



L E S S O N 1

# The Mongols

**THINKING  
FOCUS**

*How did the Mongols affect Europe and Asia?*

**Key Terms**

- steppe
- clan
- khan

► *The Mongols took excellent care of their horses. Here, a Mongol grooms the tail of his horse.*

**I**n the early 1200s, a group of people known as the Mongols began a series of rapid conquests throughout Asia. They would soon control the largest empire in the world. Ibn al Athir wrote about the events of 1220 to 1221, “These Tartars [Mongols] conquered most of the habitable globe and the best, the most flourishing and most populous thereof . . . in about a year.”

How were the Mongols able to conquer so much so quickly?

There are several reasons for the Mongol successes. They had outstanding leadership, military skill and, most important, horses. On horseback, the Mongols could advance up to 200 miles a day. Good horsemanship was so important to the Mongols that children, both male and female, learned to ride before they could walk.



## The Life of Mongol Nomads

The world that horses enabled the Mongols to inhabit was the wide, treeless plains—or **steppes**—

of central Asia. To the north lies the Siberian forest and to the south is desert.



Winter in the steppes is long and bitterly cold, and summer is dry and burning hot. The temperature ranges from  $-100^{\circ}\text{F}$  in the winter to  $100^{\circ}\text{F}$  in the summer. The Mongols were nomadic herders who migrated according to the seasons, in search of good grazing land for their flocks of sheep and horses.

Since the Mongols moved so frequently, they didn't have one permanent settlement. Instead, they lived in tents called yurts. Yurts were made of felt, a material made from wool, and so were easily transportable and yet strong enough to offer protection from the extreme weather.

The Mongols traveled in patrilineal family groups called **clans**. Clan members were related by kinship. The Mongol practice of *anda*, or sworn brotherhood, allowed people to swear allegiance to a clan other than the one they were born into. The chart on the right shows the social organization of the Mongols.

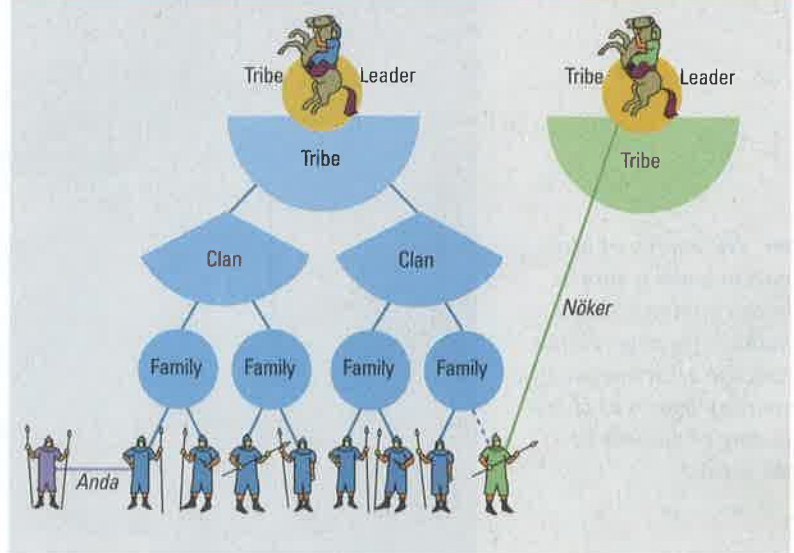
A group of several clans made up a tribe. Each tribe elected a chief on the basis of his courage, military abilities, and leadership. The chief's power and ability were very important. He often had to lead his tribe in battle against other tribes to gain access to grazing lands.

If the reputation of a tribal chief was very impressive, men from other tribes would swear

▲ *Yurts are still used by many nomads on the steppes of central Asia.*

▼ *Mongol social organization was based on family ties, sworn brotherhood, and sworn oaths to leaders. When a man swore allegiance to a new leader, he forswore his blood loyalty to his own clan and to the tribe.*

#### Social Bonds Among the Mongol



■ *What effect did the environment of the steppes have on the Mongol people?*

#### Across Time & Space

*The modern country of Mongolia, which lies between China and the Soviet Union, is officially known as the Mongolian People's Republic. Nearly all the people of Mongolia are the descendants of the Mongols, who built an empire in the 1200s.*

► *The energy of Mongols in battle is shown in this painting from a manuscript page. Notice how the artist has used swirling figures to give a feeling of movement to the scene.*

allegiance to him. They would then become the new leader's *nöker*, or followers. Their allegiance to him outweighed any allegiance to clan or tribe.

For all Mongol groups, the need to protect themselves and compete for grazing lands was crucial. To do so, the Mongols developed incredible skill on horseback.

## Mongol Leadership

Horses also helped the Mongols in another way. Each soldier had at least three or four extra horses carrying food and water. Because he didn't have to stop for fresh food, water, or horses, the Mongol soldier could travel vast distances quickly.

A Mongol soldier carried an array of weapons into battle: two or three bows; three quivers of arrows; and an ax, rope, and sword. His bow was short enough to be used while riding, yet it was strong enough to launch an arrow into a target 350 yards away.

Although clans and tribes often fought with each other, once in a

Mongols had such control over their mounts that they could ride long distances using only their feet. Their hands, then, were free to wield weapons in battle. Their exceptional riding skill and their great ability in using weapons while on horseback gave the Mongols a distinct advantage over their less-skilled enemies. ■

while a strong leader could unite them all against a common enemy. The founder of the Mongol Empire was such a leader.

### The Great Khan

Temujin (*TEHM yoo jihn*), known today as Genghis Khan, was born in 1167. When Temujin was 12 years old, his father, a tribal chief, was murdered by a rival chief. Fearing that he would be killed next, Temujin fled with his mother and four brothers. Although it was nearly impossible for very small groups to survive the environment of the steppe, Temujin, with the help of his mother,



kept the family alive. Thus began his reputation as an intelligent and resourceful leader.

Temujin's reputation continued to grow, and in 1206, an assembly of tribal chiefs elected him the great **khan**, or leader, of the Mongols. They gave Temujin the name Genghis Khan, which means "ruler of all within the seas." He was 39 years old.

### Genghis Khan the Warrior

Genghis Khan shaped the powerful Mongol warriors into a tightly structured army. He grouped soldiers into units of 10,000 troops. These units were subdivided into smaller groups of 1,000, 100, and 10. The smaller groups had individual leaders who reported to the group leader above them. This type of military leadership created a clear chain of command within the larger army and helped create order on the battlefield. Genghis further strengthened the Mongol army by incorporating defeated enemy troops who would swear allegiance to the Mongol ruler.

Genghis Khan also devised elaborate signals to be used as communication amid the noise and confusion of battle. Soldiers used drums, horns, shouts, and even bird calls to communicate with each other. Mongol leaders could then direct and organize their troops as situations developed on the battlefield.

Using this highly skilled and structured army, Genghis Khan added vast areas to his empire. The Mongols conquered all the lands between Beijing and the Caspian Sea.

### Genghis Khan the Ruler

Although Genghis Khan knew the strength of his warriors, he realized that there were areas where the Mongols were weak. The Mongols lacked a written language. So Genghis used a captured scribe to create a written language for them. He also used the skills of foreign craftsmen and specialists



▲ The great Mongol ruler Genghis Khan is pictured in this portrait from a Turkish manuscript. Most representations of Mongol rulers come from other cultures.



■ *What qualities did Genghis Khan possess that made him a successful ruler?*

to improve his army. From them he learned how to use catapults and gunpowder bombs. These weapons helped the Mongols besiege enemy fortresses.

Genghis respected the knowledge and beliefs of others. During his rule, Genghis Khan opened his empire to foreign travelers.

Missionaries and merchants were allowed to journey through Mongol lands. He also made a series of laws forbidding fighting among tribes. Despite the fact that Genghis Khan introduced several reforms, he is said to have admitted that “man’s highest joy is in victory: to conquer one’s enemies.” ■

## The Later Khans

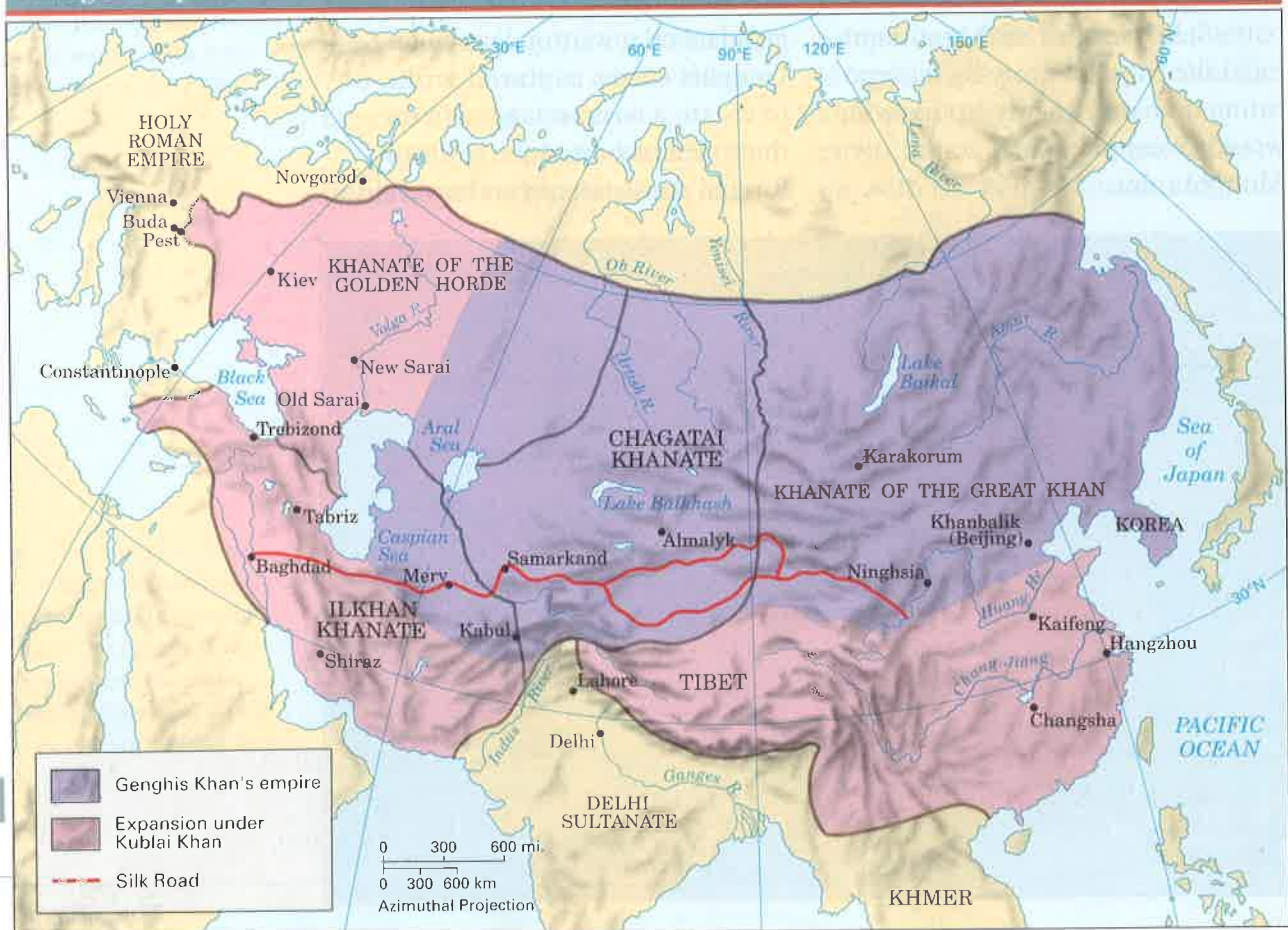
▼ *The Mongol Empire grew rapidly and eventually covered much of Asia. Name the four sections that the Mongol Empire was divided into after the death of Genghis Khan.*

Genghis Khan died in 1227. In 1229, the empire was divided into four sections, called khanates. His four sons were each assigned a khanate. His third son, Ogadei (*ahg ah DY*), was elected the Great Khan, the overall ruler of the Mongol Empire. One khanate included the western part of the present-day U.S.S.R. Another occupied the middle part of the U.S.S.R. The third was in Persia, and the khanate

of the Great Khan held China, Mongolia, and eastern U.S.S.R.

The growth of the Mongol Empire continued after Genghis’s death. China was conquered in 1234. In 1237, Ogadei sent Mongol horsemen to conquer the rest of southern Russia, as well as Poland and Hungary. Upon Ogadei’s death in 1241, the Mongol leaders ended their attacks in Hungary and returned to Mongolia to elect

Mongol Empire, c. 1200–1294



a new Great Khan. This halted the Mongol expansion into Europe.

### Kublai Khan

Twenty years later, Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, was elected Great Khan. Under Kublai's reign from 1260 to 1294, the Mongol Empire reached its height. The Mongols extended their borders to include eastern Europe, most of the Middle East, China, and the intervening territory. The map on page 166 shows the lands controlled by the Mongol Empire at its height.

Although the Mongol Empire grew, not all Mongol attempts to conquer other lands were successful. Under Kublai Khan, the Mongols tried to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. Both invasion attempts were stopped by a typhoon, or

hurricane, which destroyed most of the Mongol ships.

Like his grandfather Genghis, Kublai developed many programs to help stabilize the empire. Unlike the Chinese, Kublai respected merchants, and under his rule both internal and foreign trade flourished. He also established a postal system with riders covering up to 250 miles a day. Postal stations also served as inns for traveling merchants. Thus, the postal service helped communication and trade.

### Breakdown of the Empire

Ultimately, however, the Mongols were better conquerors than rulers. They simply were not able to control the vast area they had won in battle. Communication among the four khanates became increasingly difficult.

### How Do We Know?

**HISTORY** *Much of what we know about the history of the Mongols comes from legend and from their appearance in the histories of other peoples. These peoples were generally enemies of the Mongols. How might this lack of primary-source material from the Mongol viewpoint affect our view of the Mongols today?*

## UNDERSTANDING CONQUEST

**T**he Romans in the 2nd century. The Mongols in the 12th century. The British in the 19th century. Each group was famous for conquering vast territories and diverse peoples.

### Reasons for Conquest

What motivates one group to conquer another? There are probably as many reasons as there are human needs—security, food, land, wealth, beliefs, and power. The Mongols, for example, originally conquered to gain

grazing land. But, over time, they conquered to expand their empire's wealth and power base.

The power that accompanies control of territories and people also motivated many Roman conquests. But the desire for security pushed conquest. The Romans fought three wars over Sicily, an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Rome eventually won control of Sicily in 149 B.C.

In the 1700s and 1800s, the British launched a series of conquests to satisfy a

need for resources and markets. The British built an empire that ranged around the world to Africa, Asia, North America, and Australia.

### Conquest and Empire

Few great empires exist today. The Mongol Empire broke up because of rebellions by conquered peoples and problems in administering such a large area. Throughout history, successful conquests have not guaranteed successful empires.



► *Timur's mosque still stands in the city of Samarkand in present-day Soviet Central Asia.*

▼ *This representation of Timur's head was created from his skull by an archaeologist who was also a sculptor.*



■ *Support the following statement with details: The Mongols were better conquerors than rulers.*



Moreover, the Mongols were no longer the fierce warriors who had swept down from the steppes. Some began to adopt the social customs, languages, and religions of the people they had conquered. Ghazan Khan, who ruled in Persia, made Islam the state religion and adopted much of the Persian culture. In China, the Mongols accepted Tibetan Buddhism, but they were also influenced by the culture of the Chinese.

By 1300, the unity of the Mongol Empire had disappeared. It was then easy for the conquered peoples of the empire to overthrow their invaders. The Persians drove out the Mongols in 1335, and the Chinese followed suit in 1368.

In 1370, Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane as he is known to Europeans, made a final attempt to build a lasting empire. Timur was a Muslim Turk of Mongol descent. He ruled from Samarkand in what is now Soviet Central Asia. Timur led successful raids throughout central Asia to Persia and Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, southern Russia, and India.

Timur's empire lasted for 45 years. When he died in 1405, his empire was divided among his sons, as Genghis Khan's had been. His heirs fought among themselves for control, and Timur's fourth son, Shahrukh (*shah ROOK*), won control. After his death in 1447, the empire gradually lost its power. ■

## The Impact of the Mongols

Although the Mongols were fearsome warriors who conquered vast territories, that was not their only memorable accomplishment. The Mongols also showed tolerance, or respect, for different religions. They believed that there was truth in each religion. Thus, many

religions existed in their empire, including Christianity, Daoism, Buddhism, and Islam.

The Mongols also promoted trade and travel throughout their empire. The Silk Road, which had run from China through central Asia to Mesopotamia and Syria

during the Roman Empire, became active again under Mongol protection.

Travelers from both Europe and the Arab world visited the Mongol Empire. The Italian Marco Polo visited the court of Kublai Khan in the late 13th century. He later wrote a book describing his visit, which was the first accurate record of China by a European.

The 14th-century Moroccan writer Ibn Battuta also described the world of the Mongols in a book



▲ This painting shows travelers on the well-protected Silk Road during the Mongol reign.



about his travels through Africa, Asia, and Europe. The records that Ibn Battuta kept of his many experiences throughout Asia served to open up the Mongol world to other people of the time.

In addition to impressing travelers, the Mongol Empire fostered the spread of ideas from Asia to Europe. Also benefiting Europe was the spread of such Chinese inventions as the compass and gunpowder. The compass would make possible Europe's golden age of discovery, and gunpowder would alter the rules of European warfare. ■

◀ This statue of a Chinese goddess was made during the Yuan, or Mongol, Dynasty.

■ What were the positive effects of Mongol rule?

## R E V I E W

1. **FOCUS** How did the Mongols affect Europe and Asia?
2. **CONNECT** Compare social bonds among the Mongols to social bonds among the Kikuyu.
3. **CULTURE** What Mongol qualities contributed to their success as conquerors?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING** Ibn Battuta and Marco Polo traveled freely throughout the Mongol Empire. What does this indicate about Mongol rule?
5. **CRITICAL THINKING** Both Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan made significant contributions to the Mongol Empire. Which of the two was the greatest Mongol leader? Why?
6. **ACTIVITY** Read the poem "Kubla Khan," written in 1798, by the English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. What does the poem tell you about the late 18th-century view of the Mongol Empire?