemies. . .. If in time of battle we disobey your orders or in time of peace we act contrary to your interests, part us from our wives and possessions and cast us out into the wilderness.”[[29]](#footnote-29)*

## This oath is which made Temujin the Great Khan with the name of Chingis,[[30]](#footnote-30) which is

## just another way to spell Chengis.

He ordered all the tribes to forget old scores because they were now one nation, the Mongols, his subjects.[[31]](#footnote-31) He degreed that no Mongol should be a slave**,** above all others, but they must obey.[[32]](#footnote-32) Khan supposedly said to one of his enemies “I am the flail of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.”[[33]](#footnote-33) They outmarched every enemy with speed their chief weapon. The commanders kept in touch by messengers. His army ranged freely by having five horses for each man and often eighteen for the officers. Their horses were well-trained and taken care of, were ridden one day and rested for five. Soldiers rode in groups of ten, sharing their rations. The light cavalry fought with bows and javelins using hit-and-run tactics. The toughest warriors of the heavy cavalry were the shock troops. Their horses were protected with lacquered-leather armor and armed with swords, axes, lassos, and lances ending with hooks. The artillery regiments were made up of Chinese and Mongols who used heavy catapults carried on ox carts and assembled on the battlefield. Bridge-builders, miners, herdsmen driving livestock, merchants, interpreters, mapmakers, and officials to take over the government traveled with the army.[[34]](#footnote-34) Women could ride as skillfully as men, carried quivers and bows, could shoot like men and ride for as long as the men. Mongol women made everything from leather: skin clothes, shoes, and leggings.[[35]](#footnote-35) Two or three chiefs were in command of the whole army. Then there was the Khan who held the supreme command.[[36]](#footnote-36) The impact of Khan’s reign during his conquests can be looked at from several perspectives. He killed millions of people, yet he readily took care of those who pledged their loyalty to him. People believed he had the “Mandate of Heaven” and fighting against him was fighting heaven itself.[[37]](#footnote-37) Khan had a keen eye for talent. He promoted his officers on skill and experience, not on ancestry or class, and rewarded loyalty and honesty.[[38]](#footnote-38) Khan gave other kingdoms a chance to peacefully submit to Mongol rule, but he didn’t hesitate when they resisted to bring down the sword.[[39]](#footnote-39) Their empire strength covered an area from China to the Black Sea.[[40]](#footnote-40) Khan’s rapid conquest stunned the medieval world and transformed Mongolian society.[[41]](#footnote-41) He abolished inherited title, forbid the selling and kidnapping of women, banned enslaving any Mongol, made livestock theft punishable by death, ordered the adoption of a writing system, conducted a regular census, granted diplomatic immunity to foreign ambassadors, and allowed freedom of religion**.**[[42]](#footnote-42) He instituted a system of laws called Yasa[[43]](#footnote-43) and regulations to run his empire*. “In accordance and agreement with his own mind he established a rule for every occasion and regulation for every circumstance; while for every crime he fixed a penalty.”* Wrote the Persian writer Ata-Malik Juvayni.[[44]](#footnote-44) A complex postal service – “Yam” –was established [[45]](#footnote-45) with a well-organized series of post houses and way stations. Stopping to rest or getting a new mount every few miles, theriders could cover up to 200 miles a day.[[46]](#footnote-46) This enabled Khan to be aware of military and political developments,[[47]](#footnote-47) maintain contact with his network of spies and scouts as well as help protect foreign dignitaries and merchants such as Marco Polo and John of Plano Carpini**.** This vast communication network was their most potent weapon.[[48]](#footnote-48) It created a bridge across Asia which spread information about inventions such as printing paper money, gunpowder and playing cards.[[49]](#footnote-49) Khan was way ahead of his time in what he implemented to run his empire successfully.

Khan’s wars may have reduced the entire world population by as much as eleven percent.[[50]](#footnote-50) Historians estimate the number who perished to be somewhere around forty million**.** [[51]](#footnote-51) The population of China decreased by tens of millions during the Khan’s lifetime.[[52]](#footnote-52) Scholars estimate that he may have killed a full three-fourths of modern-day Iran’s population.[[53]](#footnote-53) Many lives were forfeited in Khan’s quest for greatness.

To the Mongols, Genghis Khan was a great national hero.[[54]](#footnote-54) Genghis Khan, with hundreds of Mongol horsemen, conquered twice as much land as any other person in history**.**[[55]](#footnote-55) He united all the Mongol tribescarving out the largest contiguous land empire in world history**.** His empire was larger than the Roman Empire or Alexander the Great’s Empire.[[56]](#footnote-56) It *g*ave the Mongols unity with a large army. Hewas seen as honest and wise, a great national hero, the greatest man of all times, sent from heaven,[[57]](#footnote-57) and the founding father of Mongolia.[[58]](#footnote-58) Mongols thought him brave, and continue to believe that one day Genghis Khan will rise again and lead his people to new victories.[[59]](#footnote-59) During the era of Soviet rule in the 20th century, themere mention of Genghis Khan was banned*,* removing his story from textbooks as well as forbidding pilgrimages to his birthplace. In the early 1990’s, Genghis Khan was restored to Mongolian history where his picture was a recurring motif in art and popular culturewith thenation’s major airport bearing his nameand Mongolian currency carrying his portrait.[[60]](#footnote-60) He has not been forgotten by the Mongolian people.

Even though his kingdom was the largest in the world, it was impossible for it to be ruled effectively for any length of time which ultimately ended it**,** but not during his lifetime. The Mongolian people still look at him as a national hero. From a tragic childhood, Genghis Khan rose into a fearless warrior and leader, feeling he had the divine right to conquer the world.[[61]](#footnote-61) He was open to new unique ideas that made his empire so successful. Although seen as a cruel and an unjust conqueror, Genghis Khan overcame numerous obstacles to triumph as a great ruler over the largest empire in the world.

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