

Mongols and Japan
World History
Kienast

Mongol Empire

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. 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.

For centuries, the Mongol people had roamed 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. 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.

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. 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 Ilkhans and the Golden Horde, for example, became Muslims. Growing cultural differences among the khanates contributed to the eventual splitting up of the empire. 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.

Japan

During the 400s, the Japanese began to have more and more contact with mainland Asia. They soon came under the influence of Chinese ideas and customs, which they first learned about from Korean travelers. One of the most important influences brought by Korean travelers was Buddhism. In the mid-700s, the Japanese imperial court officially accepted Buddhism in Japan. By the eighth or ninth century, Buddhist ideas and worship had spread through Japanese society. The Japanese adopted the Chinese system of writing.

For a time, Japan even modeled its government on China's. Prince Shotoku planned a strong central government like that of the Tang rulers. He also tried to introduce China's civil-service system. All of these reforms were called the Taika reforms.

In the late 700s, the imperial court moved its capital from Nara to Heian (HAY•ahn), the modern Kyoto. The centralized government was extremely weak, with most of the power being given to local landowners called daimyo. These lords hired samurai to protect their lands, creating a feudal system in Japan. During the late 1100s, Japan's two most powerful clans fought for power. After almost 30 years of war, the Minamoto family emerged victorious. In 1192, the emperor gave a Minamoto leader named Yoritomo the title of shogun, or "supreme general of the emperor's army." In effect, the shogun had the powers of a military dictator.

Eventually the period of the shoguns gave way to a much stronger government around 1600. The government moved to Edo (Tokyo today). Slowly, the old feudal system was abolished and a stronger government emerged.