



Background: Mongol geography and society

The influence of geography



The steppes [Image](#) by InvictaHOG / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain

The Mongols lived on the vast steppes of Central Asia, a region of grasslands stretching from Mongolia to Eastern Europe. The sheer size of the steppes made communication and transportation difficult. This region experiences extreme temperatures, with scorching summers and bitterly cold winters.

The steppes offered limited resources, making survival challenging. Water sources were often scarce, and fertile land was limited. The harsh environment forced the Mongols to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. They constantly moved with their herds of horses, sheep and cattle in search of grazing land and water.

The need to cover vast distances quickly led to the development of exceptional horsemanship skills among the Mongols, and the use of technology like the stirrup to help control their horses in a way that was not common in Europe at this time.

Due to the limited resources available on the steppes, trade with neighbouring civilisations was crucial for obtaining goods like silk, spices and metalwork. This was why the Silk Road – a trade route that ran from the east coast of China to the Levant at the eastern end of the Mediterranean – was so important to the Mongols.



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Mongol society

Mongol society was organised into tribes, each with its own khan – the Mongol word for leader. These tribes were often in conflict with one another, vying for power and resources.

The Mongols were renowned for their exceptional horse archery skills. They were highly mobile and could shoot accurately while riding at full gallop. The Mongols employed psychological warfare tactics, such as feigned retreats and spreading rumours, to demoralise their enemies.

Genghis Khan instilled strict discipline and a highly organised military structure within his forces, which is why he was so successful compared to other khans.

Religion

Traditionally, the Mongols practised animism, a belief in the spiritual forces of nature. They also believed in the power of shamans – religious figures who claimed they could communicate directly with spirits like Tenger ('Father Sky') or Tngri (the ancestors of the tribe).

Unusually for the time, Genghis Khan was tolerant of other religions, allowing his subjects to practise their own faiths. This helped him gain the support of diverse populations within his empire.

2.1.1 Temujin's rise to power

Temujin's story is more than just conquest; it is a narrative of survival, ambition and strategic genius. Understanding his family background and the challenges he faced is key to grasping his later successes.

Early life and hardships

Temujin's father, Yesugei, a leader of the Borjigin tribe, was poisoned by the neighbouring Tartar tribe. This event was so traumatic for young Temujin that he developed a lifelong hatred for the Tartars. The murder destabilised the Borjigin, leaving them vulnerable.

Following Yesugei's death, Temujin and his mother, Hö'elün, were abandoned by their tribe, who saw them as a liability. They were left to fend for themselves on the harsh Mongolian steppe. Hö'elün's resilience and resourcefulness during this period were a powerful influence on Temujin. This period of exile taught him self-reliance and the importance of survival skills. It also fostered a deep bond with his mother, who became a trusted advisor throughout his life. The hardship they endured together solidified his determination to overcome adversity.



Temujin, Genghis Khan

[Image](#) by Unknown author / Wikimedia Commons / Public Domain





Adding to the hardship, Temujin was captured and briefly enslaved. This experience further fuelled his desire for power and control. His eventual escape demonstrated his bravery and cunning. It also gave him experience of vulnerability – of being without power – which reinforced his ambition to become a strong leader.

Becoming sole ruler of the Mongols

The Mongol tribes were a complex web of alliances and rivalries. Temujin understood that these alliances could shift at any moment. He learned to play different tribes against each other, exploiting their weaknesses and leveraging their strengths.

Temujin built a loyal following of *nökers* – warriors who pledged their personal allegiance to him. These men formed the core of his army and were crucial to his early successes. He treated his *nökers* well, rewarding their loyalty and bravery, which ensured their continued support. This created a meritocratic system where loyalty and skill were valued over birthright – a departure from traditional tribal structures.

Temujin faced numerous challenges in his rise to power from rival chieftains, most notably Jamukha and Ong Khan.

Jamukha was Temujin's *anda* (blood brother) and initially a close ally. However, their relationship eventually soured due to power struggles and differing views on leadership. Jamukha represented the traditional aristocratic way of leading, based on recognition of his family's status, while Temujin favoured merit and loyalty. Their conflict was long and bloody, involving several battles and betrayals. Temujin's eventual victory over Jamukha was a major step towards consolidating his power.

Ong Khan, the leader of the Kereit tribe, was also initially an ally of Temujin and a powerful protector. However, Ong Khan betrayed Temujin, driven by jealousy and fear of Temujin's growing influence. This betrayal taught Temujin a valuable lesson about the unreliable nature of alliances and the need to be ruthless when necessary. Temujin's defeat of Ong Khan eliminated another significant rival and further strengthened his position.

The defeat of the Naiman tribe and the Tartars

Temujin's eventual defeat of the Tartars in 1202 at the Battle of Dalan Nemürge was a strategic victory. It was also an act of revenge for the poisoning of his father, fulfilling a long-held ambition. This solidified his image as a strong leader who protected his people and avenged their wrongs. It also removed a significant threat to his growing power.

The Naimans were a powerful tribe in western Mongolia. Their defeat in 1204 at the Battle of Chakirmaut brought a large swathe of territory under Temujin's control and significantly increased his resources and manpower. This victory also showcased his military prowess and his ability to adapt his tactics to different terrains and enemies.

Conclusion

Temujin's path to becoming leader of the Mongol tribes was paved with hardship, betrayal and war. His family background, including the murder of his father and his life in exile, instilled in him a strong sense of purpose and a relentless drive for power. His ability to





navigate complex tribal politics, forge alliances and defeat his rivals – including Jamukha, Ong Khan, the Naimans and the Tartars – ultimately led to the unification of the Mongol tribes and the founding of the Mongol Empire.

2.1.2 Creating the Mongol state

Uniting the Mongol tribes was just the first step for Temujin. To build a lasting empire, he needed to create a stable and organised state. This involved establishing a political structure, a legal system and a powerful, unified military.

Establishing the Mongol state

The Kurultai of Burkhan Khaldun (1206): This pivotal event marked the official birth of the Mongol state. After years of consolidating power, Temujin convened a *kurultai* (assembly of Mongol leaders) at Burkhan Khaldun, a sacred mountain. Here, he was proclaimed Genghis Khan, meaning 'Universal Ruler'. This title symbolised his claim to leadership not just over the Mongols, but potentially the world. The *kurultai* was a crucial step in legitimising his rule and solidifying the unification of the tribes. It represented a formal agreement among the tribal leaders to acknowledge him as their supreme leader.

The *keshig* (royal guard/court): Genghis Khan established a personal bodyguard and ruling body known as the *keshig*. This elite group was initially composed of his most loyal *nökers* (warriors). The *keshig* served multiple functions:

- **Personal protection:** They were responsible for Genghis Khan's safety.
- **Military elite:** They formed the core of his army and often led key campaigns.
- **Administrative functions:** Members of the *keshig* held important positions in government, managing finances, diplomacy and other state affairs.
- **Symbol of power:** The *keshig* represented Genghis Khan's authority and power.

The role and significance of Borte: Borte, Genghis Khan's first wife, played a significant role in his life and in the early Mongol state. She was a trusted advisor and confidante, known for her intelligence and political acumen. Her loyalty during times of hardship was crucial to Genghis Khan's rise. While not formally part of the *keshig*, her influence within the court and her support for Genghis Khan were invaluable. Her position as the Khan's primary wife also carried significant weight in Mongol society, solidifying the legitimacy of Genghis Khan's rule. Borte effectively served as regent when her husband was away on military campaigns.

Genghis Khan's social revolution

Genghis Khan restructured Mongol society, creating a more efficient and unified state. His reforms had a profound impact on all aspects of Mongol life.

The military decimal system: One of Genghis Khan's most significant innovations was the reorganisation of the Mongol army using a decimal system. Units were organised into groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000. This system:





- **Improved discipline:** It created a clear chain of command and made it easier to manage and control large armies.
- **Enhanced efficiency:** It facilitated communication and coordination on the battlefield.
- **Promoted meritocracy:** Commanders were often chosen based on their skill and experience, rather than their birth. This system was so effective that it was adopted by other armies and continued to be used for centuries.

The *Yassa* (oral law code): Genghis Khan established a code of laws known as the *Yassa*. While its exact contents are debated, its core principles emphasised:

- **Loyalty and obedience:** The *Yassa* stressed absolute loyalty to Genghis Khan and obedience to his laws. This was essential for maintaining unity and discipline within the newly unified Mongol state.
- **Military discipline:** The code outlined strict rules for military conduct, emphasising bravery, discipline and obedience. These rules contributed to the effectiveness of the Mongol army.
- **Social order:** The *Yassa* also addressed other aspects of social life, including crime, property rights and trade. It aimed to create a more stable and predictable society. This was why many of the people conquered by the Mongols found they were better off under their rule than they had been before.
- **Religious tolerance:** While the *Yassa* was strict, it generally promoted religious tolerance. This policy helped to integrate conquered populations and prevent religious conflict within the empire.

It's important to remember that the *Yassa* was an oral code, meaning it was passed down through generations by word of mouth. This allowed for some flexibility in its interpretation and application.

Impact and significance

Genghis Khan's reforms laid the foundation for the rapid expansion of the Mongol Empire. The unified military, the efficient administrative system and the *Yassa* provided the stability and organisation necessary for conquest. These changes were crucial in transforming the Mongols from a collection of warring tribes into a world power.

Conclusion

The creation of the Mongol state under Genghis Khan was a remarkable achievement. His reforms, including the establishment of the *keshig*, the implementation of the military decimal system and the creation of the *Yassa*, were instrumental in building a powerful and unified empire.



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2.1.3 The Mongol invasion of China

Genghis Khan's ambition extended far beyond the Mongol steppes. China, despite its historical power and sophistication, presented a tempting target.

The weakness of China

At the beginning of the 13th century, China was not a unified empire. The Song dynasty, which had once ruled a vast territory, had lost control of the north to the Jin dynasty. This political division significantly weakened China. Instead of presenting a united front, the two dynasties were often rivals, sometimes even engaging in open warfare, which made them both more susceptible to external threats.

The Jin dynasty, while initially powerful, was also experiencing internal problems. Their hold on power was weakening, and they faced rebellions and internal strife. This decline in strength made them less able to defend against the Mongols.

The Song dynasty, ruling in the south, was relatively stable compared to the Jin dynasty, but it was still struggling with internal issues and external pressures. The Song dynasty were also aware of the growing Mongol threat and were trying to maintain a delicate balance of power.





Before even fully focusing on the major Chinese dynasties, Genghis Khan targeted the smaller Western Xia kingdom. Emperor Xianzong of Western Xia, realising the might of the Mongol forces, chose to submit to Genghis Khan and become a tributary state in 1210 – although Genghis Khan’s final military campaign was to put down a Xia rebellion in the 1220s.

This was a strategic victory for the Mongols. It secured their eastern flank, provided them with resources and manpower and demonstrated the effectiveness of cooperation over resistance. It also sent a clear message to the other Chinese dynasties about the consequences of opposing the Mongols.

How the Mongols took control of China

While Xianzong submitted, the relationship was often fraught with tension. Western Xia periodically rebelled against Mongol rule. Genghis Khan and his successors launched several campaigns against Western Xia to enforce their submission. These campaigns, while sometimes protracted, ultimately weakened Western Xia and paved the way for the Mongols’ eventual conquest of all of China.

The Jin dynasty was the primary target for Mongol expansion in China. The war against the Jin dynasty was a long and arduous struggle, lasting over two decades. Several factors contributed to the Mongol victory:

- The Mongol army was highly disciplined, mobile and skilled in both cavalry warfare and siege tactics.
- They learned and adapted, incorporating new technologies and strategies as they encountered different types of fortifications and terrains in China.
- The Mongols often formed alliances with groups who were also enemies of the Jin dynasty, such as the Southern Song. This strategy divided the Jin forces and weakened their overall resistance.
- The Mongols were adept at siege warfare, using catapults, siege towers and other techniques to capture fortified cities. Despite the strength of Jin defences, the Mongols were persistent and eventually breached them.

As the Mongol armies advanced from 1211 onwards, they often encountered Chinese rebellions against Jin rule. These rebellions further weakened the Jin and provided the Mongols with local support. In 1215, the Mongols attacked and captured the Jin capital, Zhongdu. They spent the next few years dealing with what remained of Jin resistance.

The Jin dynasty eventually collapsed under the combined pressure of the Mongols and their allies. This victory gave the Mongols control of northern China, and in 1227, they began to turn their attention to the other ruling dynasty in China, the Song.



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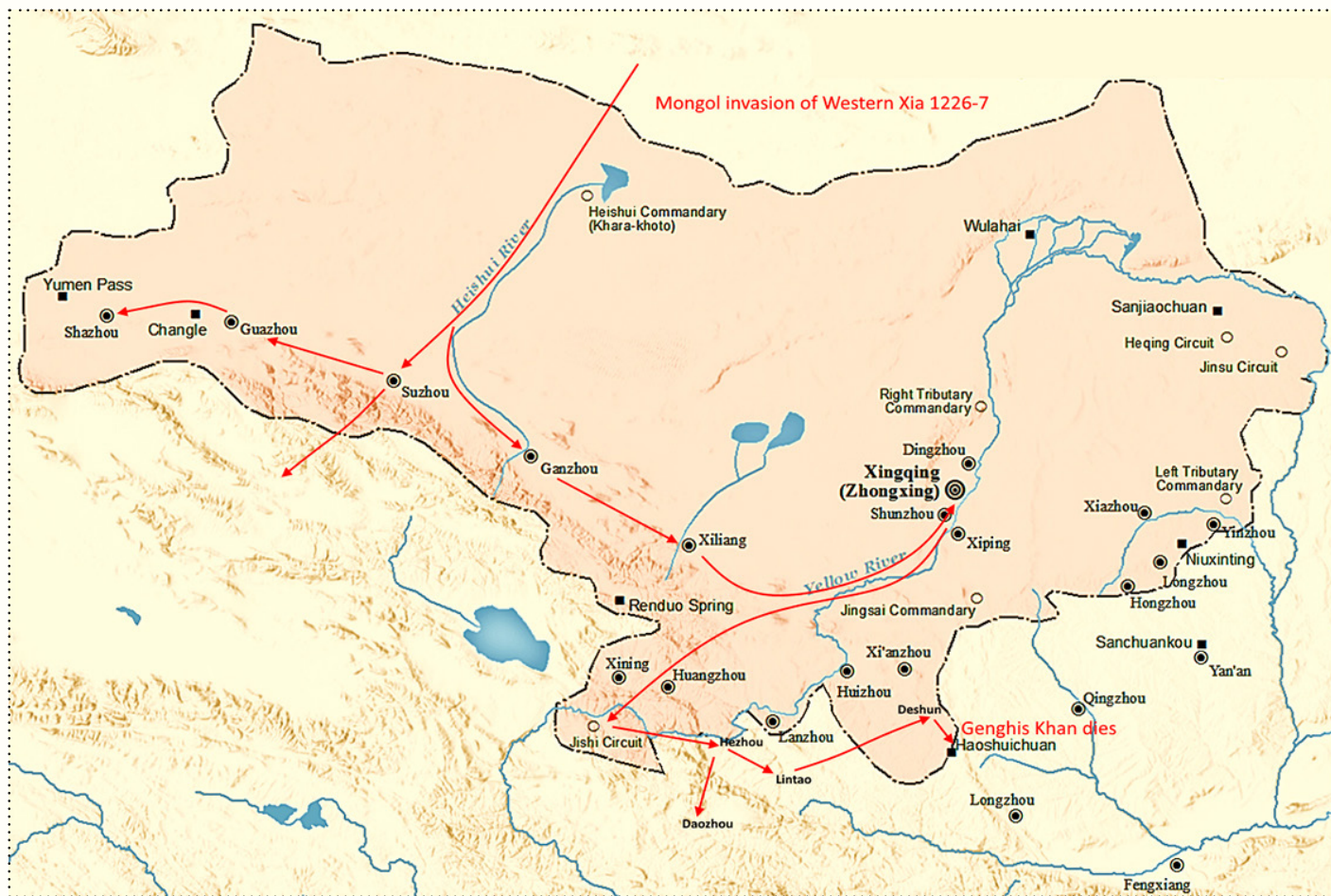


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Map of the final campaign of Genghis Khan in China [Image](#) by Qishufang / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

Conclusion

The Mongol conquest of China was a long and complex process, spanning several decades and involving multiple campaigns. The weakness of a divided China, the military prowess of the Mongols and their strategic use of alliances all contributed to their eventual victory.

2.1.4 Mongol attacks on Central Asia

Following the unification of Mongolia, Genghis Khan's sights turned westward towards Central Asia. The wealthy and powerful Khwarazmian Empire, which controlled a vast territory including parts of modern-day Iran and Central Asia, became the target of Mongol aggression.

The weaknesses of the Khwarazmian Empire

The Khwarazmian Empire, despite its outward appearance of strength, suffered from internal weaknesses. Shah Muhammad II, the ruler, was an autocratic and often unpopular leader. His policies alienated many within his empire, leading to widespread resentment and opposition. This internal dissent weakened the empire's ability to present a united front against external threats. Powerful regional governors often acted independently, undermining the Shah's authority and hindering coordinated defence efforts. Religious leaders also voiced their disapproval of the Shah's policies, further fuelling discontent.



While the Khwarazmian Empire benefited from its control of sections of the Silk Road, internal strife and the Shah's unpredictable policies disrupted trade. This economic instability further weakened the empire and made it more vulnerable to external pressures. The Shah's heavy taxation and interference in trade discouraged merchants and reduced the flow of goods, impacting the empire's revenue and overall economic health.

Shah Muhammad II underestimated the Mongols. He viewed them as just another nomadic tribe, failing to recognise their unique military capabilities and Genghis Khan's strategic genius. This miscalculation proved fatal. The Shah's arrogance and lack of accurate intelligence about the Mongols led him to make critical errors in his strategic planning.

Genghis Khan understood the economic importance of the Silk Road. By initially establishing peaceful trade relations and then strategically disrupting existing trade routes, the Mongols gained valuable intelligence about the Khwarazmian Empire's weaknesses and resources. This control also provided the Mongols with access to wealth and supplies, which they used to fuel their military campaigns. The Mongols' ability to manipulate trade routes and leverage economic factors gave them a significant advantage over the Khwarazmians.

The impact of Mongol attacks

The Mongol invasion of the Khwarazmian Empire was swift and brutal. Genghis Khan, employing his highly mobile and disciplined army, quickly overwhelmed the Khwarazmian forces. The Mongols' use of psychological warfare, including spreading rumours of their ruthlessness, further demoralised the enemy. The Shah's poor leadership and the lack of a unified defence strategy contributed to the rapid collapse of the Khwarazmian army.

The Mongol conquests were characterised by extreme violence and destruction. The cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, major centres of trade and culture, were attacked and destroyed. These events sent shockwaves throughout the region and became symbols of Mongol brutality. The destruction of these cities not only resulted in immense loss of life but also in the loss of libraries, mosques and other cultural treasures – a significant blow to the region's intellectual and cultural heritage.

The Mongol campaign against the Khwarazmian Empire resulted in a massive loss of life. Entire populations were massacred or enslaved. The destruction of irrigation systems and agricultural lands led to widespread famine. The campaign had a devastating and long-lasting impact on the region's demographics, economy and culture. Historical accounts, though often exaggerated, paint a grim picture of the scale of the destruction and the suffering inflicted upon the civilian population.

Faced with the Mongol onslaught, Shah Muhammad II fled his capital, abandoning his empire to its fate. He died shortly after – a broken and defeated man. His flight further demoralised the Khwarazmian forces and contributed to the empire's rapid disintegration.

The Khwarazmian Empire was effectively destroyed, and its territory was incorporated into the expanding Mongol Empire. The Mongol conquest of Central Asia had far-reaching consequences, reshaping the political landscape of the region and opening the way for further Mongol expansion westward.



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Conclusion

The Mongol conquest of the Khwarazmian Empire was a testament to the Mongols' military prowess and Genghis Khan's strategic genius. However, it was also facilitated by the internal weaknesses of the Khwarazmian state, including the unpopular rule of Shah Muhammad II, internal divisions and economic problems. The Mongol invasion had a devastating impact on Central Asia, resulting in widespread destruction, immense loss of life and the disruption of trade and cultural exchange. The fall of the Khwarazmian Empire marked a significant turning point in the history of the region and paved the way for Mongol domination of Central Asia.

2.1.5 The death and legacy of Genghis Khan

The death of Genghis Khan in 1227 marked the end of an era, but his legacy continued to shape the world for centuries to come.

The immediate legacy

Unlike many historical figures whose deaths were followed by power struggles and civil wars, Genghis Khan ensured a smooth transition of power. He had designated his son, Ögodei, as his successor, and this decision was respected by the Mongol leadership. This peaceful transfer of authority was crucial for maintaining the stability of the rapidly expanding Mongol Empire. It demonstrated the effectiveness of Genghis Khan's leadership and his ability to establish clear lines of succession.

Genghis Khan left behind a powerful and well-organised empire. His military innovations, administrative reforms and the *Yassa* law code provided a solid foundation for his successors. The Mongol army, with its disciplined structure and effective tactics, remained a formidable force. The empire's vast territory, encompassing diverse cultures and resources, provided the means for continued expansion and prosperity. Genghis Khan's legacy was not just one of conquest but also of state-building. He created institutions and structures that allowed the Mongol Empire to thrive and expand.

How Genghis Khan has been remembered

Genghis Khan's historical image is both complex and contested. He is admired as a brilliant military leader and state-builder, yet condemned for his brutality and destructiveness.

There is no denying that the Mongol conquests were often accompanied by immense violence and destruction. Cities were sacked, populations massacred and vast amounts of wealth and cultural heritage destroyed. The Mongol invasions had a devastating impact on many regions, particularly Central Asia and the Middle East. Historical accounts, while sometimes exaggerated, document the scale of the destruction and the suffering inflicted upon civilian populations. This aspect of Genghis Khan's legacy is undeniable and cannot be ignored.

While the Mongol conquests were undeniably brutal, some historians argue that the *Pax Mongolica* (Mongol Peace) that followed brought a period of relative stability and prosperity to parts of the empire. The Mongols facilitated trade and cultural exchange across their





vast domains, connecting East and West in unprecedented ways. They were also generally tolerant of different religions, although this tolerance was often contingent on submission and cooperation. Within the context of the 13th and 14th centuries, the Mongol Empire, at its peak, enabled the movement of people, goods and ideas across the Eurasian landmass, fostering cultural exchange and economic integration. It's crucial to acknowledge that this "peace" was often built on the foundations of earlier conquests and subjugation. It also did not necessarily translate into an end to all conflicts within the vast empire.

It's important to understand the historical context in which he lived and the values of his time. While we may condemn his brutality by modern standards, it's also important to recognise his military genius, political skill and his role in unifying the Mongol tribes. He was a complex figure, capable of both great cruelty and strategic brilliance. His legacy is not simply black and white, but a complex tapestry of achievements and atrocities.

Modern perspectives on Genghis Khan vary. In Mongolia, he is often revered as a national hero and the founder of the nation. In other parts of the world, his legacy is viewed more critically, focusing on the destruction and violence associated with the Mongol conquests. It is important to consider these different perspectives and to understand the historical context in which they arise.

Conclusion

Genghis Khan's death marked the end of his remarkable life, but his legacy lived on. He left behind a vast and powerful empire, a unified Mongol people and a complex historical record. His legacy remains a subject of ongoing debate and interpretation. While we must acknowledge the destruction and violence associated with his conquests, we must also recognise his military genius, political skill and his role in shaping the course of world history.



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