

The Mongol Empire

The steppes that cover the area from the Black Sea into Central Asia were home to many nomadic tribes during the Middle Ages. These nomadic people lived on these dry grasslands by raising horses, cattle, and sheep. Their homes were tents making them highly mobile allowing them to move their herds to new pasture lands.



The areas in green are the Steppes

The Mongols were one of these tribes. They originated from the country we call Mongolia. They were fierce fighters and masters of horsemanship. Their saddles and stirrups allowed them to shoot their bows and arrows while riding. They could cover long distances in a short time and caught their victims by surprise. Those victims even included other tribes of nomads until the people of the steppes were united under the leadership of the Mongols.



“It is not sufficient I succeed – all others must fail”
Genghis Khan

The chief of the Mongols had a son who would become known as Genghis Khan (Great Ruler). Born in 1162, he was 13 years old when his father died. As he grew older, he outwitted the other tribal leaders and became the ruler of the Mongols. By 1206, Genghis became the undisputed ruler of the steppes. He ruled his army through strict discipline and complete loyalty. By 1219 he had captured most of Central Asia including the trading cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. The Mongols then moved into the steppes of Russia and through the Himalayan Mountains into India.

His descendants expanded the empire even further, advancing to such far-off places as Poland, Vietnam, Syria and Korea. At their peak, the Mongols controlled between 11 and 12 million contiguous square miles, an area about the size of Africa. Many people were slaughtered in the course of Genghis Khan's invasions, but he also granted religious freedom to his subjects, abolished torture, encouraged trade and created the first international postal system. Genghis Khan died in 1227 during a military campaign against the Chinese kingdom of Xi Xia. His final resting place remains unknown.

In 1227, after Genghis Khan had died, his empire was divided into four khanates that would be ruled by his sons and grandsons. These were the Khanate of the Golden Horde, in Russia and Eastern Europe; the Khanate of Ilkhans (Ilkhanate) in the Middle East; the Chagatai (Jagatai) Khanate in Central Asia; and the Khanate of the Great Khan in Mongolia, China and East Asia.



In 1229, Genghis Khan's third son Ogedei became his successor. The new great khan continued to expand the Mongol empire in every direction, and also established a new capital city at Karakorum, Mongolia. They expanded into East Asia, into northern China. Ogedei's hordes moved into Eastern Europe, conquering the city-states and principalities of Rus (now in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus), including the major city of Kiev. The Mongols broke down the walls of the city with a battering ram and launched a fierce attack. Kiev fell in five days and a massive slaughter of the people took place.

Further south, the Mongols took Persia, Georgia and Armenia by 1240. In 1241, Ogedei Khan died, bringing to a temporary halt the Mongols' momentum in their conquests of Europe and the Middle East. Batu Khan, the uncle of Ogedei took over. The Russians called the Mongols the "Golden Horde". **Gold** was the color of Batu's tent, **Horde** is the Mongol word for camp. The Mongols allowed the Russian princes rule their states as long as they continued to pay "**tributes**" of money and give laborers to the Mongol rulers. The princes collected more money than the Mongols required from their people, so they became very wealthy under Mongol rule.



A Russian prince inside the Gold Tent of Batu Khan

The Mongols would never restart their expansionary drive in the west, though East Asia was a different matter. This time, the Mongol Empire descended into a civil war before another of Genghis Khan's grandsons, Kublai Khan, managed to take power. In 1271, the great khan named himself the founder of the Yuan Dynasty in China, and moved in earnest to finally conquer the Song Dynasty. The last Song emperor surrendered in 1276, marking the Mongol victory over all of China. Korea also was forced to pay tribute to the Yuan.

Kublai Khan left the western portion of his realm to the rule of his relatives, concentrating on expansion in East Asia. He forced Burma, Annam (northern Vietnam), Champa (southern Vietnam) and the Sakhalin Peninsula into tributary relationships with Yuan China. However, his expensive invasions of Japan (1274 and 1281) and of Java, Indonesia, in 1293 were complete failures. It is believed that the Mongols could not defeat the Japanese samurai soldiers who defeated the first invasion forces. Then, the second invasion was believed to have been destroyed by a tsunami.



Kublai Khan

After the Mongols conquered many lands and created their enormous empire there came a peaceful time called the **Pax Mongolica**. Pax Mongolica, also known as the Mongol Peace, was a period of time where peace, stability, economic growth, cultural diffusion and development were happening around the Mongol's occupied territories. Pax Mongolica was a time of spreading different ideas and a great cultural expansion around Europe and Asia. Pax Mongolica enabled a widespread global communication with the different nations ruled by the Mongols. This led different cultures to blend with each other and combine different philosophies. One example of this blend was the adaptation of Mongol culture to Islam. The Mongols promoted peace and stability during the Pax Mongolica and wanted an empire that would prosper in trading.

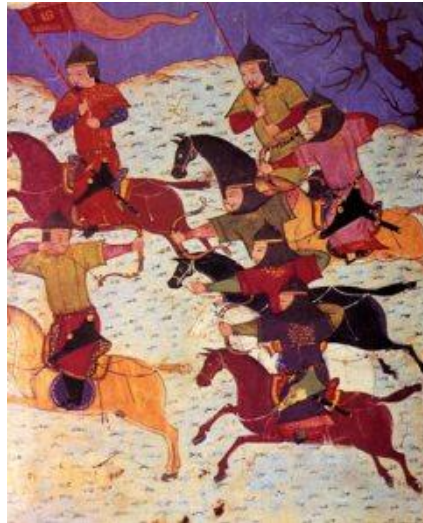
The Mongols created networks of trade routes all around Asia and Europe. At the peak of their power the Mongols controlled what is now present day Hungary all the way to China. Due to the enormous territory the Mongols occupied and the importance of trade, they had to put a massive effort to protect their trade routes. They kept their trade routes safe for each occupied area, so the merchants and travelers were guarded during their expeditions. In addition to establishing a world-wide trade system, the Mongols also developed a postal system. It was called the Yam. The Yam was a way of communicating between the different parts of the Mongolian empire. How the Yam worked was it was a series of stations far part from each other where a messenger would travel from station to station and pass along his message.



The trade routes controlled during Pax Mongolica

Pax Mongolica gave many contributions to the modern world by sparking trade within the continent of Asia and with the new inventions and technologies that they created. The **Silk Road** became an integral part of Pax Mongolica and due to taxes on goods traded between the cities along its route, the Mongol Empire became very wealthy.

Kublai Khan died in 1294, and the Yuan Empire was passed down to Temur Khan, Kublai's grandson. He was probably the most brutal of all of the Mongol leaders but over time the Mongol rule was coming to an end. Several civil wars broke out between the Hordes and the conquered people began to regain control of their lands back from the Mongols.



Mongol cavalry (horsemen)

In 1335, the Mongols lost control of Persia. The **Black Death** swept across Central Asia and along Mongol trade routes, wiping out entire cities. Russian princes united to defeat the Mongol invaders. By 1369, the Golden Horde had lost Belarus and Ukraine in the west. Most significant of all, in 1368, the Yuan Dynasty lost power in China, overthrown by the ethnic-Han Chinese Ming Dynasty. Genghis Khan's descendants continued to rule in Mongolia itself until 1635, when they were defeated by the Manchus. However, their great realm, the world's largest contiguous land empire, fell apart in the fourteenth century after less than 150 years in existence.

