

Heroes & Villains

Genghis Khan

The early-13th century saw a nomad rise from the tribal chaos of the Mongolian steppes to build an empire four times larger than Alexander the Great's

Written by Dave Roos

In the Western imagination, Genghis Khan is the blood-soaked infidel at the head of the Mongol hordes, wild-eyed murderers on horseback who slaughtered millions in a crusade for world domination.

He is the indiscriminate punisher, laying waste to great civilisations. But history tells a different story. Yes, Genghis Khan and his army wrought a lot of bloodshed, but it was not indiscriminate.

In fact, Genghis Khan may have been the medieval era's greatest military and political strategist, forging alliances and dispatching enemies with an eye to ultimate unification.

Genghis Khan's story begins in the mid-12th century at the edge of the Gobi Desert in eastern Mongolia. The Mongols followed a fiercely nomadic lifestyle centred around horses, in which families pledged loyalty to one of 30 or more tribes and slept in circular yurts called gers. Khan's father, a tribal chief, named his son Temüjin after a captured chief from a rival clan called the Tatars. Such was life in medieval Mongolia - a perpetual cycle of kidnappings and raids fuelled by blood feuds dating back centuries. Temüjin's grandfather, Khabul Khan, had briefly united the warring tribes during the 1100s, but that was ancient history.

Young Temüjin's life would be torn apart by tribal warfare. Aged nine, Temüjin was taken to a nearby tribe to live with the family of his betrothed. His

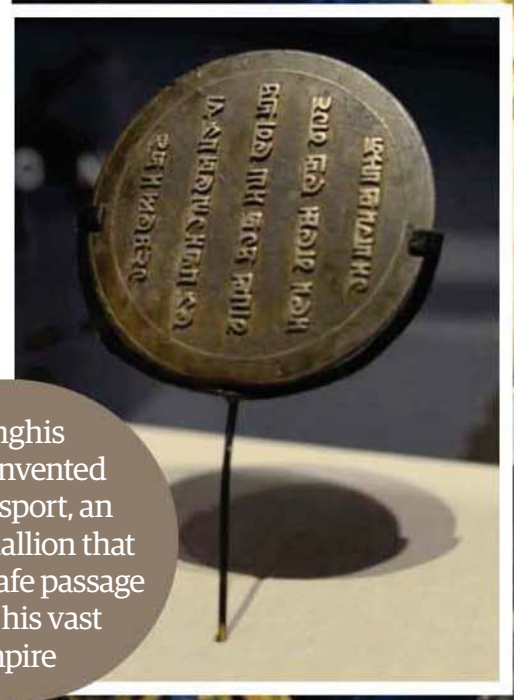
Khan's genetic legacy - imposed by rape of enemy women and many concubines - is present in 16 million male descendants, reportedly


father, Yesügei, was intercepted on the journey home by a band of Tatars, who tricked him into eating poisoned food, which killed him. When Temüjin received news of his father's death, he rushed home to assume tribal leadership and protect his family. But the tribe rejected his claim to power and abandoned his mother and his young brothers, leaving them to scavenge the desert wilderness for survival.

Temüjin's mother, Höelün, was herself kidnapped from the rival Merkits, and taught young Temüjin the importance of strength in numbers. As long as a tribe was unified, it couldn't be destroyed. Temüjin took that advice to heart, forging bonds with his father's former allies as a teenager. After he married at 16 to his betrothed Börte, he set out to present gifts to neighbouring tribal leaders in exchange for loyalty and mutual protection. While away, a legion of Merkit horsemen attacked his mother's camp, stealing away his bride.

At this point, Temüjin had a choice to make. He and his brothers could succumb to their thirst for revenge and pursue Börte's captors, or they could take a more strategic approach. Temüjin petitioned some of his allies for support, won their loyalty

Genghis Khan invented the passport, an iron medallion that allowed safe passage across his vast empire





The Mongol ruler did not kill 1,748,000 in an hour, but did murder every man, woman and child in the city of Nishapur



The Mongols captured the fortress-like Khara Khoto in 1226 and used its 3.7m (12ft)-thick walls to repel enemies until China's Ming Dynasty cut off water in 1372

Life in medieval Mongolia...

Tribal trouble

Temüjin, the boy who would become Genghis Khan, was born into a violent nomadic society, where warring tribes or confederations raided and plundered each other in a ruthless cycle of vengeance and betrayal. Genghis Khan's first great achievement was to unite these tribes under one Mongol banner.

Life on horseback

Mongol children learned to ride a horse as soon as they could walk. In nomadic Mongol culture, horses were more than transportation; they were hunting companions, war machines and, in desperate times, even food. Marco Polo reported that starving Mongol warriors would drink the blood of their horses for sustenance.

Strong women

Genghis Khan's mother Höelün and wife Börte are examples of strong Mongol women who were not only expected to raise the children, tend to livestock and prepare meals, but also collect arrows after battle and finish off wounded enemies. Genghis Khan's daughter became a fierce military leader too.

Moral code

As supreme leader of the Mongols, Genghis Khan was also its chief lawmaker. He wrote the *Great Yasa* as a guide to Mongol behaviour, which punished lying, stealing and adultery by death, and promoted humility and respect for all religions.

Anti-civilisation

Genghis Khan remained a nomad until the very end, refusing to establish a capital city for the Mongols. Mongol armies had no regard for the trappings of civilisation, sacking and burning priceless libraries and cultural treasures throughout the Islamic world.

Necessity of violence

Genghis Khan's war-like ways were driven just as much by economic necessity as they were by a lust for power and territory. As the Mongol population grew so food and resources became scarce and in 1211 his forces struck the Jin Dynasty in northern China to plunder their bountiful rice fields.

"Such was life in medieval Mongolia - a perpetual cycle of kidnappings and raids"

“He spared his enemy’s best horsemen and weapons experts, folding them into his growing army”

and assembled a small army of 500 men to raid the Merkit camp with devastating force. Not only did he liberate Börte but he utterly destroyed the Merkits.

Throughout his twenties and thirties, Temüjin would continue this pattern, strengthening his political alliances, sharpening his military tactics and expanding his reputation as a merciless butcher. He annihilated his father’s murderers, the Tatars, allegedly ordering the death of all males over three foot tall. He boiled enemy chieftains alive and built pyramids from the skulls of vanquished foes. All the while, he spared his enemy’s best horsemen and weapons experts, folding them into his growing army.

By 40 years old, Temüjin had achieved the unthinkable: the complete unification of the Mongol tribes. Having absorbed, subjugated or destroyed his political rivals, tens of thousands of his loyal followers gathered at a massive spiritual coronation called a khurital, during which Temüjin the warrior was renamed Genghis Khan – literally ‘king of the ocean’, or ‘universal ruler’.

Genghis Khan now commanded an army of 100,000 or more. These fighters weren’t the barbaric raiders of lore, but a disciplined and highly trained war machine. Rank was based on merit and proven loyalty, not relations to the khan. Squads were composed of ten men, companies of 100 and divisions of 10,000. The Mongol horse – small and swift – was like a jet fighter. Mongol riders could fire their composite bows forward or backward while riding full speed, launching armour-piercing arrows as far as 320 metres (1,050 feet).

For centuries, the Mongol nomads paid steep taxes to travel along the Silk Road and conduct trade with the Chinese, who had amassed vast wealth in terms of food, technology and treasure. For his first great conquest, Genghis Khan set his

Genghis the god

The word ‘khan’ is an honorary title meaning ‘sovereign ruler’ in Altaic, a family of languages stretching across the Mongol Empire. In 1206, the young Temüjin was made the sole political and military leader of the newly unified nomadic tribes and given the title Genghis Khan, or ‘universal ruler’. Like most Mongol warriors, Genghis Khan practised a form of shamanism called Tengriism and worshipped a god called Koko Mongke Tengri (‘Eternal Blue Sky’). When he was named Genghis Khan, he was designated the earthly representative of Eternal Blue Sky. This holy mantle gave Genghis Khan the spiritual authority to rule over more ‘civilised’ nations. As Genghis Khan often proclaimed to his subjects, “One sun in heaven; one lord on Earth.” As a ruler, though, he was unexpectedly tolerant to other religions, allowing Muslims, Christians and Buddhists to worship freely in his empire.



In order to communicate across thousands of miles, Genghis Khan designed a medieval ‘Pony Express’ network

sights on Xixia, a Chinese empire ruled by the Tanguts from Tibet. Outnumbered by the Xia defenders, the Mongol army employed a favourite tactic: false retreat. When the Xia warriors pursued the fleeing Mongols, Khan was waiting with a barrage of arrows.

Once Xixia pledged loyalty to the Mongols, Genghis Khan pushed east to the much larger

Jin Dynasty, whose 600,000-strong army was busy fighting the Song Dynasty to the south at the time. The Mongol army moved easily toward the capital Zhongdu (now Beijing) – the Great Wall wasn’t built yet – but lacked the weaponry to siege the fortified city. Always the strategist, Temüjin set his armies free to plunder smaller cities, acquiring Chinese experts on siege warfare.

Defining moment

Marriage of Börte 1178

At 16, Temüjin and Börte get married, however the nuptial bliss is cut short by tragedy. While Temüjin is away establishing alliances with neighbouring chieftains, his home encampment is raided by Merkit tribesmen who vow to steal every woman in revenge for the kidnapping of Temüjin’s mother. Temüjin returns in time to rescue his mother and brothers, but cannot save Börte, who has already been carried back to the Merkit camp. Temüjin makes the conscious decision not to pursue the Merkits immediately, but to assemble an army of supporters. Only when he has 500 men under his command does Temüjin crush the Merkits, returning home with Börte and the spoils of war, eg animals, women and weapons.



Timeline

1162

● Birth of Temüjin

The nomadic Mongols kept no birth records and were unconcerned with tracking age, so it’s impossible to know the exact birth date of Temüjin. We know he was born into a ruling family of the Borjigin tribe and was a direct descendant of Khabul Khan, who united the Mongols in the early-12th century. According to legend, Temüjin is born clasp a blood clot – a sign he’ll be a powerful leader.

Circa 1162

● Death of Temüjin’s father

When Temüjin is only nine, he is promised in marriage to a girl named Börte from the neighbouring Olkhunut tribe. According to tradition, Temüjin is brought to live with the Olkhunut. While his father, Yesügel, rides home, he is tricked by Tatar clansmen into eating poisoned food that kills him.

1171

● Murder in the family

Temüjin’s mother Höelün is abandoned by the rest of the clan. Temüjin returns home to help Höelün care for his younger brothers and several half-brothers. However, when a half-brother attempts to steal one of Temüjin’s fish, the future khan kills him with an arrow.

1175

● Birth of an heir

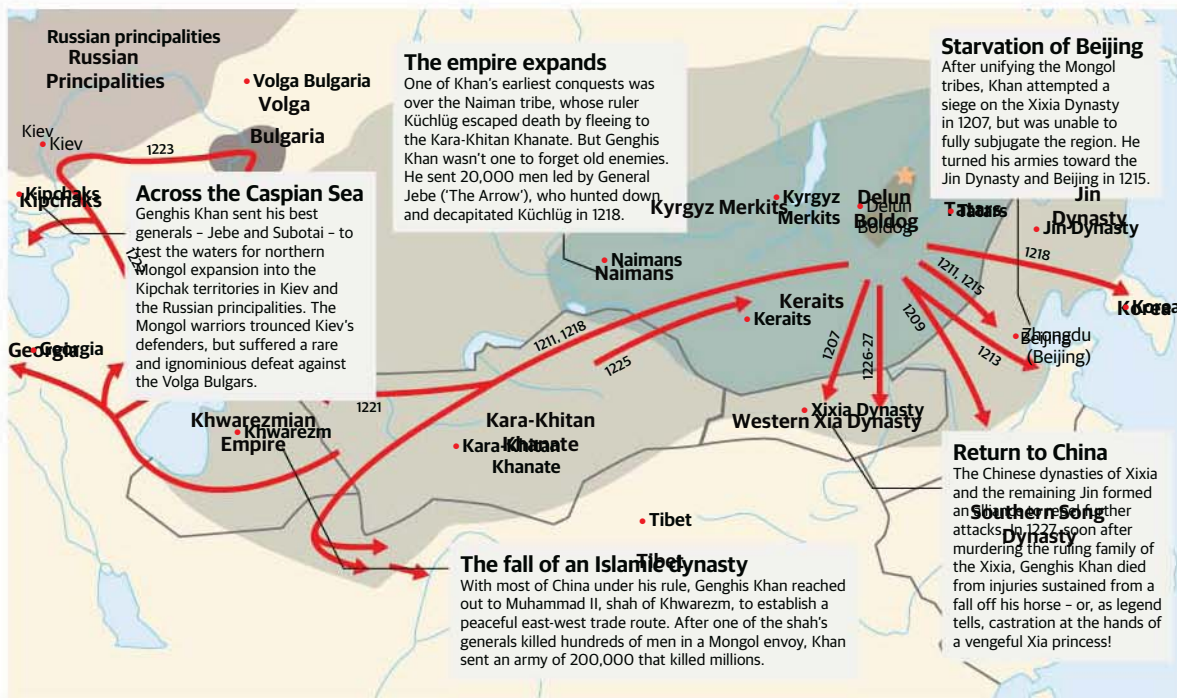
When Börte is rescued from the Merkit tribe, she is pregnant, and there is some question whether the child is Temüjin’s or the Merkit chieftain’s. Temüjin accepts his son Jochi as his first-born male heir.

1181

● A thirst for power

Young Temüjin is determined to break down the divisions between tribes. Those who would not join his Mongol alliance would have to be destroyed or assimilated. His first act is to exact revenge on the Tatars who had poisoned his father.

1187



Despite centuries of exploration, Genghis Khan's hidden tomb, rumoured to contain priceless treasures, has never been found

useful and not useful, and then murdered anyway.

While Genghis Khan himself returned to the Mongolian heartland to oversee his immense bureaucracy, he sent his best generals on a scouting mission around the Caspian Sea, through the Ukraine and into Russia. The European armies had never encountered such an enemy, attacking with alarming speed

When the Mongols returned to Zhongdu in 1214, they were armed with trebuchets capable of hurling 45-kilogram (100-pound) stones or 'bombs' of sulphurous petroleum called naphtha. Cut off from food imports, the residents of Zhongdu were starved into submission and Khan plundered its treasures and massacred its remaining holdouts.

After easily wresting control of the Kara-Khitans west of Mongolia, Genghis Khan dreamed of extending his reach along the full length of the Silk Road to the Caspian Sea. The only remaining obstacle was the Muslim kingdom of Khwarezm, ruled by Shah Muhammad II. The Mongols extended a rare hand of diplomacy, showering the

shah with gifts in exchange for a free trade route through his territories. That all changed when a diplomatic convoy of unarmed Mongol merchants was killed by one of Muhammad's governors.

Genghis Khan's response to that treacherous act may be one of the most murderous in the history of warfare. The Mongol army pursued a three-year campaign of death and destruction that would claim millions of lives and erase centuries of Islamic literature, art and culture. In Urgench, the Mongols diverted a river to drown remaining survivors and stamp out all signs of the city. In Balkh, the hundreds of thousands of residents surrendered immediately, were divided into the

and calculated brutality. Decades later, under the command of Khan's grandson, Batu, the Mongols would return to establish the Golden Horde, which would rule eastern Europe until the 1500s.

Genghis Khan would not live to see the fullest extent of his self-made empire. After falling from his horse in battle against a Chinese insurrection, he died from his injuries in 1227. His grandson Kublai Khan would ultimately bring all of China under Mongol control, creating the largest empire the world had ever seen. Genghis Khan may have left a legacy of merciless brutality, but he is also credited with opening up the first major trade and cultural exchange between the East and the West.



Defining moment
Annihilation of Khwarezm 1219
Driven by vengeance, Genghis Khan lays waste to this Muslim empire, telling the few survivors of the city of Bukhara: "I am the flail [a spiked medieval weapon] of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you."



Defining moment
Burial of a khan 1227
Genghis Khan left instructions to bury him according to the traditions of his tribe, without any markings or signs. To this day, his exact burial location is unknown. Legend tells that the burial team trampled the site with horses, redirected a river to run over it and then killed all witnesses.



Becoming a leader
Through strategic alliances and brute force, Temüjin is able to unite the warring nomad tribes into a single Mongol Empire. His loyal followers, culled from the top ranks of each rival clan, elect him as their 'supreme leader', otherwise known as Genghis Khan.
1206

Pillaging of China
Always the strategist, Genghis Khan turns his armies first on the Chinese dynasties of Xia and Jin. The huge Mongol army is starved for resources and weaponry, which they find abundant in China. The Mongols put captured Chinese engineers to work building war machines.
1207



Pax Mongolica
With the defeat of Khwarezm and the Russian principalities, Genghis Khan's dynasty now spreads across two continents. This heralds a century-long period of trade, cultural exchange and relative peace.
1225

Genghis Khan dies
One of Genghis Khan's final triumphs is the suppression of Chinese revolutionaries in the Xia and Jin dynasties. While chasing down the enemy, he falls off his horse and dies from the injuries. However, some claim he is mortally wounded by a knife-wielding Xia princess when he tried to claim 'spoils'.
1227