



THE MONGOLS

Timothy May

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Acknowledgements

This book has been thirty years in the making. Not literally—I write fairly quickly—but the ideas have been percolating in my mind for some time. When Erin T. Dailey approached me about writing a book on the Mongols for the Past Imperfect series, I agreed as long as it was not a straight narrative history. I wanted it to revolve around a question—Why were the Mongols successful? This, of course led to a second question—Why did the Mongol Empire come to an end? Two simple questions that are anything but simple. The first question has been one that has piqued my curiosity since I first became interested in the Mongols. Erin was game and for that I thank him and for all of his help since that initial conversation.

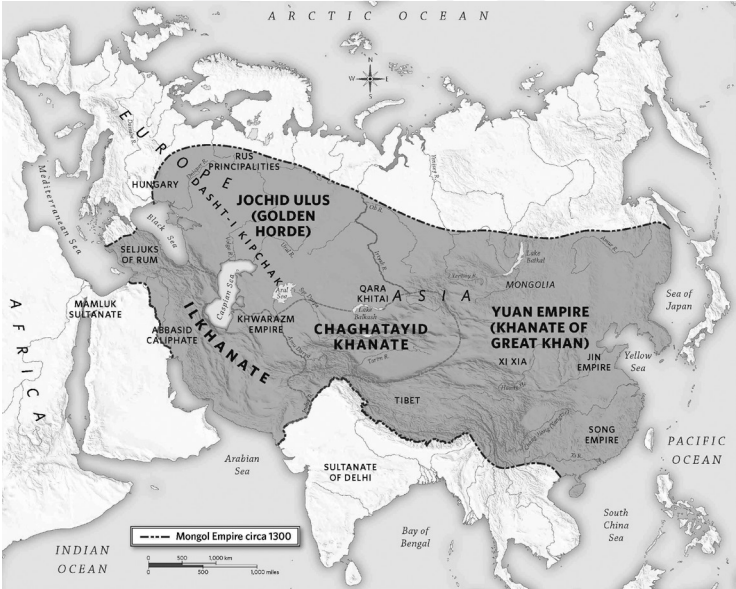
While most of my work has followed other lines, these two questions have always lurked in the background. I make no promise that this book is the final answer—the more I learn about the Mongols, the less I know. I will say, that if nothing else, it should generate some discussion and hopefully among students in a classroom, for whom it is intended.

I would like to thank a number of teachers including Professor Abdul-Karim Rafeq who permitted me to work on the Mongols for an honors thesis at The College of William & Mary and the late Professor Larry W. Moses for his classes and numerous early morning conversations at Indiana University. At the University of Wisconsin, Michael Chamberlain, Anatoly Khazanov, Uli Schamiloglu, and Kemal Karpat pushed me to

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I have kept referencing and citations to the minimum in keeping with the series and the aspiration to make this book as readable as possible.



Introduction

It was a dark and stormy night when the Mongol fleets anchored off the coast of Japan at Hakata Bay and Imari Bay in 1281. With their fleet arranged as a floating fortress, the Mongols waited for a dawn that never came as a *tsunami* struck the Mongol fleet, destroying much of the fleet and scattering the remainder. The failure at Japan marked a tipping point for the Mongols. No longer did their armies march inexorably across Eurasia defeating all who opposed them, creating an empire that stretched from the shores of Korea to Bulgaria. Even after the dissolution of the empire in 1260, each of the successor states would be considered a super-power in modern terminology. Yet, the Mongols soon found themselves engaged in desultory civil wars rather than new conquests. How did it reach this point? Considering that the Mongols began their empire as a rather inconsequential power in the steppes of Mongolia, among a half dozen similar groups, another question comes to mind: Why were the Mongols successful in the first place?

Much of the Mongols' success had to do with the appearance of Temüjin, the man who became Chinggis Khan. Before his appearance on the historical stage, the Mongols were but a minor tribe at a time when the Jin Empire (1125-1234) in northern China and Manchuria defeated an ascending Mongol khanate in the 1160s. Temüjin's father, Yesügei died in 1171, poisoned by Tatars, rivals of the Mongols.¹ With the defeat of the Mongols, the Tatars dominated eastern Mongo-

lia. The Tatars were a powerful confederation bordering the Jin Empire, providing better access to trade and wealth. In the past, confederations like the Tatars rose to regional dominance and sometimes even held sway over all of the Mongolian steppes. Yet, the Tatars were not the only powerful tribe in the Mongolian steppes.

In Central Mongolia, the Kereit held sway. Ruled by Toghril Khan, the Kereit had close ties with the Mongols. Toghril had been *anda* or blood brother to Yesügei and became the suzerain of Temüjin. The Kereit, however, controlled the Orkhon Valley, which historically conveyed legitimacy to previous steppe empires.² Missionaries from the Church of the East, also known as Nestorians, exerted influence upon the Kereit. Although not all of the Kereit were Nestorians, many of the aristocracy converted. Their conversion to a world religion gave them entry to a wider network through connections along the Silk Road as well as relations with other tribes influenced by the Church of the East such as the Önggüd to the south and the Naiman to the west. Additionally, the Kereit maintained ties with regional powers such as Xi Xia to the south and Qara Khitai to the west, as did the Naiman who were former subjects of Qara Khitai.³

Further west and situated on both sides of the Altai Mountains were the Naiman, a Turkic confederation. Through their association with the empire of Qara Khitai, the Naiman also had access to other Nestorians in Central Asia, broadening their cultural vision. Indeed, the Naiman adopted literacy by using the script used by the Uighurs, who were also ruled by Qara Khitai. Unlike the Naiman, the Uighurs were predominantly Buddhists and tended to dwell in the oasis towns of modern Xinjiang. With literacy, contacts to other civilizations and trade routes, the Naiman were positioned to rise in importance. Other smaller tribes such as the Merkit and Önggüd also played a role in the steppes, but the Naiman, Kereit, and Tatars were all better placed to influence history than the Mongols. Yet, larger and well-organized states also existed who were situated to prevent the rise of the Mongols.

Despite being what is today Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Qara Khitai still exerted influence in Mongolia. Established in 1125 by Khitan refugees from the Liao Empire (906–1125) in north China, Manchuria, and Mongolia, Qara Khitai was a steppe empire that ruled a population of pagans, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims. Yelü Dashi (1087–1143), the first Gur-Khan of Qara Khitai, defeated the Seljuq Sultan, Sanjar (r. 1118–1157) in 1141 bringing his borders to the Amu Darya River. The nascent Khwārazmian dynasty (1077–1231), situated south of the Aral Sea, also submitted but remained relatively autonomous. By the thirteenth century, the latter began to assert its own prowess. By not directly challenging the Khitans and using Qara Khitai to secure its northern borders, Khwārazm, ruled by Sultan Muhammad Khwārazmshāh II (1200–1220) expanded into Iran, absorbing Seljuq principalities. He also moved against his primary competition for Iran, the Ghūrid Empire (1186–1206) in Afghanistan. Muhammad even launched an attack against the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) in Baghdad. Although it failed, it demonstrated his reach and that Muhammad would not tolerate a resurgent Caliphate in Iran.

East of Qara Khitai sat the Buddhist kingdom of Xi Xia (1038–1227), a poly-ethnic and polyglot realm of nomads, sedentary Turks, and Han Chinese, but ruled by the Buddhist Tangut, a Tibetan people. Dominating the Gansu corridor, a key artery of the Silk Road, Xi Xia was a wealthy realm that at times paid tribute or warred with the Song Empire to the southeast as well as the Jin Empire. Additionally, they forged relations with the polities in the steppes, the Kereit in particular. It was not unusual for Kereit princes who fell out of favour in the steppes to take refuge there.

The Jin Empire (1125–1234), the most powerful entity in East Asia, ruled an empire consisting of North China (extending south to the Huai River) as well as Manchuria, from which the ruling elite came. These were the Jurchen, a Manchurian people who deposed the Liao Empire in 1125. As their dynastic name (Jin) meant Gold, the steppe tribes referred to the Jin Emperor as the Altan Khan or Golden Ruler. While the Jin did

not extend their rule into the steppes, as did the Liao, they did meddle in steppe affairs, favouring one tribe over another, creating a delicate balancing act to prevent one tribe from dominating and becoming a threat to the Jin. While steppe confederations had threatened northern China for centuries, it seems unlikely that the Jin were overly concerned—cautious, but not afraid. By the thirteenth century, they not only had a large experienced army, but also seventy-five years' experience in manipulating events in the steppes.

In the far western end of the steppes, the Kipchaks had not coalesced into a coherent body that threatened regional, much less global domination. The Kipchaks were Turkic nomads who arrived in the Pontic and Caspian steppes in the twelfth century, possibly as part of a chain reaction caused by the Liao domination of Mongolia. Known variously as Cumans, Polovtsy, Kipchaks, and Qangli (the eastern branch), they all spoke the same northern Turkic dialect. Rather than forming a single dominant state, they existed in four or five confederations. While sedentary societies such as the Rus' and Khwārazmians fought them, they also formed alliances with various tribes and even inter-married. While a medieval peasant might disagree, in the larger scheme of history, the Kipchaks were a nuisance but not a threat. They proved resilient and difficult for anyone to control over the long term.

Thus in the late-twelfth century and early thirteenth century, there was no obvious reason why the Mongols should become a global power with strong states hemming them in. While in hindsight, it is easy to identify their weaknesses, at the time, there was no reason to suspect that the Mongols would be the wildcard that toppled empires. Among the nomads, no single confederation had emerged from Mongolia in three hundred years to threaten the status quo, much less establish an empire. Even the Tatars and Kereit lacked the gravitas and unity to exert dominion over others.

So what made the Mongols successful? Recently, scientists have argued that wet and cool weather facilitated the rise of the Mongol Empire.⁴ The weather was perfect for the steppes, allowing the nomads of Mongolia to flourish. With

ample grass, the flocks and herds of the Mongols thrived, permitting them to expand beyond Mongolia. This hypothesis, however, does not explain how the Mongols dominated Mongolia, as other nomads must have benefited from the lush pastures as well. Again, the Mongols were not a significant power at the time of Temüjin's (the man who became Chinggis Khan) birth. While the lush pastures may have aided their outward expansion, climatic reasons fail to explain their initial success.

There are a number of approaches to study the past. One that has fallen out of favour is the Great Man Theory. In this idea, which originated in the nineteenth century, history is explained through reference to the rise and fall of remarkable individuals who possessed sufficient charisma and ability to influence events in a significant and lasting manner.⁵ The counter-argument is that all people are shaped by their society; thus social conditions influence events. There is no denying this argument, first formally expressed by Herbert Spencer. Yet Spencer's Social Darwinism or "survival of the fittest" does not adequately explain Chinggis Khan's success.⁶ Of course, Herbert Spencer, with his Victorian sensibilities, would not have viewed Chinggis Khan positively in his scheme of progress.⁷ Nonetheless, the Great Man (or Woman) Theory still has application. It took a Great Man to propel the Mongols to the forefront of history. Chinggis Khan, however, was not alone in his actions; his generals and advisors were attracted by his personal charisma and seemingly divine favour. There were a number of individuals on the steppe who had similar opportunities to Chinggis Khan, but only he emerged to be remembered as the greatest conqueror in history and the father of Mongolia, while other steppe leaders are only known readily to scholars of the Mongol Empire. Yet we must also restrain our enthusiasm for the Great Man Theory. Monocausal explanations rarely explain anything. While the Great Man Theory helps explain the rise of Chinggis Khan and the early Mongol Empire, it does not necessarily explain the success of the Mongols after Chinggis Khan's death.

Undoubtedly, the military machine Chinggis Khan created assisted in the expansion of the Mongol Empire. Yet, while he initially organized the army as well as introducing new tactics, the military continued to evolve after his death. It is safe to say that the Mongol Empire could not have succeeded without the military. Numerous steppe empires existed prior to the Mongol, but none enjoyed the extent of conquests and the successes that the Mongol military did. While popularly conceived as a mob of horse-archers and sabre-wielding barbarians, the Mongol military was much more complex than this stereotype.⁸

As many empires have learned, however, it is much easier to conquer than to rule. The fact that the Mongols provided stable rule over most of their territories indicates that their governmental style also contributed to their success. In the past, it was thought that the Mongols largely left the actual running of the government to personnel they recruited from their conquered territories, particularly Uighurs, Khitans, and Persians who had a long history of running empires and kingdoms.⁹ Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that this is not true and the Mongols took great interest in administration.¹⁰ Indeed, one could argue that the empire was not just an empire but also a family business of the *altan urugh* or the Golden Kin (the family of Chinggis Khan). Furthermore, the Mongols created a dual system of military and civil administration consisting of Mongol and non-Mongol personnel and techniques. This apparatus, staffed through a system of meritocracy, provided them with the flexibility required to run a trans-continental empire.

While bureaucracies are able to run without a particular idea other than to sustain itself as well as the government which it serves, government ultimately implement policies in order to effect change or to guide it. The Mongols were no different. As their goal was to rule the world as indicated in their ideology, the Mongols also implemented policies to assist in that effort which included creating stability and order to their empire. Two policies in particular helped this aim. The first was the Mongols' policy of religious tolerance.

In an era in which religious driven warfare and discrimination was common, the Mongols' approach was startling to outsiders. Indeed, most had difficulty believing that the Mongols did not prefer one religion over another and most faiths tried to sway them to their particular belief system. The Mongols however remained neutral and favoured none. The second policy that contributed to their success was their promotion of commerce. As former American President Bill Clinton once famously said, "It's the economy, stupid." While the economy does not drive all aspects of a state, it plays an important role in any society. The Mongols instituted policies that assisted the expansion of trade not only within the Mongol Empire but ultimately had long lasting effects even after their demise. Due to their policies, some have given the Mongols credit for the first appearance of globalism. While it may be a stretch to apply a twenty-first century concept to a thirteenth-century empire, like all myths, there is some truth to it. The Mongol court's embracing of commerce helped fund their empire, yet it, along with their religious policy, also triggered other changes, which will be explored in detail later.

The factors listed above all contributed to the Mongol success, but to fully understand how the aspects of the empire contributed to the success of the Mongol Empire they must be examined separately. This examination is all the more important as all of the factors that contributed to their success also contributed to the demise of the empire. As with so many things, we must begin with the rise of Chinggis Khan.

Notes

¹ The dates for the early life of Chinggis Khan are approximate. It is generally agreed that his birth was in 1162, but this is by no means certain. Other possibilities are 1167 or 1155. Thus, the chronology must be adapted according to the birth. We know Temüjin was nine-years old when his father was poisoned.

² Larry W. Moses, "A Theoretical Approach to the Process of Inner Asian Confederation," *Études Mongoles* 5 (1974): 113-22.

³ Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 46.

⁴ Neil Pederson, et al., "Pluvials, Droughts, the Mongol Empire, and Modern Mongolia," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 12 (March 2014), 4375–79.

⁵ E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 67–69.

⁶ Christopher R. Versen, "What's Wrong with a Little Social Darwinism (In Our Historiography)?," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (2009), 406–8.

⁷ Versen, "What's Wrong," 407.

⁸ See Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2007 & 2016).

⁹ David Morgan, *The Mongols*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 94–98; David O. Morgan, "Who Ran the Mongol Empire?," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1982): 124–36.

¹⁰ Morgan, *The Mongols*, 194; David O. Morgan, "Mongol or Persian: The Government of Ilkhanid Iran," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 3 (1996): 62–76.