

# The Mongol Eurasian Empire 1206–1405: The Greatest Continental State in World History

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*History remembers the Mongols as a pastoral nomadic people from Central Asia who made a significant impression on the world's history. In essence, the Mongol territorial occupation was of a scope and range never equaled as stretching from Central Europe to the Korean Peninsula and from the middle of Siberia to Asia Minor and the Persian Gulf.*

*The Mongols even attempted seaborne military invasions of Japan (in 1273–1274 and 1281) and Java (1292–1293). The Mongol invasion during two centuries (from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century) was, in fact, the last but at the same time most violent, assault on pastoral tribes with its effects being considerable for the world history of the time.*

As a direct consequence of the Mongol military invasion, the political-social organization of a bigger part of Asia followed by East and part of Central Europe was changed. Some human groups were exterminated, some were removed and dispersed, and some of the regions suffered tremendous changes of the ethnic features. It became followed by the fact that both the distribution and influence of the most numerous world religions became tremendously changed.

In addition, the trade and other traffic links between Europe and Asia were broken for a longer time as traveling was not safe.

Nevertheless, from an ethnic viewpoint, the focal outcome of the Mongol invasion in Asia and Europe was the wide dispersal of the tribes of Turkic origin over the region of West Asia.

It had to be said that Mongol native land was, in fact, barren and, therefore, not supporting a large population. The Mongols, actually, had been no numerous people which was the reason why their most prominent leader and unifier, Genghis Khan (real name Temujin,

1162/7–1227) augmented his armies from loyal Turkic tribes.

The name/title *Genghis Khan* means “ruler of all”.

Consequently, soon, the Turkic people outnumbered the native Mongols, and the Turkish language became spread out in Asia with the Mongol armies.

Naturally, the minority of Mongol speakers became absorbed by the Turkic mass and the Mongol language survived only in the original Mongol homeland – Mongolia.

The Turks even before the Mongol conquest were prominent with their Seljuk sultanate of Rum in Asia Minor but by breaking up this sultanate, Mongols cleared the way for the creation and existence of the greatest of the Turkish empires – the Ottoman.

During the Mongol military invasions in Asia and Europe, they faced three religions and their associated cultural products: Islam (both Sunni and Shia), Buddhism, and Christianity (both Catholic and Orthodox).

However, the Mongol attitude towards the three of them was in practice different. The Mongols, actually, professed a traditional shamanism that was embodied in the Law of Genghis Khan (*Yasa*). Nevertheless, they felt the powerful attraction of the new faiths by occupation of the lands around Mongolia which, in fact, have been associated with higher levels of civilization compared to Mongols one.

Islam at first was unfavorable: Baghdad as the administrative Islamic center was both captured and sacked in 1258 and the Islamic caliph was killed.

Nevertheless, the historical destiny was that Islam slowly occupied the souls of the Mongol/Turkic conquerors and a powerful revival began. In fact, this revival was directly connected with the collapse of the Christian religion in Asia in general. Before, the Mongol/Turkic invasion, Christianity in (West) Asia looked very prosperous as Christianity was present throughout Asia but mostly in its western portions.

Buddhism, as well as Islam, emerged from the Mongol/Turkic experience stronger than it entered it. Buddhism had little success westward Altai Mts., however, in the eastern portions of the Asian continent the Mongol dynasty gave Buddhism a superior place within the society of China (in both Chin Empire and Sung Empire).

The early life of Temujin (later Genghis Khan) is covered in the clouds of legend due to the lack of relevant historical sources. As a matter of fact, Mongol-speaking tribes lived for centuries generally within the territory of present-day Mongolia.

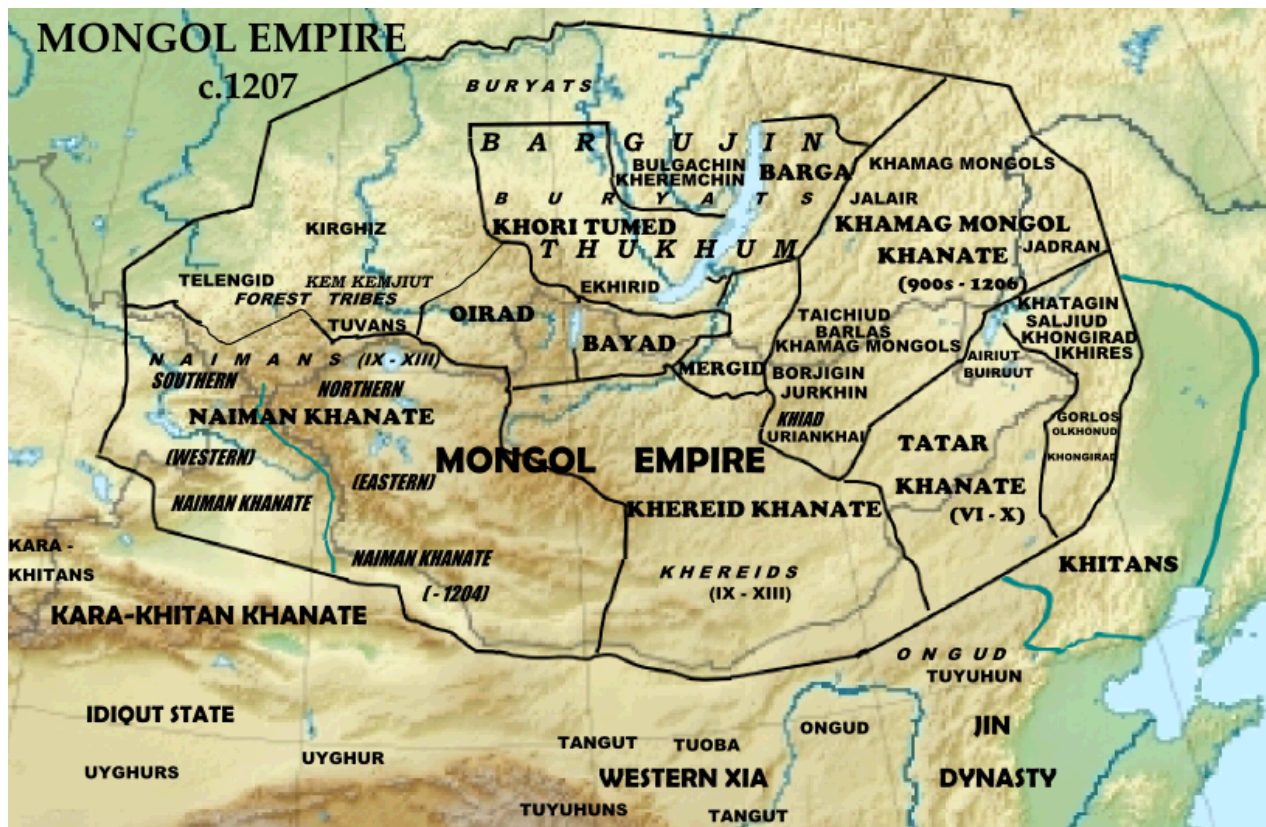
Nonetheless, they need an extraordinary person who would politically and nationally unite all Mongol tribes and furthermore transform them into the biggest land empire in the world history. Temujin, born either in 1162 or 1167 was the son of a Mongol tribal leader.

Up to 1206 he united all the Mongol tribes and established a single unified Mongolia. After the unification of Mongolia, his first political task was to subdue other non-Mongol neighboring tribes and in 1211 to invade the northern Chinese Empire of Chin which was finally conquered in 1234 (after his death) many years after the breaking of the Great Chinese Wall.

The southern Chinese Empire of Chin became totally destroyed. Peking (Khanbalik) was taken by the Mongols in 1215.

However, Temujin turned their army to the west in the military attack on the Kara-Khitai Empire (a state between the Aral Sea and the Uighurs).

The next to be attacked was the Empire of the Khwarizm Shah (from the land between the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea to the Indian Ocean). That became the first Islamic state to be conquered and barbarically plundered by the Mongols. The Mongols did not face any bitter resistance from the peoples of Central Asia and quickly reached the Caucasus Mts. In 1221 (southern) and 1223 (northern).



The tribal polities united by Temüjin to found the Mongol Empire (Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Temujin died in 1227 leaving his empire extended from the Pacific to the Black Sea. However, his military conquests have been prolonged by his successors. Nevertheless, before he died, he made a rule for his succession to the throne of the Mongol Empire. By this provision, Temujin divided the whole empire among his four sons/relatives.

Therefore, Batu (a grandson of Temujin) organized a Mongol military invasion of East and Central Europe.

Consequently, the principalities of North Russia became occupied in a quick (*Blitzkrieg*) winter action of 1237/1238.

The capital of the Kievan Rus' – Kiev, was taken in 1240 (and razed to the ground) ending consequently the first independent state of the East Slavs.

The Mongols of Batu in 1240 started a two-directional military action on Poland and

Hungary. During the assault, the Oder River was passed at Racibórz in Poland and the army of Batu quickly swept northwards down the river valley.

The city of Breslau in German or Wrocław in Polish became bypassed but on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1241 combined German/Polish army was heavily defeated at Liegnitz/Legnica on the very border with the Holy Roman Empire. Only several days later, another Mongol army defeated the Hungarian army at Mohi in North Hungary. However, Europe became saved from further successful Mongol military raids only by the death of the Great Khan Ogedei (December 1241) as disputes over the throne between the successors arose and, therefore, Batu led his European army back to the lower Volga River (that was old Mongol military base) during the winter of 1242/1243. Kublai Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan, succeeded in completing the occupation of China.

Christian Europe was saved from the Mongol military attacks for the reason of the death of Ogedei in 1241, the death of the Great Khan Möngke in 1259 saved the Islamic territories and peoples in Asia. The Mongol Great Khan Möngke decided to extend the boundaries of the Mongol empire to the east and west but in principle against the Chinese Empire of Sung as well as against the Assassins and the Islamic Caliphate up to Egypt. By himself, Möngke took charge of the war against China. The Western military campaign was in the charge of his younger brother, Hülegü. The Order of Assassins was conquered and Baghdad fell in 1258.

After the death of Möngke in 1259, armed conflict took place between rival groups that was causing Hülegü to concentrate his main forces in Trans-Caucasus leaving only weak forces in the Middle East. However, such development became soon known by the Egyptian authority of the Mameluke Empire/Sultanate (existing from 1250 to 1517). In other words, the Mameluke sultan took the opportunity to attack the Mongol army in Palestine (of pagan enemies of the faith). It was a famous battle near Nazareth at Ain Jalut on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1260 in which better armed and more numerous Mameluke army decisively defeated the Mongols. This battle, in fact, became a turning point of the time as the Mongol advance in the West was never again renewed to some serious degree. More important, the legends of their invincibility on the battlefield disappeared forever.





The death of the Mongol leader Möngke (1259) ended the short-lived political unity of the Mongols and their huge empire.

The succession was for the first time decided by armed conflict. Kublai became ultimately successful in the struggle for the throne. The direct authority of succeeding Great Khans was in the eastern portion of the empire.

However, the western territories of the khanates of Chagatai (from Altai Mts. to the River of Amu Darya), Il-Khan (Persia), and Golden Horde (from the River of Yenisei to behind the River of Dnieper) gradually became independent states. Kublai ruling the Empire of the Great Khan stretching from the River of Amur up to the Himalayas Mt. became involved in the stubborn struggle with the southern Chinese Sung Empire up to 1279 and by unsuccessful efforts to conquer Japan in 1281 (due to terrible sea-storm).

Nonetheless, it was obvious that such a vast territory of the Eurasian Mongol Empire could not be administered by only one ruler.

In Persia and China, the Mongol ruling dynasties came to an end in less than a century.

In both khanates of Chagatai and Golden Horde society was of the lesser level of urbanization while the population was partly nomadic. As a matter of direct consequence, on these territories the Mongol rule lasted longer: for instance, on the lands of ex-Kievan Rus', it lasted for more than two centuries. Nonetheless, the time of Tamerlane (Timur, 1336–1405) marked the ultimate end of the Mongol age of conquests.

It has to be especially underlined that the Mongol appearance at the top of the world stage

from 1206 to 1405 was both very sudden but extremely devastating too.

Several old states (kingdoms and empires) disappeared due to the Mongol conquest, destruction, plundering, and extermination of the citizens. The question, nevertheless, arose what was the reason for their quick and successful military success in Eurasia?

The answer is the result of the superior military strategy at the time, an excellent and very mobile cavalry, physical endurance, discipline, as well as coordinated way of military actions. The horsemanship of the Mongol cavalry was the most effective in military history.

It is usually not a very known fact that the Mongols had a military institution that we can call today a modern general staff. Nonetheless, on the other hand, the opposing armies either in Asia or (especially in) East Europe have been in the majority of cases uncoordinated, bulky, and therefore not so maneuverable on the battlefield.

Probably, the military invasion and quick occupation of the Kievan Rus' in 1240 was the best example of the Mongol tactics and methods. As a result, the biggest part of the Kievan Rus' became occupied for only several months during the winter campaign when the Mongol cavalry was moving across the frozen rivers with great speed. Historically, that was the only successful winter military invasion of Russia.

As a matter of fact, the Mongols did not make any innovations concerning the old traditions of living as the nomads of the Central Asian steppes. Simply, the Mongols used both the methods and strategy of the earlier cavalry armies of the steppe nomads. However, under several masterminded military and political leaders (starting with Temujin and finishing with Tamerlan), these have been brought to the top of military efficiency producing the most terrible instrument of war of the time.

Nonetheless, regarding the history of the Mongol Empire from 1206 to 1405 military deeds are best studied and known while, on the other hand, the social or cultural legacy is very difficult to discover and follow due to the lack of relevant sources.

The Mongol lordship was comparatively short and they did not succeed in establishing some distinctive and longtime civilization.

By 1368 the Mongols were expelled from China and in 1372 a Chinese army burned Karakorum.

The Mongol conquests, in fact, are understood as the end of an epoch. Historically it is quite known that city dwellers and peasants have been constantly in danger by attacks from both the fierce riders from the steppes and highlanders from the mountains. However, during the time of the Mongol Empire both gunpowder and firearms were invented that meant no longer the battle was going to be decided by endurance and manpower. Russia and China had suffered very much from nomad aggression by the people from the steppes which was the reason that during the succeeding centuries after the Mongol Empire, both nations firmly executed the policy of the pacification of wild and warmongering steppes' herdsman.

The Mongol Empire before 1259 was the greatest land empire in history that was established by the ruthless and capable cavalry armies of Temujin and his direct successors.

The empire was composed of loosely related nomadic tribesmen who have been living in felt huts (*urts*) and subsisted on meat and fermented mares' milk (koumiss).

The empire stretched from the Korean Peninsula and Java to Poland and from the Tungus' land to the Persian Gulf and Asia Minor. The Mongol armies were experts at siege warfare, learning from the Chinese.

The Byzantine Empire (the East Roman Empire) as well as West Europe became saved from further Mongol invasion only by the death of Ogedei in December 1241 just as his advance guard reached the Adriatic littoral (Dalmatia) while Japan was not invaded just due to *kamikaze* – sacred wind that destroyed the navy of Kublai Khan.

Timur/Tamerlane or Tamburlaine, born Timur Lenk, (in power from 1369 to 1405) was the last great Mongol conqueror ruling his empire from Samarkand. He was leading an army combined by Mongols and several Turkic tribes and conquered a vast land which included Persia, North India, and Syria in the Middle East. Timur defeated the Ottoman army in the 1402 battle near Ankara (Angora), but died during an invasion of China. However, his, paradoxically, destroyed what remained of the Mongol Empire (Khanate of the Golden Horde and Chagatai Khanate).

The Chagatai Khanate ended with the death of Timur while the Khanate of Golden Horde, which became reduced in territory and weakened in power due to his attacks, survived up to 1480 when the power of the Tartars was broken by Ivan III (the Great, 1462–1505).

The word *horde* is derived from the Mongol *ordo* (camp). The word *golden* recalls the splendid of the central camp of the khan Batu. He as the grandson of Genghis Khan invaded 1238 the Kievan Rus' with the army composed of Mongol-Kipchaks. Batu burned Moscow and in 1240 occupied Kiev – the capital of the state. Golden Horde existed from 1242 to 1480 ruled by the Tartars of the Mongol Khanate of the Western Kipchaks. The army of Batu quickly swept through East Europe (including the Balkans) and after this military campaign, Batu founded his camp at Sarai on the Lower Volga River. The Mongol destruction of Kiev led to the rise of Moscow where in the course of time resistance to the Golden Horde started. Nevertheless, Timur defeated the Golden Horde in 1391 which tremendously weakened the Horde and its military power. Consequently, independent khanates emerged in Crimea and Kazan.

Finally, as the last Mongol political inheritance, Timur was an ancestor of the Mogul dynasty in India.

Contemporary Map on Mongolia





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