

The Mongols: Definition, History & Conquest

Who are the Mongols? In this lesson we will look at the origins of the Mongols, the early life of Genghis Khan, their very first conquests, and examine what made them the most feared warriors of the 13th century.

Who Were the Mongols?

The Mongols were one of many nomadic groups who lived in the vast open grassland planes of Eurasia: **the Steppe**. The Mongols (and most other nomads) frequently fought amongst each other for power and rarely unified under a single leader. Mongol society emphasized hunting, horseback riding, and archery as skills that all successful people (women included) needed to master. Culturally, Mongols absorbed behaviors and language from other steppe tribes and their larger, settled neighbors (most notably the Chinese and the Koreans to the south and southeast.) The Mongols were respected for their incredible ferocity in battle and their incredible ability to survive on little to no supplies.



A Chinese Portrayal of a Mongol Horse Archer

History of the Mongols under Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan was born around 1162 CE and was largely responsible for the Mongols' near world-conquest. He grew up on the harsh steppe and witnessed many of his close family members die or get kidnapped. His father was poisoned by a neighboring nomadic tribe and Genghis vowed to take his father's place as chieftain of the Mongols and seek his revenge against his father's killers. As he reached adulthood, Genghis quickly became renown among his tribe as a skilled fighter, a shrewd diplomat, and an even better leader.



A Chinese Portrayal of
Genghis Khan

Genghis gained control of his small band of Mongols and waged a war of conquest against the other steppe tribes in order to both bring prestige to his tribe and to avenge his father's death. It was at this time that Genghis recognized the importance of fear. Instead of conquering every tribe one by one, he reasoned, it would be easier to make an example of some of them so that the others would easily submit. When he conquered a neighboring Tartar tribe, for example, he forced the tribe's ruler to watch as he pushed all of his friends, family members, and loved ones off of a cliff. As rumors about Genghis's ferocity spread, neighboring tribes were quick to submit before any blood was shed.



Genghis Khan at his Kuraltai

By 1206, Genghis had united all of the tribes. As was customary, the Mongols held a **Kuraltai**, which was a large meeting where all the important tribesmen came together to make important decisions. They had a large discussion

about the fate of the nomadic tribes and almost all of the tribes in the East Asian steppe agreed to submit to Genghis and proclaim him as their Khan, or supreme king. Importantly, there was an implicit assumption that when Genghis was crowned as Khan that he would provide enough spoils in warfare to distribute to all of the others who gave their loyalty to him. To fill his end of the bargain, Genghis looked to his neighbors in the south as a potential solution.

The Mongols at War



Map showing the extent of the Mongol Empire

The Chinese were the most powerful and wealthiest country on the planet in the 1200s. China had the ability to put more soldiers in the field than many other countries had in total population! For a group of less than 70,000 horse archers to conquer such an enormous power without writing, sophisticated siege technology, or a concrete military system like the Chinese had is almost unimaginable. However, Chinese sources were stunned with the speed and efficiency with which the Mongols were able to sweep through their lands. Why were the Mongols such a potent military force? There were a few reasons:

- 1) The Mongols were essentially born on the saddle. Proper Mongolians were taught to ride a horse before they learned how to walk! While other, settled societies had units of advanced cavalry, riding a horse was an activity rather than a way of life to other societies. Mongols lived, worked, ate, and often slept on the horse, giving them a deep connection with their animals that they used to their advantage.

2) The Mongols did not need huge amounts of supplies. The vast majority of armies in the 1200s (and today!) needed supply chains, which are giant columns of cooks, cobblers, blacksmiths, and workers of all kinds to help bolster the army. The Mongol armies didn't need such luxuries. They slept on their horses, carried everything they needed on their persons, and even used their horses as a source of food. The Mongols routinely would make a small, painless cut on the horse's mane, collect the blood that came out, and mix that with milk from the same horse to create an incredibly filling meal on the go (fast food of the 13th century!). These advantages allowed them to be more mobile and strategically flexible than any other contemporary army.

3) The Mongols had superior battle tactics. One of the biggest reasons people from traditional civilizations fought was for glory or honor. To that end, the way that someone fought was just as important as the outcome of the battle. For example, the Chinese and Europeans saw it as dishonorable to retreat during battle, but the Mongols were willing to feign a retreat, convince the enemy to chase after them, and then surround them again before anyone knew what was going on.

4) The Mongols utilized fear like never before. Entire villages would be burned to the ground and skulls stacked high into the sky to send a message to other towns. As the Mongols kept conquering, they found that entire villages would completely capitulate before a single arrow was let loose. Genghis was acutely aware of how important it was to win battles without fighting and in this way he was extraordinarily effective.

5) Genghis had an eye for talent. Genghis was not prideful; when he met someone with useful skills he immediately took them under his wing and made them work for him. For example, the Mongols were initially awful at siege warfare, but after conquering a few towns in China inhabited with siege engineers, Genghis incorporated him into his army and quickly built up a successful force of thousands of the best siege engines of the day.

Lesson Summary

The Mongols one of many nomadic people who lived on the East Asian steppe. Genghis Khan was born into this nomadic lifestyle in 1162CE and had a very difficult upbringing: many of his family and friends were either killed or kidnapped while he was still young. Fueled by passion for revenge, Genghis ruthlessly conquered the other nomadic people who had wronged him in his young age. In 1206, Genghis Khan was officially made ruler over all the steppe nomads at a large gathering of important tribe leaders called a Kurultai. After he unified the nomadic people under the banner of the Mongols, he led his relatively small (<70,000 people) band of warriors to conquer the Northern Chinese, the richest state in the world at the time. The Mongols were so successful because of their excellent horsemanship, lack of supply trains, superior battle tactics, use of fear, and Genghis Khan's superior intellect. These factors combined allowed the Mongols to first conquer the Chinese and then the rest of the known world!