

Why this unit?

During the thirteenth century, the Mongols built an empire from scratch by remarkable feats of organization, planning, endurance, courage, slaughter, destruction, and terror. The empire was ruled by a combination of exploiting and protecting subject peoples. The large-scale displacements of population, combined with Mongol peace-keeping and encouragement of long-distance communications, resulted in widespread exchanges of ideas, goods, and techniques, as well as in the spread of disease.

Studying the Mongols' rise to power and its consequences helps students to:

grapple with the causes, process, and results of empire-building in the context of the Eurasian steppes.

evaluate the impact of Mongol imperial conquest on both Mongol society and the societies they conquered.

analyze ways in which the Mongol empire reestablished and intensified contact between various parts of Afroeurasia.

develop some empathetic understanding for the Mongols, a people with values and customs very different from students' own.

Although the Mongol empire's heyday ended after its first century and it definitively disintegrated at the end of its second, some of its legacy was long lasting. This legacy included:

a firm and lasting unification of China.

the beginnings of Russian unification and the firming up of Russian identity.

the further expansion of Islam.

Unit objectives

Upon completing this unit, students will be able to:

1. Explain what features of the Mongols' pastoral nomadic way of life were favorable to their creation of an empire.
2. Analyze the impact of the imperial conquests on both Mongol society and on the societies they conquered.
3. Describe the ways that Mongol actions promoted the exchange of goods and ideas within and beyond their empire.
4. Assess the significance of particular individuals and historical processes.
5. Analyze historical documents for reliability.

Author

The principal author of this teaching unit is Dr. Anne Chapman. She served for many years as history teacher and academic dean of Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, Ohio. She has been a history education consultant to the College Board, the Educational Testing Service, and the National Center for History in the Schools.

The historical context

In the grasslands and mountains northwest of the Gobi Desert of East Asia lived a nomadic, tribal, largely illiterate people numbering 700,000 to 1,000,000. These were the Mongols. Economically dependent on flock and herds of sheep, goats, horses, and cattle and on raiding for booty, they were in constant low-level conflict with each other. They fought over pasture, water, and potential slave captives and engaged in long, bloody feuds.

Suddenly, they exploded onto the world scene by conquering the territories of both nomadic and settled peoples, including urbanized, agrarian societies from China to Syria and Russia to Korea in about half a century. They created the world's largest empire and managed to hang on to their conquests for nearly two centuries. The founder of the empire was Chinggis Khan. The unified empire that he forged between 1206 and 1227 broke up about 1260. It did not shatter, however. Rather it divided into four large Mongol kingdoms ruled by his grandsons and later descendants. Therefore, the age of Mongol domination continued far into the fourteenth century.

During that time these Mongol rulers, called khans:

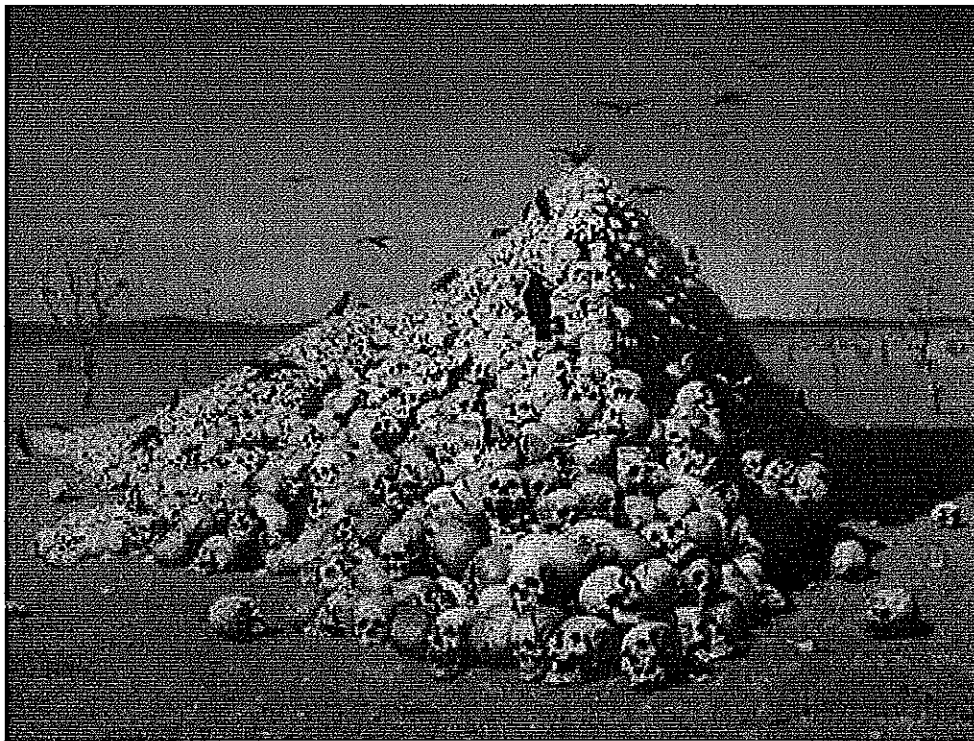
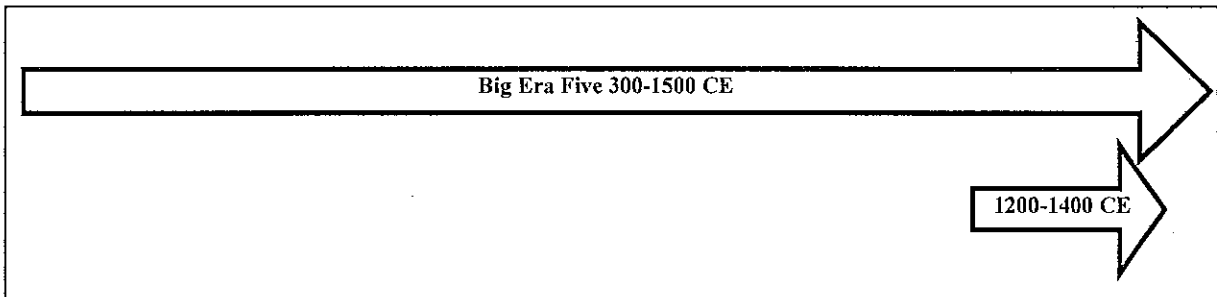
- Facilitated contact between the various parts of the enormous land area from the Mediterranean to the Pacific.

- Promoted interaction between peoples of many different ethnicities, religions, and cultures.

- Enabled the exchange and spread of ideas, goods, technologies, and disease.

What's in a name? The name Chinggis Khan, meaning something like "universal lord, has been spelled in European languages many different ways: Genghis, Chingiz, Djingis, Djenghiz, and Jankiz, also Qan, Kaan, Qhan. Our alphabet can only approximate the sounds of Mongolian, a language in the Altaic family which also includes Turkish.(If you say these different spellings aloud, how different do they sound?) For a while, Genghis was the most popular spelling, but today Chinggis or Chingiz is preferred. Europeans also called the Mongols "Tatars" or "Tartars." Before Chinggis demolished them, the Tatars were the most powerful Mongol tribe, but that name was later loosely applied to all Mongols. In Europe, the form "Tartar" became current, after the Latin name for Hell, "Tartarus."

This Unit in the Big Era Time Line



Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Vasily Vereshchagin
Apotheosis of War
Photo by R. Dunn

Lesson One

From Tent to Palace: A Long, Rocky Road

Introductory Activities

These activities may be revisited as a wrap-up for this teaching unit. If used, ask students to take and save notes on the ideas and thoughts shared. They can revisit their notes in the closing activities at the end of Student Handout 1.6.

1. Ask the class to:

Share their ideas on what kind of person would be described as “Oh, he’s a real Chinggis Khan!”

Write down in three minutes or so what they think of when they hear the word “Mongol,” then share the results.

Brainstorm the characteristics that they consider define “an empire”. Take a few minutes to try them out on empires they know something about. How well do the characteristics they have hypothesized fit?

2. Ask students to answer the following, individually or in groups:

If you were setting out on a career of conquest, aiming to create an empire, which of the following would you be least willing to do without? Most willing to do without? Explain your reasoning.

A larger army than that of the people you are planning to attack

A better trained, more obedient army than that of your opponents

Charismatic (inspired, forceful) leadership

Ideological (religious or other) support for aggression

A stronger economy or more wealth than your opponents have

Technological superiority in military hardware

Safe, fast supply lines to your homeland

Current, detailed intelligence about your opponents

First-rate communications within your own army

Something not on this list --what?

Have students share their choices and their reasons for them. Ask them to arrive at a consensus on what are the five most important factors in building a successful empire. List them on the board.

Ask students to save the question, their answers, and the consensus list, because they will be working with them again (See closing activities at the end of Student Handout 1.6).

3. Tell students they will be discussing what it was about the Mongols that led to their success by considering the following, which influence the outcome of any empire-acquiring enterprise:

- characteristics of the people
- nature of the leadership
- details of social organization
- features of the environment
- nature of the technology
- features of the ideology

To participate in the discussion, students need to bear in mind the following questions:

In what ways would each of the above have promoted, or hindered, the success of Mongols as conquerors?

Which of the above do they consider to have been most important in the creation of the Mongol empire? Why?

They also need to know the information about the Mongols contained in Student Handouts 1.1-1.6). Some ways of getting them to do this include:

Divide the class into groups, and assign each group one or more of the six Student Handouts below to read, discuss, and summarize within their group. Then report their summaries to the class.

Instead of one person from each group reporting to the class, form new groups, each of whose members have read a different Student Handout. Each student in the group then teaches the knowledge to the rest of the group (Jigsaw method).

All students may be asked to read all the Student Handouts. This allows use of the detailed discussion questions based on the various individual sections.



Photo source unknown

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1

What Were the Mongol People Like In the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries? Depends on Whom You Ask!

According to Chinggis Khan's shaman, reported in a Mongol-written history in 1228:

Before you were born [1167] . . . everyone was feuding. Rather than sleep they robbed each other of their possessions. . . The whole nation was in rebellion. Rather than rest they fought each other. In such a world one did not live as one wished, but rather in constant conflict. There was no respite [letup], only battle. There was no affection, only mutual slaughter (*Secret History of the Mongols*, sec. 254, qtd. in Ratchnevsky 12).

According to the Italian friar John of Plano Carpini, who spent several months in the Great Khan's court in the late 1240's:

In the whole world there are to be found no more obedient subjects than the Tatar . . . they pay their lords more respect than any other people, and would hardly dare to lie to them . . . Their women are chaste . . . Wars, quarrels, the infliction [causing] of bodily harm, and manslaughter do not occur among them, and there are no large-scale thieves or robbers among them . . . They treat one another with due respect; they regard each other almost as members of one family, and, although they do not have a lot of food, they like to share it with one another. Moreover, they are accustomed to deprivation [doing without]; if, therefore, they have fasted for a day or two, and have not eaten anything at all, they do not easily lose their tempers . . . While riding they can endure extreme cold and at times also fierce heat

They are extremely arrogant toward other people, [and] tend to anger . . . easily . . . They are the greatest liars in the world in dealing with other people . . . They are crafty and sly . . . [and] have an admirable ability to keep their intentions secret . . . They are messy in their eating and drinking and in their whole way of life, [and] cling fiercely to what they have. They have no conscience about killing other people . . . If anyone is found in the act of plundering or stealing in the territory under their power, he is put to death without any mercy.

The chiefs or princes of the army . . . take up their stand some distance away from the enemy, and they have beside them their children on horseback and their womenfolk and horses . . . to give the impression that a great crowd of fighting- men is assembled there. (Qtd. in Spuler 78-79.)

According to the French friar William of Rubruck who spent several months in the Great Khan's court in the early 1250's:

It is the duty of the women to drive the carts, get the dwelling on and off them, milk the cows, make butter and to dress and sew skins . . . They also sew the boots, the socks, and the clothing, make the felt and cover the houses.

The men make the bows and arrows, manufacture stirrups and bits, do the carpentering on their dwellings and carts; they take care of the horses, milk the mares, churn the mares' milk, make the skins in which it is put; they also look after the camels and load them. Both sexes look after the sheep and goats.

At the entrance [of the palace] Master William of Paris has made for him [the Great Khan] a large silver tree, at the foot of which are four silver lions each having a pipe and all belching forth white mares' milk . . . The whole dwelling was completely covered inside with cloth of gold, and in the middle in a little hearth was a fire of twigs and roots of wormwood . . . and also the dung of oxen (Qtd. in Spuler 96-97).

According to a letter by a Hungarian bishop who had custody of two Tartar captives taken in Russia, written to the bishop of Paris in 1257:

I asked them about their belief; and in few words, they believe nothing. They began to tell me, that they were come from their own country to conquer the world. They make use of the Jewish [actually, Uighur; the Uighurs were a semi-sedentary, literate steppe people, and early allies of the Mongols] letters, because formerly they had none of their own . . . They eat frogs, dogs, serpents and all things . . . Their horses are good but stupid (Qtd. in Paris 449).

According to a description by Matthew Paris, English chronicler, in the 1270's :

They are inhuman and beastly, rather monsters than men, thirsting for and drinking blood, tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and men, dressed in ox-hides, armed with plates of iron . . . thickset, strong, invincible, indefatigable . . . They are without human laws, know no comforts, are more ferocious than lions or bears . . . They know no other language than their own, which no one else knows; for until now there has been no access to them . . . so that there could be no knowledge of their customs or persons . . . They wander about with their flocks and their wives, who are taught to fight like men (Qtd. in Rockhill).

Discussion questions:

1. What can you infer about the economy, ideology, and technology of the Mongols from the descriptions given?
2. Which of the Mongols' characteristics that are described would make them likely to set out on a career of conquest?
3. Which of their characteristics would be helpful to them during their career of conquest?
4. Which of the descriptions would you be most willing to accept as accurate? Which would you be least willing to accept as accurate? Why?

Lesson 1***Student Handout 1.2*****What was the Mongol Leader, Chinggis Great Khan, Really Like?
Depends on Whom You Ask!**

According to a southern Chinese author who was an eyewitness of the bloody Mongol campaign in north China:

This man is brave and decisive, he is self-controlled, and lenient [merciful] towards the population; he reveres [respects] Heaven and Earth, prizes loyalty and justice (Qtd. in Ratchnevsky 167).

The Indian historian Juzjani wrote in 1256 in the Sultanate of Delhi and had been an eyewitness of Chinggis Khan's raid on India in 1221. According to him:

A man of tall stature, of vigorous build, robust in body, the hair on his face scanty and turned white, with cat's eyes, possessed of great energy, discernment [judgment], genius and understanding, awe-inspiring, a butcher, just, resolute, an over thrower of enemies, intrepid [fearless], sanguinary [bloodthirsty] and cruel (Qtd. in Saunders 63).

Chinggis himself had a letter written to a Chinese Daoist sage whom he had invited to discuss religious topics. The Daoist's companion included the letter in the account of the trip. He said:

I wear the same clothing and eat the same food as the cow-herds and horse-herders. We make the same sacrifices and we share our riches. I look upon the nation as my new-born child, and I care for my soldiers as if they were my brothers (Qtd. in Ratchnevsky 149).

The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din, the official court historian of the Mongol khan of Persia. According to him, some of Chinggis's sayings included.

From the goodness of severity the stability of government.

When the master is away hunting, or at war, the wife must keep the household in good order. Good husbands are known by their good wives. If a wife be stupid or dull, wanting in reason and orderliness, she makes obvious the badness of her husband.

Only a man who feels hunger and thirst and by this estimates the feelings of others is fit to be a commander of troops. The campaign and its hardships must be in proportion with the strength of the weakest of the warriors.

My bowmen and warriors loom like thick forests: their wives, sweethearts and maidens shine like red flames. My task and intention is to sweeten their mouths with gifts of sweet sugar, to decorate their breasts, backs and shoulders with garments [clothes] of brocade, to seat them on good geldings [horses], give them to drink from pure and sweet rivers, provide their beasts with good and abundant [plentiful] pastures, and to order that the great roads and highways that serve as ways for the people be cleared of garbage, tree-stumps and all bad things; and not to allow dirt and thorns in the tents.

It is delightful and felicitous [good] for a man to subdue rebels and conquer and extirpate [destroy] his enemies, to take all they possess, to cause their servants to cry out, to make tears run down their faces and noses, to ride their pleasant-paced geldings [horses], to

make the bellies and navels of their wives his bed and bedding, to admire their rosy cheeks, to kiss them and suck their red lips (Rashid al-Din, *Collected Chronicles*, qtd. in Riasanovsky 91)

According to inference from the laws that by tradition Chinggis set up:

If it is necessary to write to rebels or send messages to them they shall not be intimidated by an excessive display of confidence on our part or by the size of our army, but they shall merely be told: if you submit you will find peace and benevolence. But if you continue to resist—what then do we know [about your future]? Only God knows what then shall become of you (Bar Hebraeus, *Chronicon Syriacum*, qtd. in Spuler 40-41).

Whoever gives food or clothing to a captive without the permission of his captor is to be put to death.

[Leaders are to] personally examine the troops and their armament before going to battle, even to needle and thread; to supply the troops with everything they need; and to punish those lacking any necessary equipment.

Women accompanying the troops [are] to do the work and perform the duties of men, while the latter are absent fighting.

All religions [are] to be respected and . . . no preference [is] to be shown to any of them (Qtd. in Riasanovsky 83-85).

According to inference from the following decisions made by Chinggis Khan:

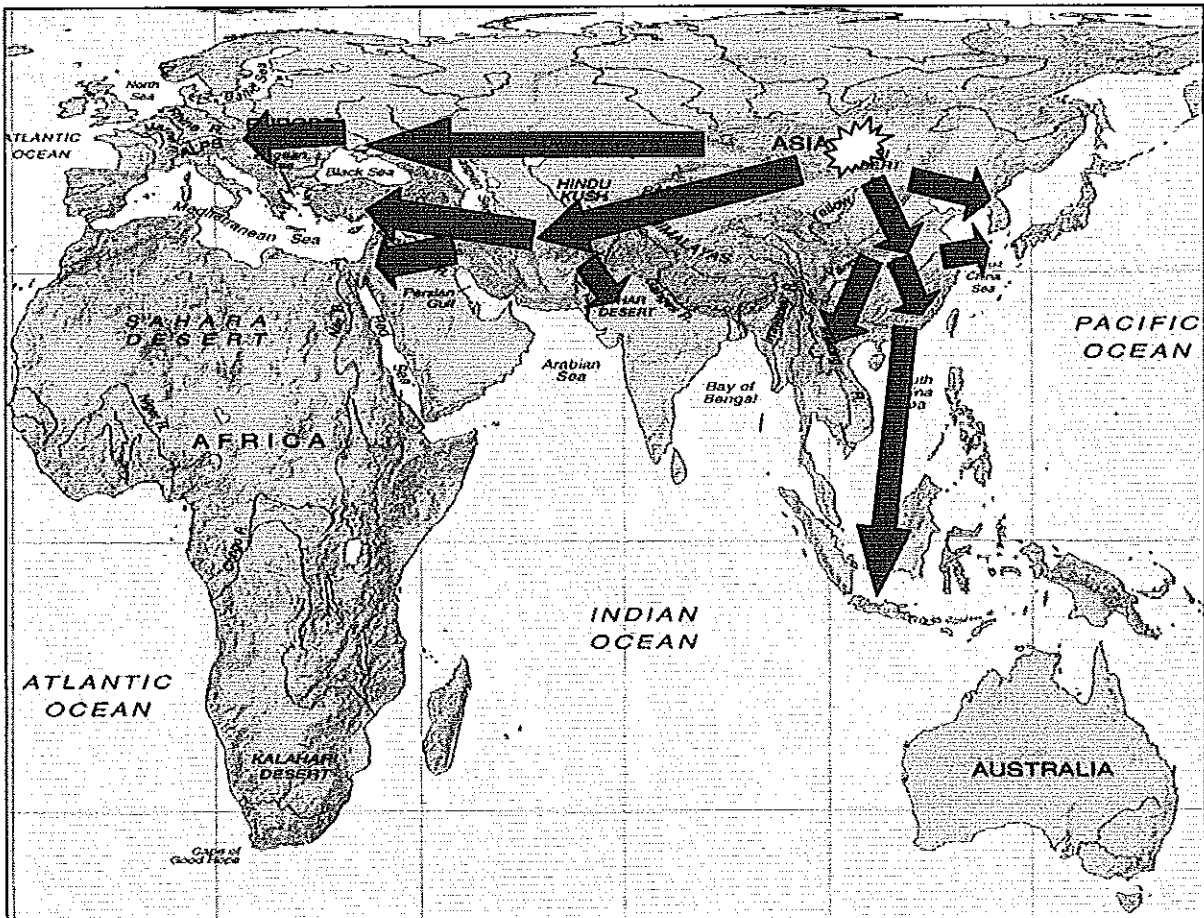
When fighting against hereditary enemies of his tribe, Chinggis's own son begged him to spare the life of the enemy leader's son. Chinggis replied: "How often have we fought them? They have caused us much vexation and sorrow. How can we spare his life? He will only instigate another rebellion. I have conquered these lands, armies, and tribes for you, my sons. Of what use is he? There is no better place for an enemy of our nation than the grave (Rashid al-Din, *Collected Chronicles*, qtd. in Riasanovsky 86)!

At a Grand Council meeting headed by Chinggis in 1202, it was decided that "in days gone by the Tartars killed our ancestors and forefathers. [Therefore] we will sacrifice them in revenge and retribution...by massacring all except the youngest...down to the very last male and the remainder will be shared as slaves among us all (*Secret History of the Mongols*, secs. 148, 154, qtd. in Ratchnevsky 151).

Discussion questions:

1. What characteristics of Chinggis shown by the documents would have been particularly helpful to him in his career of conquest? If you had to choose three characteristics as the most helpful, which would they be? Why?
2. What characteristics of Chinggis shown by the documents would have been particularly helpful to him in governing his empire? If you had to choose three characteristics as most helpful, which would they be? Why?
3. Which of the items of information above about Chinggis's character would you question as to accuracy, and why?
4. How would you explain variations in the descriptions of what Chinggis was like?

5. In what ways could Mongol ideas about women's position in society help the Mongols' career of conquest? To answer this question use information from all parts of this unit so far.
6. Would you agree with Chinggis's idea that severity is good, because it leads to stable government? Why or why not? Did the idea apply more in Chinggis's time and place than today? Why or why not?
7. Which of the accounts above do you consider most reliable, and why?



**Mongol Conquests and Expeditions
1211-1300 CE**

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.3

How Did Chinggis Turn a Pastoral Nomadic Society Into an Efficient War Machine?

Before Chinggis, the Mongols were organized into tribes that fought and raided each other for plunder, for women (no marriages were allowed between members of the same tribe), and to avenge insults. Largely self-sufficient, they often raided, traded with, and extracted tribute from neighboring settled agricultural communities.

In most tribes, there were no specialists other than shamans and blacksmiths. Women and men both contributed to the economy, and the division of labor by sex was not rigid. Those men who could afford it married more than one wife, each of whom had her separate household, owned property outright, and had considerable freedom of action. Women rode, shot with bow and arrow, and hunted. They gave political advice and could rise to the rank of chief, though rarely. The senior wife had special status and respect, and her children were often favored as heirs. On campaign, wives, children, and flocks often went with the army. Women and even children could be drafted to ride on the fringes of battle to simulate larger numbers. It is unclear whether they ever took an active part in combat. The tribes were divided into nobles and commoners, and only members of noble lineages could become chiefs, though class differences were not strongly marked.

All Mongols were fighters, but Chinggis made a reorganized army the core of the society and the carrier of many of his reforms. Under him and his successors, the Mongol army had the following characteristics, many designed by Chinggis himself:

All males 15-70 served in the army, all as cavalry.

The army's 95 units of 10,000 soldiers were subdivided into units of 1,000, 100, and 10. Members of different tribes were mixed together in units of every size to ensure loyalty to the army above loyalty to the tribe. Allies and levies from conquered territories were also integrated into the fighting force, the latter usually being placed in the front ranks.

Absolute obedience to orders from superiors was enforced.

Officers had tight control over their troops' actions (plunder only with permission, no one allowed to transfer out of their unit).

Officers and men were bound to each other by mutual loyalty and two-way responsibilities.

No one in the army was paid, though all shared to varying degrees in the booty. All contributed to a fund to take care of those too old, sick, or hurt to fight.

During three months every year, large-scale hunting expeditions served as intensive military training simulations.

Cavalry troops had to supply their own bows and other military equipment, which had to meet officers' standards.

Gathering intelligence had high priority. Scouts were sent out, local knowledge sought, and traveling merchants rewarded for information.

Foreign experts and advisors were extensively used, notably Chinese and Persian engineers skilled at making and using siege weapons such as catapults and battering rams.

The highest level of government was Chinggis and his family, especially his sons by his senior wife and their descendants, known as the “Golden Family.” From among their members the Great Khans and after Chinggis Khan’s death the khans ruling the four successor empires were selected by agreement of the Kuriltai, the council made up of Chinggis’s family members and those others they invited.

Lack of clear-cut rules of succession opened the way for power struggles after the death of each ruler. Some earlier pastoral nomadic empires did not long survive the death of the leader who founded them. The Mongol state was unusual in surviving for as long as it did, even though it divided into four separate kingdoms, or khanates after about 1260.

Chinggis Khan’s administrators were picked for demonstrated high performance regardless of their wealth or social class. Among Chinggis’s closest advisors were people from both allied and conquered non-Mongol backgrounds, notably literate scholars and scribes from China, Persia, and the Inner Eurasian oasis towns

Discussion questions

1. What features of Mongol social organization and way of life favored their success in conquest. In what ways?
2. What features of Mongol social organization and ways of life would have favored successful government of conquered territories. In what ways?
3. What features of Mongol social organization and ways of life would have made for difficulties in conquest and in subsequent government of conquered territories?
4. What problems was Chinggis trying to solve by setting up his army the way he did?
5. What features of Mongol society favored the possibility of mobilizing a large proportion of the population for a war effort?
6. In what ways might the diversity and mixing that Chinggis favored have been an advantage, and in what ways a handicap in the conquests and the running of his empire?

Extension

1. Compare the Mongol army to the feudal/mercenary armies of medieval Europe. What were the advantages and disadvantages of each for an initial conquest and for keeping hold of conquered territories afterwards?

Assessment

Discussion question might serve as assessment.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.4

What Was it Like to Live in the Mongol Homeland?

John of Plano Carpini, an Italian friar who traveled to Mongolia in the 1240's described the Mongol homeland as follows:

In some parts the country is extremely mountainous, in others it is flat . . . in some districts there are small woods, but otherwise it is completely bare of trees . . . Not one hundredth part of the land is fertile, nor can it bear . . . unless it be irrigated by running water, and brooks and streams are few there and rivers very rare . . . Although the land is otherwise barren, it is fit for grazing cattle; even if not very good, at least sufficiently so.

The weather there is astonishingly irregular, for in the middle of the summer . . . there is fierce thunder and lightning which cause the death of many men, and at the same time there are very heavy falls of snow. There are also hurricanes of bitterly cold winds, so violent that at times men can ride on horseback only with great effort. [Sometimes one can] scarcely see owing to the great clouds of dust. Very heavy hail also often falls there. Then also in summer there is suddenly great heat, and suddenly extreme cold (Qtd. in Dawson 5-6).

Carpini was right. Winters in the Mongol homeland were long and cold and still are today. The average mean temperature in January is minus 34 degrees centigrade, but extremes have been recorded of minus 55 degrees. The air temperature fluctuates heavily from day to day. Even in the mountainous region of the northwest, the heat can hit 40 degrees centigrade. There is little rainfall, and 85 percent of it falls during the three summer months. There is evidence that the climate of the steppes had turned cooler and drier for a while before and during the time of the Mongol conquests. Climatological data shows that the climate of the steppes was turning cooler and drier about the time of the Mongol conquests, reducing the season when ample grazing land was available for horses, sheep, and other stock. We can only speculate, however, about a possible connection between the Mongol conquests and an ecological crisis (Christian 387).

Horses were essential to the Mongol way of life. They were pastured entirely on the open steppe, with no supplementary grain or hay even in winter. Although extremely hardy, Mongol horses could not be ridden day after day or carry heavy loads. Therefore, every mounted soldier ideally possessed not one horse but a string of remounts as well (Lattimore 2).

Long-distance travel was tough. William of Rubruck, a Flemish monk who visited Karakorum, the Mongol capital, in the 1250s, took eleven months to return from there to the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean. The *Merchant's Handbook*, a book based mostly on information from Genoese traders of the early 1300's, suggests a nine-month journey from the Black Sea to Beijing, the capital of the Chinese Mongol state. People traveled across the steppe by ox-drawn wagon, river boat, camel caravan, donkey, and horse. The Daoist sage Ch'ang Chun took fourteen months to get from the Chinese border to Samarkand in what is today Uzbekistan, a country north of Afghanistan (Larner Appendix II).

His companion Li Chih-Ch'ang's account of the journey suggests some reasons for the length of time taken. He reported that:

The country was now so mountainous, the ascents so formidable and the valley-gorges so deep that the use of wagons became very difficult. The road here was first made for military purposes by the great Khan's third son. Our cavalry escort helped us to deal with the wagons, dragging them up hill by attaching ropes to the shafts and getting them down by tying ropes to the wheels and locking them fast . . . Our oxen were incapable of further effort and abandoning them by the roadside we harnessed six horses to our wagons. Henceforward we did not again use oxen.

We descended a deep ravine . . . Stream after stream rushes into this defile, forming a torrent that bends and twists down the pass . . . It was the Great Khan's second son who when accompanying his father on the western campaign first constructed a road through the defile, piercing the rocks and building no less than forty-eight timber bridges of such width that two carts can drive over them side by side (Li Chih-Ch'ang 76-77, 84-85).

Discussion questions

1. What problems of logistics and provisioning might a Mongol army numbering 100,000 to 120,000 mounted soldiers be likely to encounter? Note: The Persian historian Juvaini estimated that the daily food ration for a few thousand Mongols assembled for a council meeting was 2000 wagon-loads of fermented mares' milk and wine, 300 horses or oxen, and 3000 sheep.
2. How might the Mongols have solved their provisioning problems in the various regions where they fought?
3. What was the potential environmental impact of their provisioning needs?
4. Assess the part that the natural and physical environment is likely to have played in the Mongols' success at conquest.
5. What part does the environment still play in military planning in the twenty-first century?

Activities

1. Write a travel brochure addressed to merchants intending to bring goods for sale from the Black Sea to Karakorum in the 1220s.
2. Assume that you are a spy sent out by the ruler of a neighboring state at the time the Mongols were on the rise. Report on whether it is worthwhile to send an army to invade Mongolia to stop the Mongol advance. What features of the environment might be considered in deciding whether or not to invade.

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.5

Mongol Technology: Highly Effective Low Tech

The Mongols' own tribal technology was similar to that of other steppe nomads. The weapons their blacksmiths made on portable anvils and forges were relatively crude. The Mongols also acquired by plunder, tribute, and trade high-quality weapons made by urban artisans.

The bow was the Mongols' most important weapon. Made from layers of horn, sinew, wood, and waterproof lacquer, it shot an arrow faster and with more power than a wooden bow could. It had a pull of up to 160 pounds and a range of up to 350 yards.

A stone thumb-ring used in the release further increased the speed and penetrating power of arrows, which were made for different purposes. There were short and long range arrows, "singing" arrows used for signaling, fire-starting arrows, and arrows tipped with tiny gunpowder grenades. The Mongols did not, however, win every battle they fought because mounted enemies usually had similar equipment.

Mongol troops also carried iron or leather helmets, a leather-covered wicker shield, a lasso, a forearm-strapped dagger, a small sword, and if they were heavily armed, a scimitar, battle-axe, and 12-foot lance. Soldiers learned from the Chinese to wear closely-woven silk undershirts. If an arrow hit a soldier's torso, it would drive the silk into the wound without breaking it. Therefore, the arrowhead might do less damage and could more easily be removed.

Mongol saddlebags, made from the waterproof stomachs of animals, could be inflated to help in river crossings. These bags held minimal field rations of millet, dried meat, fermented mares' milk in a leather bottle, and tools such as files and needles for repairing equipment. When a Mongol messenger needed to ride a long distance and had little food and no time to hunt, he sometimes opened a vein in one of his horses and drank the blood.

In military communications, it well-coordinated and efficient use of transport and signaling that gave the Mongols an edge. They signaled by shooting whistling arrows tuned to make different sounds, waving flags (a forerunner of the semaphore), burning torches, and dispatching fast-riding couriers. The army set up and maintained networks of staging posts where riders could rest and exchange horses.

Discussion questions

1. What features of Mongol technology are likely to have contributed to the success of their empire-building, and how?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, was the Mongols' technology connected to their pastoral nomadic way of life?
3. What were the Mongols' most significant technological strengths? What are your reasons for considering them "significant"?
4. Which three of the following did the Mongols need most when fighting other pastoral nomads, and which three did they need the most when fighting against a settled, agricultural state:

bows and arrows

lance, battle-axe, and spear

armor

communication equipment

catapults, battering rams, and other siege equipment

technical advisors

Explain your choices.

Activity

1. Compare the military technology of the Mongols to that of one or more of the following:
 - European crusaders
 - Song Chinese army
 - Armies of Mayan city-states in Mesoamerica

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.6

Shamans, Heaven, and the Ideology of Conquest

The Mongols' religion was shamanism. They combined this with belief in Tengri, the Eternal Sky, as the supreme supernatural power. They also believed in an earth and fertility goddess and in nature spirits. The major religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam, were seen as having access to other spiritual beings who might, if properly approached, also be helpful.

Shamans were considered go-betweens or bridges, joining the human and the spirit world. They could be women or men, and they were always people of prestige and importance. They communicated with the spirits in trances, exorcised evil, blessed flocks and herds, and made prophesies by examining cracks in the burnt shoulder-blades of sheep. Mongols had no temples, no hierarchy of religious specialists, no regular public worship, no sacred scriptures, and no required beliefs. Their religious concerns were practical aimed toward ensuring fertility, prosperity, health, and military success. As chiefs usually did, Chinggis Khan and his descendants climbed to high places to pray to Heaven before a decisive battle. The Mongols also regarded vengeance for insult or injury as a moral duty, approved by Heaven. And the duty to avenge was handed down from generation to generation.

It was only gradually that Chinggis and his Mongols arrived at an ideology of conquest. Eventually, he, or at least the sons and grandsons who followed him, came to believe that the Mongols had a mission from Heaven to conquer the world and establish a universal empire. In this, Mongol leaders were almost certainly influenced by contact with the Chinese ideology of the Mandate of Heaven, the belief that the emperor ruled because the Supreme Being wanted him to. Some Mongol tribes professed the form of Christianity known as Nestorian. So Christian monotheism and rituals may have influenced them, too.

The Mongol view of Heaven's attitude towards their conquests developed slowly but surely. Chinggis Khan's early campaigns were clearly not part of a larger plan for universal conquest. In 1206, he was named Great Khan primarily because of his military and political successes. However, it helped that one of his followers saw a vision: "A white ox harnessing itself to a wagon and pulling it behind Chinggis, bellowing: 'Heaven and Earth agree, let [Chinggis] be the nation's master! Bearing the nation, I am bringing it to him'" (Onon, 45)!

His first invasion of northern China in 1211 followed the usual pattern of nomad raids. Chinggis made no attempt to occupy or to keep Chinese territory, which was then under the Jin dynasty, a ruling family that had come originally from Manchuria far north of the Yellow River valley. The Mongols returned, however, and in 1215 took the Jin capital of Beijing. Chinese officers deserted to Chinggis in large numbers, some bringing with them tens of thousands of troops.

Determined to crush all resistance, Chinggis discussed with his generals what to do with the land once it was conquered. According to some accounts, they considered exterminating the north Chinese farming population in occupied territories and turning the country into pasture for the Mongols' horses. They were dissuaded when one of Chinggis's valued Chinese advisors pointed

out that taxes from a live population were worth more to the conquerors than a depopulated land occupied by horses.

Evidence suggests that Chinggis originally had no intention of invading the Qara-Khitai and Khwarizm empires, which lay to the west of Mongolia. The populations of these empires varied from highly sophisticated urban Persians to illiterate nomads. Most were unhappy with their own rulers. Chinggis conquered the huge Inner Eurasian territory of the Qara-Khitai without much trouble. He then attacked Khwarizm, which included northern Persia, in revenge for its ruler unwisely killing some Mongol envoys. Chinggis announced that “Heaven has granted me all the Earth, from sunrise to sunset” (Juvaini, Qtd. in Ratchnevsky 159). This was a claim to universal empire. He would stick by it for the rest of his life, and his descendants would echo the claim.

From this time on, he consistently considered those opposing him not as enemies but as rebels. That made resistance to Mongol takeover treasonous, meriting wholesale executions as punishment. By the 1240s, it was reported that “The Mongols do not make peace with anyone who has not submitted to them, because of the instruction of Chinggis Khan that they should seek to bring all peoples under their yoke” (John of Plano Carpini, qtd. in Ratchnevsky 159).

There were other reasons for conquest besides religious ideology:

Enemies and continual conquests were needed to keep the Mongol forces united and not slipping into the old ways of tribal squabbling and feuding.

The army was financed with booty.

Followers needed rewards in plunder, lands, and slave captives to keep them loyal.

The Mongol elite’s newly-honed taste for luxuries could not be satisfied from the old nomad economy.

Each conquest put the Mongols in touch with new enemies and new threats.

Chinggis’s ideology of ruling those he conquered was simple. His rule was intended solely to benefit the Mongols. Subject peoples were seen only as sources of plunder, cannon-fodder, forced labor, taxes, and experts in areas where Mongols were ignorant.

Discussion questions

1. Did ideology cause the Mongols to launch their conquests? How? In what sense are you using the word “cause”? On what evidence are you basing your answer?
2. What part did ideology play in the success of Mongol empire-building?
3. Which Mongol beliefs would be an advantage and which would be a disadvantage in governing their multi-ethnic empire? Explain in what ways each of the beliefs you mentioned would be an advantage or a disadvantage.
4. Based on the evidence you have, would you agree with the idea that the Mongols’ success was due to their enemies’ weaknesses rather than to their own strengths? Explain your answer.

Activities

Ask students to:

1. Develop hypotheses (individually, in groups, or as a class) about how the Mongols would rule their empire, based on information provided so far. Ask them to save their hypotheses since they will work with them again later.
2. Compare the Mongols' career of conquest, and their ideology of conquest, with that of the European Crusaders.

Assessment

1. What advantages and what disadvantages did the Mongols have in their career of world conquest?
2. What contributed most to their conquering success? Explain the reasons for your answer.