

The Mongol Empire in World History
AP World History
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An empire arose in the steppes of Mongolia in the thirteenth century that forever changed the map of the world, opened intercontinental trade, spawned new nations, changed the course of leadership in two religions, and impacted history indirectly in a myriad of other ways. At its height, the Mongol Empire was the largest contiguous empire in history, stretching from the Sea of Japan to the Carpathian Mountains. Although its impact on Eurasia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was enormous, the Mongol Empire's influence on the rest of the world—particularly its legacy—should not be ignored.

The formation of the Mongol Empire was a slow and arduous process, beginning with the unification of the Mongol and Turkic tribes that dwelt in the Mongolian steppes. Temüjin (1165-1227) emerged on the steppes as a charismatic leader. Temüjin's talents allowed him to become a major leader among the Mongol tribes.

Temüjin unified the tribes of Mongolia by 1206 into a single supra-tribe known as the Khamag Mongol Ulus or the All Mongol State. In doing so, Temüjin reorganized the social structure by dissolving old tribal lines and regrouping them into an army based on a decimal system (units of 10, 100, and 1000). Furthermore, he instilled a strong sense of discipline into the army. Although he had defeated all of his rivals by 1204, it was not until 1206 that Temüjin's followers recognized him as the sole authority in Mongolia by granting him the title of Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan), meaning Firm, Fierce, or Resolute Ruler.

Mongol power quickly extended beyond Mongolia, as the Mongols conquered Northern China. Although these campaigns began as raids, as their successes increased the Mongols retained the territory they plundered after resistance ceased. Mongol expansion into Central Asia began in 1209, as the Mongols pursued tribal leaders who opposed Chinggis Khan's rise to power in Mongolia and thus constituted a threat to his authority there. With their victories, the Mongols gained new territory. Ultimately, the Mongols found themselves with a large empire, now bordering not only the Chinese states but also the Islamic world in Central Asia.

The army that Chinggis Khan organized was the key to Mongol expansion. It fought and operated in a fashion that other medieval armies did not, or could not, replicate. In essence it operated very much as a modern army does, over multiple fronts and in several corps but in a coordinated effort. Since the Mongols were from the steppe, they knew well how to fight along the Silk Road steppe, making their conquests easier. Also, the Mongols fought in the manner of total war. The only result that mattered was the defeat of enemies through any means necessary, including ruses and trickery. The famous traveler, Marco Polo, observed

In truth they are stout and valiant soldiers, and inured to war. And you perceive that it is just when the enemy sees them run, and imagines that he gained the battle, that he has in reality lost it, for the [Mongols] wheel round in a moment when they judge the right time has come. And after his fashion they have won many a fight.

Ögödei (d.1240-41), Chinggis Khan's second son, ascended the throne in 1230 and quickly resumed operations against the Jin Empire, successfully conquering it in 1234, and establishing a new dynasty of Mongol emperors in China, the Yuan. The Yuan had an enormous impact upon China, even moving the Mongol capital from Chaghadai, in Mongolia, to Khanbaliq, later known as Beijing. Although Chinggis Khan had announced previously that he had been sent as the scourge of God, Ögödei promoted the idea that Heaven (Tengri the sky god) had declared that the Mongols were destined to rule the world. Before invading a region, Mongol envoys delivered correspondence indicating that as Heaven had decreed that the Mongols were to rule the earth, a prince should come to the Mongol court and offer his submission. Any refusal to this request was seen as an act of rebellion not only against the Mongols, but also against the will of Heaven. This process was aided by a multi-ethnic bureaucracy staffed not only by Mongols, but in fact in large part by the educated elites from the sedentary conquered populations such as Chinese, Persians, and Uighurs. Thus the letters were translated and delivered in triplicate—each one being in another language so that there was a high probability that someone at the other court could read the letter. In trade documents, Uighur script was used since the Mongols did not have a language of their own. By using Uighur script, it was likely that trade documents would be read along the Silk Roads since the Uighurs were middlemen.

Ögödei backed his intentions of world domination by sending armies out to multiple fronts. While Ögödei led his army against the Jin, another army conquered Iran, Armenia, and Georgia. Meanwhile, a massive force marched west, conquering the Russian principalities and the Caspian steppes before invading Hungary and Poland. While they did not seek to control Hungary and Poland, the Mongols left both areas devastated before departing, possibly due to Ögödei's death in 1241. Russia, however, continued to be ruled as a region called the “Kipchak” or the “Golden Horde.” Changes upon Russia were significant. Previously the Russia capital was Kiev, but Kiev was destroyed by the Mongols, leading to the rise of a new capital, Moscow.

The Mongols moved against the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad in the 1250's.. The Caliph, nominally the titular leader of Sunni Islam, refused to capitulate but did little to defend the city. The Mongols sacked Baghdad and executed the Caliph, ending the position of Caliph among the Sunnis in 1258.

As rulers, the Mongols were exceptional in many ways. While the empire was patriarchal, women enjoyed more rights than in most other societies of the day. Women could own property and were trusted advisors to male leaders. The empire was also extremely tolerant, with almost no centralized government. The Mongols allowed the different regions of their empire to rule themselves, as long as they were loyal to the khans. They could be brutal if disobeyed (think of what they did to Kiev) but mostly left their citizens alone as long as they were obedient and didn't disrupt trade.

Among the most significant legacies of the Mongols was their concern with trade and their respect for knowledge. From the beginnings of the Mongol Empire, the Mongol Khans fostered trade and sponsored numerous caravans. The very size of the Mongol Empire encouraged the

wider dissemination of goods and ideas throughout Eurasia, as merchants and others could now travel from one end of the empire to another with greater security, guaranteed by the Mongol armies. The Mongols also did not require tribute to be paid, although some societies volunteered tribute to keep the Mongols happy. The Mongols simply believed that the people in their empire would be happy if trade brought extensive wealth the empire. From this perspective, tribute wasn't necessary because people who lived in the empire were unlikely to rebel.

Items and inventions such as mechanical printing, gunpowder, and the blast furnace made their way west from China. Other commodities, such as silk, could be purchased at lower prices as the travel and security costs decreased. Artistic ideas, knowledge of history, geography, and sciences such as astronomy, agricultural knowledge and medicinal ideas also traveled east to west and returned. Mongol rulers, regardless of location, were open to medical treatments according to Islamic, Chinese, Tibetan, Indian, and of course shamanic practice.

To historians, the Mongols represent the pinnacle of trade growth during the period 600 C.E. to 1450 C.E. All of the political and economic factors that led to trade growth in the period can be seen through the rise of the Mongol Empire. Although the initial reasons for Mongol conquests of Eurasia can be argued, there is no doubt that at some point they were motivated by the same economic factor as all other empires: demand for trade goods and desire to control trade routes. The Byzantines, Islamic Caliphates, Tang, Song, and the Mongols all were empires that wanted to control trade routes and empires that promoted trade through building infrastructure (roads, canals, ports), and establishing merchant communities. The Mongols also embraced economic factors that promoted trade such as Arab financial innovations (banks, credit, checks) and Chinese paper money. The Mongols worked with trading organizations such as the Hanseatic League.

The Mongol Empire, in many ways, marked a crossroad in World History. As the largest contiguous Empire in history it united Eurasia in a fashion that has not been repeated. As such, actions within the empire rippled across the rest of Asia and Europe whether through trade, warfare, or religious affairs. Furthermore, as the Mongols ended several previous dynasties and led to the creation of new power centers, the Mongol Empire may be viewed as a catalyst for change from the pre-modern era to the modern era.