The Mongol Conquests

**MAIN IDEA**

**Empire Building** The Mongols, a nomadic people from the steppe, conquered settled societies across much of Asia.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

The Mongols built the largest unified land empire in world history.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- pastoralist
- clan
- Genghis Khan
- Pax Mongolica

**Setting the Stage** While the Chinese prospered during the Song Dynasty, a great people far to the north were also gaining strength. The Mongols of the Asian steppe lived their lives on the move. They prided themselves on their skill on horseback, their discipline, their ruthlessness, and their courage in battle. They also wanted the wealth and glory that came with conquering mighty empires. This desire soon exploded into violent conflict that transformed Asia and Europe forever.

**Nomads of the Asian Steppe**

A vast belt of dry grassland, called the steppe, stretches across the landmass of Eurasia. The significance of the steppe to neighboring civilizations was twofold. First, it served as a land trade route connecting the East and the West. Second, it was home to nomadic peoples who frequently swept down on their neighbors to plunder, loot, and conquer.

**Geography of the Steppe** There are two main expanses of the Eurasian steppe. The western steppe runs from Central Asia to eastern Europe. It was the original home of some of the ancient invaders you have read about, including the Hittites. The eastern steppe, covering the area of present-day Mongolia, was the first home of the Huns, the Turks, and the Mongols.

Very little rain falls on the steppe, but the dry, windswept plain supports short, hardy grasses. Seasonal temperature changes can be dramatic. Temperatures in Mongolia, for example, range from −57°F in winter to 96°F in the summer. Rainfall is somewhat more plentiful and the climate milder in the west than in the east. For this reason, movements of people have historically tended to be toward the west and the south.

**The Nomadic Way of Life** Nomadic peoples were pastoralists—that is, they herded domesticated animals. They were constantly on the move, searching for good pasture to feed their herds. But they did not wander. Rather, they followed a familiar
seasonal pattern and returned on a regular basis to the same campsites. Keeping claim to land that was not permanently occupied was difficult. Battles frequently arose among nomadic groups over grassland and water rights.

Asian nomads practically lived on horseback as they followed their huge herds over the steppe. They depended on their animals for food, clothing, and housing. Their diet consisted of meat and mare’s milk. They wore clothing made of skins and wool, and they lived in portable felt tents called yurts.

Steppe nomads traveled together in kinship groups called clans. The members of each clan claimed to be descended from a common ancestor. Different clans sometimes came together when they needed a large force to attack a common enemy or raid their settled neighbors.

**Steppe Nomads and Settled Societies** The differing ways of life of nomadic and settled peoples resulted in constant interaction between them. Often, they engaged in peaceful trade. The nomads exchanged horses, for example, for basic items they lacked, such as grain, metal, cloth, and tea. Nomads were accustomed to scarcity and hardship. They prided themselves on their toughness. However, they were sometimes tempted by the rich land and relative wealth of townspeople and took what they wanted by force. As a result, settled peoples lived in constant fear of raids.

Time and again in history, nomadic peoples rode out of the steppe to invade border towns and villages. When a state or empire was strong and organized, it could protect its frontier. If the state or empire became divided and weak, the nomads could increase their attacks and gain more plunder. Occasionally, a powerful nomadic group was able to conquer a whole empire and become its rulers. Over generations, these nomadic rulers often became part of the civilization they conquered.

**The Rise of the Mongols**

For centuries, the Mongol people had wandered the eastern steppe in loosely organized clans. It took a military and political genius to unite the Mongols into a force with a single purpose—conquest.

**Genghis Khan Unites the Mongols** Around 1200, a Mongol clan leader named Temujin sought to unify the Mongols under his leadership. He fought and defeated his rivals one by one. In 1206, Temujin accepted the title **Genghis Khan**, or “universal ruler” of the Mongol clans.

Over the next 21 years, Genghis led the Mongols in conquering much of Asia. His first goal was China. After invading the northern Jin Empire in 1211; however, his attention turned to the Islamic region west of Mongolia. Angered by the murder of Mongol traders and an ambassador at the hands of the Muslims, Genghis launched a campaign of terror across Central Asia. The Mongols destroyed one city after another—Utrar, Samarkand, Bukhara—and slaughtered many inhabitants. By 1225, Central Asia was under Mongol control.
Genghis the Conqueror  Several characteristics lay behind Genghis Khan’s stunning success as a conqueror. First, he was a brilliant organizer. He assembled his Mongol warriors into a mighty fighting force (see below). Following the model of the Chinese military, Genghis grouped his warriors in armies of 10,000. These in turn were organized into 1,000-man brigades, 100-man companies, and 10-man squads. He put his most battle-proven and loyal men in command of these units.

Second, Genghis was a gifted strategist. He used various tricks to confuse his enemy. Sometimes, a small Mongol cavalry unit would attack, then pretend to gallop away in flight. The enemy usually gave chase. Then the rest of the Mongol army would appear suddenly and slaughter the surprised enemy forces.

Finally, Genghis Khan used cruelty as a weapon. He believed in terrifying his enemies into surrender. If a city refused to open its gates to him, he might kill the entire population when he finally captured the place. The terror the Mongols inspired spread ahead of their armies, which led many towns to surrender without a fight. As one Arab historian wrote, “In the countries that have not yet been overrun by them, everyone spends the night afraid that they may appear there too.”

The Mongol Empire

Genghis Khan died in 1227—not from violence, but from illness. His successors continued to expand his empire. In less than 50 years, the Mongols conquered territory from China to Poland. In so doing, they created the largest unified land empire in history. (See the map on page 334.)

History in Depth

A Mighty Fighting Force

Mongol soldiers were superb horsemen, having spent all their lives in the saddle. Annual game roundups gave young men the chance to practice skills they would use in battle and gave their leaders the opportunity to spot promising warriors. When on the move, each soldier was accompanied by three extra horses. By changing mounts, soldiers could stay in the saddle for up to ten days and nights at a time. When charging toward a target, they covered as much as 120 miles a day. If food was scarce, a Mongol soldier might make a small gash in the neck of one of his horses and sustain himself by drinking the blood.

A key to Mongol horsemanship was the stirrup, which was invented on the steppe in the second century B.C. Stirrups enabled a mounted warrior to stand, turn, and shoot arrows behind him.

Under his armor, each cavalry warrior wore silk underwear, which arrows often did not pierce. The warriors could use the silk to help pull the arrow cleanly out of a wound.

The cavalry warrior’s weapons included leather armor, a lance, a dagger, a bow and arrows, and his stout, sturdy horse.
The Khanates After Genghis's death, his sons and grandsons continued the campaign of conquest. Armies under their leadership drove south, east, and west out of inner Asia. They completed their conquest of northern China and invaded Korea. They leveled the Russian city of Kiev and reached the banks of the Adriatic Sea. The cities of Venice and Vienna were within their grasp. However, in the 1250s the Mongols halted their westward campaign and turned their attention to Persia. By 1260, the Mongols had divided their huge empire into four regions, or khanates. (See the map on page 334.) These were the Khanate of the Great Khan (Mongolia and China), the Khanate of Chagatai (Central Asia), the Ilkhanate (Persia), and the Khanate of the Golden Horde (Russia). A descendant of Genghis ruled each khanate.

The Mongols as Rulers Many of the areas invaded by the Mongols never recovered. The populations of some cities were wiped out. In addition, the Mongols destroyed ancient irrigation systems in areas such as the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. Thus, the land could no longer support resettlement. While ferocious in war, the Mongols were quite tolerant in peace. They rarely imposed their beliefs or way of life on those they conquered. Over time, some Mongol rulers even adopted aspects of the culture of the people they ruled. The Ilkhan and the Golden Horde, for example, became Muslims. Growing cultural differences among the khanates contributed to the eventual splitting up of the empire.

The Mongol Peace From the mid-1200s to the mid-1300s, the Mongols imposed stability and law and order across much of Eurasia. This period is sometimes called the Pax Mongolica, or Mongol Peace. The Mongols guaranteed safe passage for trade caravans, travelers, and missionaries from one end of the empire to another.
Trade between Europe and Asia had never been more active. Ideas and inventions traveled along with the trade goods. Many Chinese innovations, such as gunpowder, reached Europe during this period.

Other things spread along with the goods and the ideas. Some historians speculate that the epidemic of bubonic plague that devastated Europe during the 1300s was first spread by the Mongols. (See Chapter 14.) The disease might have traveled along trade routes or have been passed to others by infected Mongol troops.

For a brief period of history, the nomadic Mongols were the lords of city-based civilizations across Asia, including China. As you will read in Section 3, China continued to thrive under Mongol rule.

**TERMS & NAMES**

1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.
   - pastoralist
   - clan
   - Genghis Khan
   - Pax Mongolica

**USING YOUR NOTES**

2. Which of the listed events do you think is the most important? Why?

**MAIN IDEAS**

3. In what ways did steppe nomads and the people of neighboring settled societies interact?
4. Why was terror an important weapon for Genghis Khan?
5. What happened to the Mongol Empire in the years after Genghis Khan's death?

**CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING**

6. MAKING INFERENCES What characteristics of their culture do you think contributed to the Mongols' military success? Explain your response.
7. ANALYZING MOTIVES What do you think drove Genghis Khan to conquer a great empire? Explain your answer.
8. FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS "The Mongols were great conquerors but poor rulers." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
9. WRITING ACTIVITY CULTURAL INTERACTION Write a brief essay discussing the impact of interaction between the Mongols and the various cultures that they conquered.

**MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITY**

CREATING AN ILLUSTRATED REPORT

Today, most Mongols live in the country of Mongolia. Use the Internet to find information on Mongolian ways of life. Then create an illustrated report comparing ways of life today and in Genghis Khan's time.

**INTERNET KEYWORD**

Mongolia
The Mongol Empire

**CULTURAL INTERACTION** As emperor of China, Kublai Khan encouraged foreign trade.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW** The influence of Chinese ideas on Western civilization began with the Mongols' encouragement of trade.

**TERMS & NAMES**
- Kublai Khan
- Marco Polo

**SETTING THE STAGE** Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, assumed the title Great Khan in 1260. In theory, the Great Khan ruled the entire Mongol Empire. In reality, the empire had split into four khanates. Other descendants of Genghis ruled Central Asia, Persia, and Russia as semi-independent states. So, Kublai focused instead on extending the power and range of his own khanate, which already included Mongolia, Korea, Tibet, and northern China. To begin, however, he had to fulfill the goal of his grandfather to conquer all of China.

**Kublai Khan Becomes Emperor**

The Chinese held off Kublai's attacks for several years. However, his armies finally overwhelmed them in 1279. Throughout China's long history, the Chinese feared and fought off invasions by northern nomads. China sometimes lost territory to nomadic groups, but no foreigner had ever ruled the whole country. With Kublai's victory, that changed.

**Beginning a New Dynasty** As China's new emperor, Kublai Khan founded a new dynasty called the Yuan (yoo-ahn) Dynasty. It lasted less than a century, until 1368, when it was overthrown. However, the Yuan era was an important period in Chinese history for several reasons. First, Kublai Khan united China for the first time in more than 300 years. For this he is considered one of China's great emperors. Second, the control imposed by the Mongols across all of Asia opened China to greater foreign contacts and trade. Finally, Kublai and his successors tolerated Chinese culture and made few changes to the system of government.

Unlike his Mongol ancestors, Kublai abandoned the Mongolian steppes for China. He did not share his ancestors' dislike of the settled life. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed living in the luxurious manner of a Chinese emperor. He maintained a beautiful summer palace at Shangdu, on the border between Mongolia and China. He also built a new square-walled capital at the site of modern Beijing. Kublai built this palace to enhance his prestige, but his new capital meant something more. Previously, the Great Khans had ruled their empire from Mongolia. Moving the capital from Mongolia to China was a sign that Kublai intended to make his mark as emperor of China.

**Failure to Conquer Japan** After conquering China, Kublai Khan tried to extend his rule to Japan. In 1274 and again in 1281, the Great Khan sent huge fleets...
against Japan. The Mongols forced Koreans to build, sail, and provide provisions for the boats, a costly task that almost ruined Korea. Both times the Japanese turned back the Mongol fleets.

The second fleet carried 150,000 Mongol, Chinese, and Korean warriors—the largest seaborne invasion force in history until World War II. After 53 days, Japanese warriors had fought the invaders to a standstill. Then, on the following day, the sky darkened and a typhoon swept furiously across the Sea of Japan. Mongol ships were upended, swamped, and dashed to bits against the rocky shore, despite their sailors' attempts to escape onto the open sea. For centuries afterward, the Japanese spoke reverently of the *kamikaze*, or "divine wind," that had saved Japan.

**Mongol Rule in China**

Early in Kublai Khan’s reign, one of his Chinese advisers told him, “I have heard that one can conquer the empire on horseback, but one cannot govern it on horseback.” This advice illustrates the problems Kublai faced as emperor. Mongol ways would not work in a sophisticated civilization like China’s. Besides, the number of Mongols in China was few compared to the huge native population. Kublai would need to make use of non-Mongol officials to help him rule successfully.

**The Mongols and the Chinese** The Mongol rulers had little in common with their Chinese subjects. Because of their differences, the Mongols kept their separate identity. Mongols lived apart from the Chinese and obeyed different laws. They kept the Chinese out of high government offices, although they retained as many Chinese officials as possible to serve on the local level. Most of the highest government posts went to Mongols or to foreigners. The Mongols believed that foreigners were more trustworthy since they had no local loyalties.

Despite his differences with the Chinese, Kublai Khan was an able leader. He restored the Grand Canal and extended it 135 miles north to Beijing. Along its banks he built a paved highway that ran some 1,100 miles, from Hangzhou to Beijing. These land and water routes ensured the north a steady supply of grain and other goods from the southern heartland.

**Foreign Trade** Foreign trade increased under Kublai Khan. This was largely due to the Mongol Peace, which made the caravan routes across Central Asia safe for trade and travel. Traders transported Chinese silk and porcelain, which were greatly valued in Europe and western Asia, over the Silk Roads and other routes. These traders also carried with them such Chinese products and inventions as printing, gunpowder, the compass, paper currency, and playing cards.
Kublai further encouraged trade by inviting foreign merchants to visit China. Most of them were Muslims from India, Central Asia, and Persia. Many European traders and travelers, including Christian missionaries, also reached China.

**Marco Polo at the Mongol Court** The most famous European to visit China in these years was a young Venetian trader, Marco Polo. He traveled by caravan on the Silk Roads with his father and uncle, arriving at Kublai Khan’s court around 1275. Polo had learned several Asian languages in his travels, and Kublai Khan sent him to various Chinese cities on government missions. Polo served the Great Khan well for 17 years. In 1292, the Polos left China and made the long journey back to Venice.

Later, during a war against Venice’s rival city, Genoa, Marco Polo was captured and imprisoned. In prison he had time to tell the full story of his travels and adventures. To his awed listeners, he spoke of China’s fabulous cities, its fantastic wealth, and the strange things he had seen there. He mentioned the burning of “black stones” (coal) in Chinese homes. (Coal as a fuel was little known in Europe.) He also recorded the practical workings of Kublai’s government and aspects of Chinese life. Here is his description of trade in Beijing:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

[More precious and costly wares are imported into Khan-balik [Beijing] than into any other city in the world. . . . All the treasures that come from India—precious stones, pearls, and other rarities—are brought here. So too are the choicest and costliest products of Cathay [China] itself and every other province.

**MARCO POLO, The Travels of Marco Polo**

A fellow prisoner gathered Polo’s stories into a book. It was an instant success in Europe, but most readers did not believe a word of it. They thought Polo’s account was a marvelous collection of tall tales. It was clear to Marco Polo, however, that the civilization he had visited was the greatest in the world.

**The End of Mongol Rule**

During the last years of Kublai Khan’s reign, weaknesses began to appear in Mongol rule. In an attempt to further expand his empire, Kublai sent several expeditions into Southeast Asia. His armies and navies suffered many humiliating defeats at a huge expense of lives and equipment. Heavy spending on fruitless wars, on public works, and on the luxuries of the Yuan court burdened the treasury and created resentment among the overtaxed Chinese. This presented problems that Kublai’s less able successors could not resolve.
Dynasties of China, 500–1400

Yuan Dynasty Overthrown  Kublai Khan died in 1294. After his death, the Yuan Dynasty began to fade. Family members continually argued over who would rule. In one eight-year period, four different khans took the throne.

Rebellions broke out in many parts of China in the 1300s. The Chinese had long resented their Mongol rulers, and the Mongol humiliation of the Chinese only increased under Kublai Khan’s successors. The rebellions were also fueled by years of famine, flood, and disease, along with growing economic problems and official corrup tion. In 1368, Chinese rebels finally overthrew the Mongols. The rebel leader founded a new dynasty, the Ming, which you will read about in Chapter 19.

Decline of the Mongol Empire  By the time of the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty, the entire Mongol Empire had disintegrated. The government of the Ilkhanate in Persia fell apart in the 1330s. The Chagatai khans ruled Central Asia until the 1370s. Only the Golden Horde in Russia stayed in power. The Golden Horde ruled Russia for 250 years. As you read in Chapter 11, Ivan III finally led Russia to independence from Mongol rule in 1480.

The rise and fall of Mongol rule affected civilizations from eastern Europe to China. Kublai Khan had tried to extend this influence to Japan but had failed. However, several centuries earlier, the Japanese had embraced the influence of an outside culture—China. This development is described in Section 4.