11.8: The Mongol Era

The Mongols greatly expanded into Central Asia during the thirteenth century. There they reunited with the Turkic groups who had been expelled from the Orkhon Steppe over the course of a millennia. The Mongols confronted many Turkic peoples who had radically altered their existence since their days on the plains and adopted a stationary way of life.

At this point in time, forces indigenous to the region shaped the world around it; foreign influence waned as a consequence of nativism. The Mongols created the largest empire in history, as Central Asia externalized the violence of the steppe, yet it was with enormous difficulty that they even united as a people. Perhaps the greatest obstacle for them to overcome was their own divisiveness. Inter-tribal strife was commonplace, but once they united, the Mongols expanded deep into Russia, China, India, and the Middle East.

11.8.1: A New System for Unity

It was Temujin (1206 – 1227), later known as Genghis Khan who brought this fractured people together and developed a method of governance and expansion that lasted long after his death. Born into the aristocratic Borjigin Clan, most likely in 1167, Temujin’s success related to his convictions. Inspired by oral tales of past glory, his personal charisma and sense of fate enabled him to survive a youth of life-threatening privation, eventually bringing the various Mongol tribes together.

With a keen awareness of his own destiny, Temujin was inspired to achieve greatness. He had a clear vision that God predestined him to function as His temporal ruler on Earth and exhibited a desire to claim universal lordship. Through a series of fights, he eventually subjugated local clans in eastern Mongolia. He then expanded his political control of the region through a marriage alliance to Börte Üjin, a member of the Olkhonut Tribe, which maintained friendly relations with Temujin’s Khiyad Tribe. The Merkit Tribe kidnapped his wife not long thereafter. Temujin heroically rescued her from this rival tribe, but she had been held in captivity for eight months and soon gave birth to their first son Juchi, who
suffered from an uncertain parentage. Some historians believe that Temujin acquired the notion of conquering all of the Mongols from his liberation of Börte.

Despite his early successes, Temujin remained greatly outnumbered by his opponents and was forced to retreat to the Heights of Baljuna, located in modern day Manchuria, where he convinced his followers to swear an oath of total allegiance to him who called for them to fight unto death for him. For their unwavering loyalty, he promised his supporters a share in his glory upon their victory. Some Mongol tribes yielded to Temujin by 1204 and agreed to recognize him as their leader, thus paving the way for a period of final unification of the Mongols.

Temujin demanded a high level of commitment from his people, endowing his forces with a coherency and unity of purpose. He also promoted allies based on merit, rather than by the traditional Mongol method of advancement based on position within the tribal hierarchy. His opponents, on the other hand, lacked his force of will and entered into a series of squabbles. Temujin took advantage of their internal fights, emerging victorious by 1206. The culmination of his ascendency took place that year at a Mongol assembly, or khuriltai, which appointed him as the first undisputed ruler of the Mongols, uniting them under the authority of his position. Temujin adopted the name of Genghis Khan, or universal ruler in this context.
Genghis Khan presided over peoples who had experienced near-constant warfare since 1160. Previously, tribal confederations were loose alliances held together under charismatic khagans and punctuated by tribal warfare. He consolidated all of these diverse tribes and reshaped them into a single “nation,” endowing Mongol society with more cohesiveness, a key element to future expansion. He did this by developing a new political order that deviated from tradition.

Restructuring Mongol society into new administrative military units that provided the necessary impetus for expansion, Genghis Khan charged each of his commanders with a tribal unit that was responsible for controlling a particular pasture and fielding soldiers when needed. His system had the added effect of assuaging previous conflicts by assigning the members of one tribe to military detail with other rival tribes, thus emphasizing collective responsibility. By forcing the men from one tribe to stand guard over the pastures of other tribes, he weakened loyalty to ancestral lines and homelands, thereby reinforcing his own leadership.

Genghis Khan represented the ultimate source of justice in his newly-formed state, consolidating his position and making it more authoritarian. By embodying autocracy in the position of the khan, he made the title of khan institutional, not personal, building a new foundation for legitimacy. Previously, tribal leadership rested on charisma. Furthermore, the great khan could not be self-proclaimed but had to be recognized at a khuriltai.

His law, known as Yassa, originated as decrees delivered during war. Yassa remained secret, which allowed Genghis Khan to adapt it to changing circumstances. For example, he later incorporated cultural elements indigenous to Mongol society into the law. He based his code on shamanist principles, and it served as the social and political formula binding all Mongols together. It also strengthened Mongol, rather than clan or tribal identification. It is believed that Genghis Khan himself directed the law, while his stepbrother Shihihutag served as the high judge, and his son Chagatai administered its execution.

11.8.2: Expansion

Genghis Khan encouraged Mongol expansion and the conquest of Central Asia. After subduing inter-tribal warfare, he followed tradition and exported the violence of the steppe. He offered incentives to his soldiers; the spoils of victory went to those who followed him into battle. Genghis Khan received ten percent of the loot and divided the remaining ninety percent between his commanders, who, in turn, distributed their portion amongst their retinue. This plunder also included the inhabitants of all subjugated lands, which resulted in the dramatic depopulation of conquered territory, as the khan received his share of artisans and craftsmen to be sent back to the itinerant Mongol capital.

In 1208, Genghis Khan targeted northern China for pillaging, but he quickly encountered considerable difficulties overcoming well-fortified Chinese municipalities. The Chinese had ringed their principle metropolises with moats and connected these major urban centers to several smaller satellite towns via underground tunnels. The Mongols had attempted to starve these cities into submission, but they lacked the military technology necessary to overcome walls forty-feet high and fifty-feet wide. To counter these challenges, they imported the technology necessary to defeat Chinese cities. Genghis Khan also compensated for a lack of native talent by incorporating foreign engineers into their army. He utilized Arab, Persian, and Chinese experts to solve the problem of defeating Chinese municipalities. Their knowledge of siege warfare enabled them to construct the siege engines capable of subjugating cities.
Adding these new sedentary peoples to the khan’s army inevitably caused problems, for these men hailed from distinctly different cultures and did not interact well with the Mongols. Genghis Khan, therefore, combined the mobility of his forces with the slow, bulky siege engines of the sedentary armies. While he kept his cavalry independent from the foreign engineers, mostly comprised of mercenaries, he blended these two disparate groups on the battlefield to his strategic advantage.

For the Mongols, building an empire proved much easier than maintaining one. The nomads possessed an inherent need to loot and plunder cities, and Genghis Khan took advantage of this innate desire by remaining on campaign. But the Mongols had difficulty understanding settled civilization and did not know how to maintain order in that new and different cultural milieu. Although they were able to instill fear in their enemies and easily forced many cities to capitulate, the Mongols co-opted local officials to ensure that taxes and tribute flowed freely back to their capital.

With his newly-constructed army, Genghis Khan returned to northern China again in 1210 and began a continuous campaign of destruction, primarily directed against the Jin Dynasty (1115 – 1234), an empire ruled by a Jurchen minority, a Tungusic people from Manchuria who would later call themselves the Manchu. In an early battle, the Jin put their Turkic cavalry up front to confront the Mongol horsemen. The Mongols managed to convince the Jin Dynasty’s cavalry to defect to their side. Genghis Khan subsequently advanced on the Jin capital of Zhongdu and entered into a prolonged siege. In November of 1211, the khan withdrew his troops to their winter pastures, only to return again in 1212. Genghis Khan attempted a rash assault of the city. He failed and was wounded in the process. His Mongols had to retreat once again.

Genghis Khan returned a fourth time in March of 1213, this time with the goal of conquering Korea, Manchuria, and all of northern China. Early difficulties campaigning against the Jin Dynasty prompted him to adjust his strategy. By laying waste to all of northern China, he aimed to annihilate their way of life, turning the region into vast pastureland for his herds. The Mongol leader surrounded Zhongdu and starved the city’s inhabitants into submission. He systematically obliterated everything in order to send a message to the inhabitants that it was futile to resist him. He even considered taking the city, brick by brick, and dumping it into the Yellow River. Fortunately for the residents of Zhongdu, a captured Chinese bureaucrat intervened and convinced Genghis Khan that it would be better to “sack” them every year through the collection of tribute. Mongol interest in rebuilding the city began soon thereafter, as Genghis Khan incorporated northern China into his state and opened the region to trade. This campaign represented the first significant addition of
territory to the Mongol Empire.

As this chapter began, it was with the tenacious pursuit of the fugitive Küchlüg in 1216 that originally brought the Mongols into Central Asia. There they aroused the disdain of the local ruler in the area, Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad II. Ruling over a loose confederation of disparate peoples, Ala al-Din Muhammad lacked security in his position as the Khwarazmshah. Even his own mother was in intrigue against him. It was he who provoked the wrath of the Mongols. It all began when Genghis Khan sent a trade caravan, which probably included some spies dressed incognito as merchants, to the frontier post of Otrar, located along the Syr Darya. The shah believed that the trade mission was a mere deception meant to obscure an eminent invasion. Inalchuq, uncle of Ala al-Din Muhammad and governor of Otrar, improvidently convinced the Khwarazmshah to have the entire party executed. An enraged Genghis Khan quickly dispatched another envoy and demanded that the governor of the city be put to death and have his head sent back to Mongolia as proof that Genghis Khan’s wishes were fulfilled. The shah executed this emissary too, a rash decision that precipitated the Mongol onslaught of Central Asia, which resulted in brutal massacres and a drastic depopulation of the region.

Map \(\PageIndex{2}\): Map of the Khwarezmian Empire, 1190-1220 CE Author: Arab League Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Ala al-Din Muhammad prudently fled the area, leaving the citizens of Khwarazmia to defend themselves against the forces of Genghis Khan. A total of five Mongol armies approached the Khwarazm capital of Samarkand from different directions, converging in 1220. The Mongols slayed the inhabitants of the city and constructed pyramid-like edifices out of their severed skulls. In 1221, they seized the city of Urgench and dumped it into the Amu Darya, piece by piece, diverting the course of the waterway. And yet, Khwarazmshah Ala al-Din Muhammad still inexplicably escaped capture and absconded south. Genghis Khan deployed another force of some 30,000 troops under the generals Jebe and Sübedei to track him down and put him to death. The shah eventually sought refuge on an island in Caspian, where he died of pleurisy.

Meanwhile, Jalal al-Din Manguburti, the son of the Khwarazmshah, assembled an army of resistance. Genghis Khan sent his stepbrother Shihihutug to apprehend Jalal, but he escaped to the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. Jalal’s forces managed to defeat the Shihihutugled Mongols on the field of battle at Parwan in the spring of 1221, a rare loss. The Mongols actually respected Jalal for his display of valor and willingness to resist them. Jalal fled to India via the Khyber Pass with his pride intact. The khan headed south himself and defeated Jalal al-Din along the banks of the Indus River. Following their defeat of Jalal, the Mongols descended into India but quickly found the hot and humid climate...
inhospitable; they decided to return to Mongolia, arriving home by 1225. The Central Asia campaign had started as a punitive expedition but in the process had wiped out any type of resistance in the region.

In the interim, Genghis Khan had ordered Jebe and Sübedei to explore and reconnoiter the west. Between 1221 and 1223 the two most gifted of the khan’s generals traveled towards Russia. In the course of their journey, they defeated the Georgians, Armenians, princes of Rus, and Kipchak Turkic tribes. Then they abruptly returned home. The purpose was not to annex the territory but to gather intelligence, which proved to be important to their campaign against the princes of Rus between 1236 and 1240. Meanwhile, Genghis Khan had died on expedition in southern China in 1227. Upon his death, the Mongols participated in a year of mourning, halting expansion.
11.8.3: Succession

The Mongols were the only steppe tribes whose empire actually expanded upon the death of its founder. In fact, most of the Mongol conquests actually transpired after the passing of Genghis Khan. Unlike previous tribal confederations, it did not implode because Genghis Khan had invented a safe and reliable means of transferring power. He also stabilized Mongol society and made it less fractious, constructing a framework for subsequent generations to follow. To maintain political legitimacy and inherit the throne under this new system, one had to trace their ancestry back to Genghis Khan through his wife Börte and her four sons, Juchi, Chagatai, Ögedei, and Tolui. This concept dramatically limited contenders for the khanate, mitigating future competition for succession. Only they possessed the required Genghis-Khanid legitimacy.
The khan’s plan to transfer power upon his death also fused older steppe traditions with his new vision. He bequeathed to his sons parts of the world yet unconquered, so that they had to win these new areas. This stipulation produced an incentive for his sons to cooperate in order to collect their patrimony. Genghis Khan had divided the four patrimonial ulus, or states, amongst his sons. The four subsequent empires that grew out of these ulus included the Golden Horde, who were the descendants of Juchi and controlled Russia; the Chagatai Khanate, which traced its lineage to Chagatai and governed Central Asia; the Mongol-founded Yuan Dynasty in China, the progeny of Tolui; and the Ilkhanate of Persia, inheritors of the House of Hülegü and also the successors of Tolui.

Prior to his death in 1227, Genghis Khan expressed a desire that his son Ögedei succeed him, a decision that affronted Juchi, his eldest, whose lineage was questioned. Fortunately for the Mongols, Juchi’s death preceded that of his father’s, narrowly averting a potential civil war. A khuriltai in 1229 confirmed the khan’s wishes, and it was under Ögedei that the Mongols realized their destiny of world domination. Between 1230 and 1233, Ögedei’s troops defeated the remnants of the Jin dynasty in central China. Then they focused their attention on Russia, as they had actionable intelligence on the divisions among the Russian principalities dating to a 1223 reconnaissance mission that utterly crushed a coalition of Russian and Kipchak princes. In 1236, Ögedei launched his campaign in the dead of winter and used rivers as frozen ice highways. By end of 1237, they had taken the Black Steppe, Vladimir, and Riazan. It was only some fortuitous flooding that prevented the complete destruction of Novgorod. The Prince of Novgorod was, however, sufficiently impressed by the Mongol onslaught so voluntarily agreed to pay their tribute. The Mongols commenced a
devastating attack on the city of Kiev in December of 1240, culminating in a nine-day siege. They ultimately destroyed the city as retribution for its resistance. The Mongols steamrolled the Hungarians soon thereafter and left the region in ruins en route to Vienna. By December of 1241, their forces were approaching the outskirts of the city. No military power in Europe was capable of withstanding a Mongol attack.

Fortunately for the Viennese, Ögedei died that very same month, and a one year period of mourning ensued. The Mongols were summoned home in order to choose the next great khan. What was supposed to be a quick election turned into a five-year ordeal because Batu, son of Uchun and grandson of Genghis Khan, refused to return to Mongolia for the khuriltai. This founder of the Golden Horde believed that he would not be chosen and knew that his relatives could not officially convene a khuriltai without him, thus preventing the body from proclaiming the next great khan. It was Ögedei’s death and Batu’s independence of thought that saved Europe from Mongol conquest.
The khuriltai finally proclaimed Güyük, eldest son of Ögedei, the next khan in 1246. This was not a legitimate election though because of Batu’s conspicuous absence. Güyük quickly dispatched an army to punish Batu for meddling in the political process of succession, but Batu had already arranged for his cousin’s assassination in 1248. Güyük’s death led to another period of paralysis. A khuriltai eventually nominated Möngke, Tolui’s oldest son, as the next great khan in 1251. Now Möngke had to deal with the problem that Batu presented. He was willing to allow for Batu’s autonomy so long as he recognized Möngke as the legitimate khan. It was at this point that Batu’s horde become the Golden Horde. He adopted the moniker of “golden” because he was asserting his independence.

Batu died in 1256, and his younger brother Berke became the first khan of the Golden Horde to accept Islam. This sudden conversion to Islam caused systemic problems in the Mongol Empire because different parts of the four lines of Genghis Khan would adopt different faiths, resulting in political divisions that aligned with religious divisions. As a Muslim, Berke spurned his Buddhist cousins and established firm links with the Turkic Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, thus making an alliance based on faith with a power outside of the Mongol Empire.

Genghis Khan’s empire had exceeded normal steppe expectations, and, with potential fault lines emerging already, his vision of a politically unified empire was never truly realized. A series of civil wars erupted not long thereafter that fractured the Mongol Empire. First came the Toluid Civil War (1260 – 1264), then the Berke-Hülegü War (1262), and finally the Kaidu-Kublai War (1268 – 1301). These three wars had the combined effect of undermining the great khan’s authority, and the empire ended up breaking apart on along the lines of the patrimonial ulus, with each moving in their own direction. In fact, the successors of Kublai Khan (1260 – 1294), who presided over the Yuan Dynasty in China,
could not even convene a khuriltai to appoint a great khan following his death. By 1294, there was neither fiction nor façade of a unified Mongol Empire. It was the end of a unified political unit.