

Week 20 The World Empire of the Mongols

Historical Overview

The Song, as we've seen, emerged in a multi-state world. Its power no longer reached Central Asia, as had that of the Tang, and closer to home, powerful regimes had entrenched themselves firmly within the former northern territories of the Tang. These regimes, those of the Khitan people in the Northeast, with the Liao Dynasty, and the Tangut people in the Northwest, who would eventually form the Western Xia, had established sophisticated systems of multiethnic administration and power projection.

But while this northern influence on China would persist and expand in the period that we are about to study, the actors would change. Early in the 12th century, the Jurchens, a nomadic people of the far Northeast, established the Jin dynasty and proceeded to conquer the Liao to their west, and then in 1126, to attack the Song, taking the Song capital of Kaifeng and most of northern China. The result is a division in Song history between the Northern Song and the Southern Song.

The Song reconstitutes itself at Hangzhou, and by 1142, signs a peace treaty with the Jin. But even greater change was still to come from this northern border. Out of a resource crisis in the northern steppe at the end of the 12th century and in a world of continental trade and changing central Asian empires, Ghengis Khan unified the tribes of the steppe under a single ruler, and with them created an army that would cross into central Asia and then turn back and conquer Western Xia and Jin. 40 years later, the Mongols would succeed in conquering the Song in the south. The Mongols would create a world empire of unprecedented proportions. How did this happen and what are the effects? We'll see in this mini-course.

Section 1: Introduction to the Northern Border

I've referred repeatedly to the peoples of the North-- the nomadic peoples, the pastoral peoples, the people outside of what we might call China Proper, although now they've been incorporated into the People's Republic of China and were in fact incorporated before 1949 as well, many of them. Today we really need to take this topic head-on, with certainly the most successful group of nomads-- the Mongols.

The northern border of Chinese dynasties was a border in many senses. It was, in the first instance, a strategic border, a border which marked a zone-- a zone that moved, by the way-- a zone in which peoples fought, the armies of the South against the cavalries of the North. Eventually, that border, as a strategic border, would be rivaled by the seacoast, particularly the southeastern coast. But at this point in Chinese history, the 12th, 13th century, it is the primary strategic border.

It was also a political border between states, between the Song state, the Jin state of the Jurchens, the Xia state of the Tanguts. And, at times, this border moved. There was a frontier zone, and forts might advance and might be withdrawn. It was also, as a political border that had to be defended, an expensive project, a drain on the Northern economy. We think today of that border as the Great Wall, but, in fact, rarely was the Great Wall the actual border between peoples, between states.

Finally, we should think of this as a cultural border and an economic border. In this case, the kind of border we're talking about is the border between the steppe, the grasslands, the arid grasslands of the North, and the sown, the agricultural farmland of the South.

The contrast between steppe and sown could be thought of in lots of ways: the northern part, the steppe, the desert; and then, further north, the forests of the Far North; the sown, farming, dryland farming in the North, rice farming, wetland farming in the South.

Nomads, who rode on horse and ate sheep. Sedentary farmers used oxen to plow and ate chicken and pigs.

Nomads, who lived in yurts, tents to pack up and take with them as they moved-- and still today we find yurts in Mongolia. And the farmers in the South, the sedentary farmers living in houses, in villages.

Northerners, the northern peoples, living as tribes, organized into tribes. The Southerners, the land of the sedentary, the land of the sown, organized into villages-- tax-paying villages.

Confederations of clans among the nomadic peoples, the pastoralists. Administrative hierarchies of provinces, prefectures, counties, cities in the South.

The North, no permanent government. Confederations, sometimes-- sometimes single rule, centralized rule. But, by and large, a permanent centralized government was not the norm. And in the South, permanent, centralized government bureaucracy was the norm.

The rulers of the North are not called "emperors"-- they were called "khans." The rulers of the South, "emperors." So this border between North and South, between, in this case, the nomadic North and the sown South, between the steppe and the sown, was a border of many different kinds, but fundamentally it would be a border between two different ways of life.

Who are these nomads, these pastoral people? From the perspective of the farmers, the sedentary people of the South, the agriculturalists of the South, they're very different. They live with their flocks, they move with the seasons. When times are hard, they can retreat to the North. And to some extent we think of the forest peoples-- the hunter-gatherer peoples of the more distant north and the north side of the Gobi Desert for example-- as a different kind of northern people. But perhaps, in fact, the nomads and the hunter-gatherers of the forests were somewhat interchangeable-- that nomads, when times got hard, went to the forests, forest people when times got better, might put together horses and go south.

Let's look at the map to see the configuration of powers in the 12th century. To the south, we have Song. Song had lost control over the North China Plain-- the rich, prosperous, densely-populated North China Plain-- to an invasion by the Jurchens in the 1120s, who would establish the Jin Dynasty. The Tanguts had established their Xi Xia dynasty, or Xia dynasty, in the 1030s. Now the Song had had a northern border going north of the North China Plain, but sometimes south of the Great Wall, to defend it against the peoples to the north.

Now the Jurchen's Jin Dynasty and the Tanguts had their own northern borders to defend against these peoples here to the north-- the Tatars, the Mongols, and so on. In fact, what we're looking at is an area that we today call "Mongolia," but which in the 12th century was still composed of different nomadic peoples-- The Tatars, the Mongols-- our main concern today-- but, at that point, not the most powerful of tribes by any means-- the Onnguts, the Merkits, the Keraites, the Naimans.

In the 12th century the Mongols would have to take on the Tatars and all the other peoples of the steppe and conquer them one by one. It would then move against the Tanguts, then against the Jurchens. Ultimately, much later, after conquering the rest of Central Asia and invading the West, it would conquer Song.

Today, we look at this area and call it "Mongolia," and we call all the peoples who live here "Mongols." The peoples of the Northeast would be the Manchus-- we'll talk about that later-- the Jurchens at this point in time. But the people of the North, with Mongolia today, Inner Mongolia, are the Mongols, as one tribe, so to speak.

But, in fact, in the 12th century, the Mongols were a single tribe among many, many tribes, located on the eastern part of the steppe, up by the forest. And they were a marginal people at best. They were not one of

the central, strong tribes among the pastoralists, and that there were other northern peoples as well-- the Tanguts and the Jurchens who had established empires with emperors who were also, at the same time, khans.

But in the 12th century these tribes were united under a single khan and, with the army that resulted, that leader went out to conquer most of the known world. That leader, Ghengis Khan, began his life with the name Temüjin, will be the subject of our story today.

Section 2: The Saga of Temüjin (1162-1227CE)

1. Stolen Beginnings and Early Setbacks

We turn now to the saga of Temüjin, a person we call Chingghis Khan, or some call Genghis Khan, is a title he received later in life. So let's begin with his birth, the very beginning, when he came to be known by his childhood name of Temüjin.

He was born at a time-- 1162 it is thought-- no one is quite sure-- when that area we call Mongolia today was fractured, little unity, warring tribes. His father, Yesüge, was a Khamag Mongol, and in fact, he was the third son of his father. His father had already had one wife before he took another. And his father, Yesüge, was the chief of a sub-tribe, the Kiyad sub-tribe.

But his father had a special clan. He was an ally of Toghrul. Toghrul was the khan of the Keraits in central Mongolia, a very powerful figure. And his father, Yesüge, had been an ally of Toghrul in war and he had become the Anda of Toghrul. "Anda" is a Mongolian term that means "as if born from the same womb." It's what in English we often call "a blood brother." Not a real blood brother, but one with whom one is intimately bound. He was the oldest son of his mother Hoelun, who was an Onggirat Mongol.

Now the story about how his father found his mother goes like this. It was his second wife. One day, his father was out hunting with a party, and in the distance he saw a group of Merkits, another tribe, taking home a new wife. And he wanted her-- or perhaps it was the cart and horse that they had that he wanted-- and he gave chase. Hoelun, the new wife of the Merkit, told her party to flee and leave her behind. And they fled to save themselves, and she was taken by Yesüge and became his wife and was faithful. Temüjin was her first-born.

There's a conclusion we can draw from this. In the world of the nomads, getting a wife was important, but it was difficult. Kidnapping was common, as happened here, and enduring hostilities would result, as we'll see later.

The second story has to do, in the saga of Temüjin, with arranging a marriage, which would have happened when he was about nine years old. His father took him to the clan, the tribe, of his mother, Hoelun-- the Onggirats-- to seek a wife. And arrangements were made with a chief of one of the sub-tribes that his daughter would marry Temüjin. And as part of the deal, Temüjin was told that he should live with his family and serve his future father-in-law until he came of age to be married at 12 or 13.

The father departs, leaving Temüjin behind, but on the way he runs into a party of Tatars, another tribe. And, for reasons unclear, the Tatar poison and kill Yesüge, the father.

But, with his dying breath, Yesüge tells one of his companions to ride off to warn his son that he must leave the encampment of the Onggirat immediately and return home without telling his future father-in-law anything.

Why was that? In the steppe-- and perhaps not only in the steppe-- if there was no powerful party to back up and enforce an agreement, the agreement would not necessarily stand. And Temüjin was likely to be enslaved, not given a wife, but simply enslaved, by the man who had promised to be his father-in-law.

At this point, Temüjin is back home, nine years old, two older brothers, younger brothers. His father is gone, their family is leaderless. And the most powerful person in the sub-tribe who has claimed now the leadership of the sub-tribe, decides that he doesn't want to be involved in supporting a widow who has two half-sons, four sons of her own, a daughter. And the family is not invited to the communal feast. And the next day, when the group departs, they don't let them go with them. They leave them behind.

Temüjin thus begins without resources. The family moves north to hunt and to fish, to gather in the forests. No resources, in the middle of nowhere, without any power at all.

2. The Makings of A Leader

How, then, does he establish himself as a leader of his family? Well, it is not accepted right away that he will be the leader of his family. To be a leader involves struggle. You win through struggle, through vanquishing others. It's not as if by being the oldest son of Hoelun he has the right to become the leader of his family.

There's a story that's told of one of his half brothers who is so much stronger than him that when they went out fishing, his brother would take away the fish. When they went out to shoot birds, the half brother would take away the bird. And Temüjin went to complain to his mother, and his mother ignored him.

And so Temüjin arranged with his four brothers to sneak up behind the half brother and to shoot him dead. At that point, he became the leader of his family. In the steppe, one had to fight for leadership every step of the way. But now, he had something he could work with.

So now Temüjin had four brothers, himself, they had their horses. They could try to do something. But the leader of the sub tribe who deserted them saw him as a threat, we are told, and came back and captured him. Eventually, Temüjin would escape from that and go home. But in the meantime, another group had seen his family had nine horses, and attacked the family and rode off with eight. Temüjin gets home; he takes that one remaining horse and goes to chase those who had stolen their horses. Along the way, he meets another young man, Jamukha of the Jadaran tribe. And he joins him as he goes to recover the stolen horses for his family.

Together, they succeed. Jamukha will appear at a number of points throughout Temüjin's life, not always in a way that serves his purposes. But one of the things we're seeing again is that to be a leader is not automatic security. It involves constant effort. But it's precisely because Temüjin is willing to defend the interests of his dependents, to take care of them, to fight for them, that he gains adherents. And people start to flock to him.

Well, now he wants to go and reclaim his wife. He's old enough now. The wife had been promised to him. And he goes to demand that she be given to him and in some sense that he be recognized as the legitimate leader of this family. He succeeds. And the Onggirat give him a coat of black sables, a fur coat of black sable, a very valuable coat meant for his mother. They were her kin, after all.

But he doesn't bring the coat to his mother. He takes the coat to Toghrol, the khan of the Keriats, of the powerful Keriats, and says, I am my father's son. I offer you this gift so that you will recognize me as my father's son and as the leader of my family and of my sub-tribe. Toghrol, after all, was his father's anda, his blood brother. I want, he says, to be recognized as your vassal. So now he can claim to be a leader, a

legitimate leader, recognized by a more powerful person. And that brings more adherence, more dependence, coming into his camp.

3. Becoming Chinggis Khan

But his travails were not over. The Merkits, from whom his father Yesüge had stolen his mother Hoelun, had waited, apparently, for Temüjin to have a wife of his own to go and steal her from him. And they attack his camp. He and the other men flee, and Borte, his wife, is taken by the Merkits. This is a justification for war. He goes to Toghrol, khan of the Keriats, and says, let us now fight. We are allies. Let us attack the Merkits.

Jamukha joins the fight. 20,000 men on horse from Toghrol, 20,000 from Jamukha, and they defeat the Merkits and he gets his Borte back, who is now pregnant. So after the victory over the Merkits, done with these 40,000 troops from his allies, Chinggis is recognized as a khan, as a legitimate ruler, for at least some area of territory. So it would be in 1186, when he was possibly around 25 years old.

But there's a problem. The troops that came together for this battle disperse right afterwards. It's very hard to hold nomads together in large numbers in a single area within a steppe. And communication, of course, requires communication of messages by horse. So what happens then is that they simply disappear. They melt away. He has no army of his own at this point.

But as a khan, as one among many, he can still fight others for leadership. And he aims to take control over the eastern steppe, to establish his supremacy in the eastern steppe. But now, his own anda, Jamukha, turns against him. And with 30,000 troops of his own, Jamukha vanquishes Temüjin, who has to flee. How is he going to survive?

Well, he flees to the Jin dynasty, to the Jurchens' Jin dynasty, which had its capital in Beijing, in modern day Beijing. And the Jin actually employs various tribes on its northern flank-- even though it's pastoral, nomadic people-- to defend itself against tribes further out. And in this case, the Jurchens decide that they want him to help them defend their territory against the Tatars.

Once again, Temüjin goes to Toghrol, the khan of Keriats, and organizes a force together to attack the Tartars and to vanquish them. He fights, in this case, once again against Jamukha. But in this case, he wins. His goal is total victory. Takes the booty as well, of course, and divides that among his troops. But he's anxious for total victory. And as part of vanquishing the Tartars, he executes every male above the height of the axle on a wagon wheel. The women and children are distributed as slaves to his Mongols. He's now Khan of the East.

But in the middle of the Keriats and further west of the Naimans, the Jurchens hadn't seen him as the major force. From their perspective, it was Toghrol and his armies that had vanquished the Tartars. But in Chinggis' eyes, in Temüjin's eyes, he was the true victor. And he goes to Toghrol-- who the Jurchens, as reward, had named the Ong Khan, the King Khan-- and proposes that they have an alliance through marriage, and that Toghrol should treat Temüjin as his adopted son, and that Temüjin's family Toghrol's real son's family should exchange women. Toghrol and his son reject this out of hand.

The Mongols are still, from the perspective of many others, the scum of the steppes. There is a joke that went around among the Naimans that a Mongol lass could be taught to be a milk maid, but first you'd have to teach her to wash her hands. This hostility against Temüjin leads many of his followers to depart, and he's reduced to 2,600 people. And yet, with a surprise attack, he destroys the main force of the Keriats-- the surprise attack basically organized by setting out a great number of campfires, which looked like they were surrounded by people, but were in fact not.

The Keriats are dissolved as a people and distributed to Mongols as slaves. He then turns to the western steppe, to the Naimans, and again, he uses the trick of campfires at night. Jamukha had joined the Naimans now in a last attempt to block Chinggis Khan's rise, to block Temüjin's rise. Jamukha is betrayed by some of his own men, and he is defeated.

He arrives, defeated in Temüjin's camp and he asks a favor-- he asks that those who betrayed him be executed first, and they are. And then Jamukha is torn from limb to limb. In 1206, another great meeting is held of all those nomadic tribes of the North, and they agree and proclaim that Temüjin will now be the one great khan, and he receives the title Chinggis Khan. All the people of Mongolia have now recognized one leader, and they are united in one force.

4. Challenges and Consolidation I: The Church-State Problem

But the challenges for Chinggis Khan, as we'll now call him, are not over. The first challenge is what might be called the church-state problem. The Mongols believed in heaven as something that could give gifts to people on earth. Irrevocable gifts-- it didn't matter what your virtue was, once heaven decided you could have something and that gift was confirmed, then it was yours to have.

And it was confirmed by shamans, by people who could work as spirit mediums to find the evil spirits in a body that caused sickness, for example, who could communicate with heaven. And there was one family of spirit mediums that had been close to Chinggis Khan all during his rise. They had confirmed in 1186 that Chinggis did have heaven's gift and that in 1206 when he was proclaimed Chinggis Khan, they confirmed it again.

But now they start to make trouble. They make trouble-- at first, his family had seven sons, seven strapping young sons. They beat up Chinggis' brother Hasar. Hasar was thought to be the strongest of all the boys, the most powerful, invincible in a fight. They tell Chinggis that in fact, heaven's gift had not been given to him alone. One of his other brothers had heaven's gift, as well. Chinggis starts to suspect his brother.

His mother protests. He has his brother arrested. He's about to execute him. His mother protests, and the famous story in which she hands each of the sons an arrow and says, break the arrow. And they all break the arrow. Then she takes a packet of arrows together and gives him the packet, and says, now break the packet. And they can't. The point being, of course, that united we stand and survive, divided we fall.

The shaman family continues to create problems. The one brother who's fallen under suspicion, his dependents start to leave and they start to switch over to the shamans' family's camp across the way. Chinggis' other brother goes to the shaman's to demand dependence be returned. The shamans take him off his horse and make him walk back to his own camp. At this point, Chinggis has had enough. And he tells his brothers, do as you will.

The next time the shaman family comes for a meeting at Chinggis' yurt, his brothers take the oldest son of the shaman outside and they break his back and kill him. And that was how Chinggis solved his church-state problem. Never again would a religious force intervene between Chinggis and his connection to heaven and his claim to authority.

5. Challenges and Consolidation II: From Tribe to Government

Having resolved their church-state problems, Mongols faced another question-- how do you get from being a tribe to being a government? They were illiterate. The first contact they have with literate people would have been their contact with the Jurchens. But then, as they moved towards Central Asia, they meet the Uighurs. And the Uighurs, who were literate, become a source of literacy and writing for them. In fact, their written Mongolian script comes from Uighur rather than from Chinese.

Genghis orders his sons to learn how to read, and he sees that documents can be written down and kept, which means that his rule can be written down. And thus, they go from ad hoc rules to laws, and eventually, there will be a legal code.

Another problem. How do they regulate armed force? How do you take independent warriors, who are loyal for the moment, and turn them into an army? He brings in a system-- which is well known in steppe society because there had been earlier nomadic confederations, as well-- a decimal system of groups of 10, 100, 1,000, 10,000. He regroups the Mongols into units, military units, and allows no shifting back and forth.

He appoints an officer corps based not on nobility, but on competence, on merit. The army that he creates-- the Mongols' army, versus the armies of the conquered peoples-- are probably 100,000 people in 1200, 130,000 people at its height. One byproduct of organizing the Mongols into these armies, which were not based on tribes, was that within a century, the multiple tribes of Mongolia disappeared. All the nomads begin to think of themselves as Mongols. Then we get to the problem, of course, of how to hold it all together.

6. Becoming An Empire: The Campaigns of Chinggis Khan

So now Chinggis is the ruler of the steppe peoples of the nomads. He is supreme, unrivaled. Shamans are no threat to him. Where to turn next? And he looks south and southwest, southeast to the Jin dynasty, the territory of the Jurchen's Jin dynasty. In the years 1211 through 1214, he launches attacks against the Jin, against the Jurchens. They had their greatest capital in modern day Beijing and their wealth came from the farming, the agricultural society of north China, the taxpaying society of north China.

The Mongols can maraud and plunder the countryside, but Beijing is a great walled city and they cannot conquer Beijing. They do not understand siege tactics. Moreover, the Yellow River, which now flows south of the Shandong peninsula-- it had begun to flow south in the year 1194. They cannot cross the Yellow River, so there's a natural limit on where they can go.

The Jurchens sue for peace, but then they retreat south. They move their capital to Kaifeng, which had been the capital of the northern Song, before the Song had been driven out by the Jurchens. So now they've lost their north-- what would be modern day Manchuria-- and they are the possessors of the North China Plain. The Mongols will not forgive them for this. The Mongols thought that they had accepted Mongol overlordship. It is clear they had not.

What next? They've done what they could with Jurchen territory-- collected a great deal of booty. They send a great caravan into Central Asia to an area that had once been territory of the Tang dynasty or protectorates of the Tang dynasty. At that time, a tremendously rich area under the control of the Khwarazm Shah, Mohammad II, who had in fact established a new empire, having gone through a series of wars himself in Central Asia. Today we look at Central Asia and we don't see great wealth, but in those days the rich valley of Fergana, the great cities of Samarqand, of Herat, of Bukhara-- these were centers of the eastern Islamic world. They had universities, great mosques, streets that were paved, walls around the cities, agricultural hinterlands that supplied the cities with produce, with vast irrigation schemes, filled with merchants and artisans working on gold and silver, creating rugs.

Chinggis sent a caravan of 450 merchants with camels and horses over the mountains into Central Asia to trade. But the Khwarazm Empire, who thought very little of Chinggis and the nomads, killed the merchants and took the goods. This was cause for war. The Khwarazm Empire thought it could withstand the Mongols easily, but they make a terrible mistake. They defend their empire by locating large sets of troops, but only 20,000 to 50,000, around the various cities. Chinggis, at this point, had between 100,000 and 130,000 troops under his command.

And now he learns how to conquer cities. He learns how to lay siege to them, how to use catapults, and he adds something else-- terror. The city is invited to submit. And if it submits and accepts Mongol rule, provides resources to the Mongol war machine, then it's fine. But if it does not submit, if it resists, then it was to be annihilated, and all its inhabitants destroyed. Cities had very little defense. The Mongols move so quickly over the steppe, that the scouts sent out by a city could not get back before the Mongols reached the gates. The Mongols would drive the captives from one city on against the next and lay siege. No one could withstand them. They would pillage. They would take the artisans and send them back to Mongolia. Or people could join and accept Mongol rule. And if they did, they could survive.

Central Asia falls, and as it falls-- never, in some sense, to recover. There's some debate among scholarship. Does it fall because of the destructive military campaigns of the Mongols? Or are the Mongols, in fact, creating a new era of peace and stability? Does it fall because, in fact, the wars of the Khwarazm Shah had destroyed so much already and the Mongols just put the finishing touch on it? Either way, Central Asia went from being one of the great centers of world learning and wealth, to being a poor, benighted area.

Why did Chinggis do this? What motivated him? There's a story that the Persian historian of those days, Rashid al-Din, tells. It goes like this-- Chinggis says to one of his best generals, he says, so tell me, what do you want out of life? What gives you the most pleasure? And the general thinks for a minute, and he says, well, to go hunting in the spring with a falcon on my arm and watch it bring down prey. And Chinggis looks at him and says, oh, that's not for me. The greatest delight for a man, he says, is to inflict defeat upon his enemies, to drive them before him, to see those dear to him with their faces bathed in tears, to bestride their horses, to crush in his arms their daughters and wives.

Chinggis died in 1227 in a campaign against the Tanguts. And his coffin was brought to a burial place and everybody they encountered was killed. And to this day, no one has discovered where Chinggis was buried. The explanation for the Mongols' conquest is a personal explanation. What motivates an individual? And clearly Chinggis was an extraordinary individual. But it's also true that if Chinggis wanted to remain the Khan, he had to keep fighting, for it's only by continuously fighting, and gathering in new booty, that he could support his army. This was not a sedentary society. They depended upon pillaging and the booty that they recovered from cities, towns, to support themselves. For him to have stopped fighting would have everything fall apart. So my explanation for what motivates Chinggis is not Rashid al-Din's. It's simply that to stay in power, he had no choice but to keep expanding.

Section 3: The Mongol Empire

1. After Chinggis Khan: The Khanship

The Mongol Empire was founded by Chinggis, but it was his sons and grandsons, who really extended its reach. His first son, Jochi, had died before him. And in 1229, two years after Chinggis' death, there is another Kurultai that elects Ogedei. And it's Ogedei, who finally in 1234, defeats the Jin army.

I've mentioned the word Kurultai a couple times now, and I should explain what that means. Among the Mongols there was not a-- although Chinggis' lineage seems to contradict this-- principal among the Mongols, rulership, the Khanship was given by election. The leaders of the various tribes, factions, armies would gather together and have a meeting, in which they would-- somewhat like cardinals perhaps in the

Catholic church-- vote for somebody to be the leader. But of course, all this time, people had been vying for leadership by defeating their enemies and so on.

In any case, Ogedei defeats the Jurchens, the Jin Dynasty of the Jurchens. And it is not until the reign of Khubilai Khan, which begins in 1260 goes to 1294, that the Southern Song is vanquished. In fact, the Song Dynasty in the South lasted longer than any of the Mongol's enemies. And eventually however, it falls as well, although not as bloodily as Central Asian cities had fallen.

But I've gotten ahead of myself. We need to go back to the 1230s. And see after Chinggis' death, during the reign of Ogedei, how the expansion of the Mongols continued and got, in fact, to the gates of Vienna, about ready to enter Western Europe.

2. The Campaign Against The West

Let me turn now to the Mongols' invasion of Western Eurasia, what might be called, in fact, the beginning of the invasion of Europe. In 1237, it begins its invasion of Rus, what we would now call the western part of the Russian empire. It goes on until 1242. The next year, 1238, invades the North Caucasus. By 1241, it's already in Poland and Bohemia. The Mongols invaded Silesia, in Poland, against Henry II, Henry the Pious of Silesia, a battle known as the Battle of Legnica, who attempted, but failed, to halt the Mongol invasion.

We have an image, in fact, of the decapitation of Henry II, and his soul being carried to heaven. In 1241, invades Hungary, invasion that will resume, by the way, in the 1280s, then into Austria, and northeast Italy. 1241-1242, again the invasion of Croatia, the invasion of Serbia, and Bulgaria. Now there's a tale here to be told, a tale of how, in 1241, the Mongols get to what might be called the gates of Europe-- Budapest, or perhaps in Vienna. The Pope rallies Christendom. He calls on them to defend Christendom against the barbarian hordes of the Mongols.

We actually have a letter that the Pope sent to the Khan, demanding that he desist, and we also have the Khan's reply. What does the Khan tell the Pope? "Heaven gave me the world as its gift. It's not for you to tell me to stop. You should submit." Well, they prepare for battle. That night they look out, the campfires are lit, the next day will be the great battle, and, we can be fairly certain that the Mongols would have won, would've broken through, and overrun Western Europe. Yet, the next morning, when they looked out over the gates, the Mongols had disappeared.

What had happened? Well, the European reading was that God had saved Christendom. In fact, what we know from the history of the Mongols, is a rather different story. It turns out that, in 1241, the Khan died, and runners went out, couriers went out to tell the leading Mongol generals that there would be a "kurultai," an assembly of the Mongol nobles to decide to elect the next Khan, next great Khan. And the general who was about to invade Europe realizes, in fact, Europe isn't that important. What's really important is who's going to be the next Khan.

So he turns around, takes his army, and heads back to Karakorum. The Khan was chosen, and then the conquest resumes. First, against the Islamic world. In 1258, Baghdad falls. Then against the rest of Asia. By 1259, the conquest of Korea is complete. In 1271, and 1284, the Mongols set fleets against Japan. They failed in their attempt to invade Japan. This was the story well known in Japanese history of the divine wind that protected Japan and sank the Mongol fleet, the Kamikaze. And in the 1280s, Vietnam submits. In the 1290s, 1293, a fleet is sent against Java, in Indonesia, and it submits. In the 1320s, the invasions of India begin. The invasions of India continue on into the 1320s.

The Mongols had created the greatest empire the world has ever seen. But it was hard to keep that empire whole, as a centralized empire, and it was divided, instead, into four Khanates. There was the Empire of the Golden Horde, or what in fact is the Altan Orda, the Golden Palace, or the central palace, which is Russia

east of Kiev, and that lasted until 1502. The empire of the Il Khan, the Islamic states of Iran, Iraq, Georgia, and Syria. That lasted until 1411. The empire the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, and then the empire of the grand Khan, which was Mongolia, and Yuan China, Korea, in the northeast, we now call Manchuria. But that only lasted until 1368, and how it fell will be a story for a later module.

In the view of the Mongols, most of the known world was theirs. Some parts remained outside, Japan, for example, some of Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Egypt, and, of course, Western Europe. Now, much of the Eurasian land mass was in the hands of the Mongols. In the east, in the country of Great Yuan, the Yuan Dynasty, China is still the richest prize, the central population and wealth. And with the Mongols' occupation of China, Mongolia itself lost importance. The Khan moves his headquarters from Karakorum, to Dadu, or the Great Capital. It's approximately where Beijing is today.

Section 4: The Mongols in China

1. The Mongols' Multi-Ethnic Empire: Reshaping China Under the Yuan

From the Mongols perspective, much of the known world was theirs. There were parts that remained outside. Western Europe, in the end, did not become part of it. North Africa, Egypt, and the rest of North Africa were outside. Parts of Southeast Asia remained outside, and Japan. But, most of the world, as they understood it was theirs.

Mongolia itself, where its capital, Karakorum, was located, did lose importance. Khanate of China called the Great Yuan, or the Yuan Dynasty, was certainly the richest part of the empire. However, the Mongol's view of things was such that they did not accept that the people they had conquered, necessarily, were the only ones to rule. Or, that the ways in which people in the areas they had conquered ruled was the way the Mongols would rule.

They saw themselves as leading a multiethnic world of many different peoples, and that they could give privileges and rights and duties to different peoples as they chose. They distrusted many of their subjects, particularly their Chinese subjects, given their vast numbers. And relied heavily on bringing in people from Central Asia to help them rule.

We have examples of this. In theory, the Dynasty appointed officials would appoint both a Chinese official, a Han official, and a Mongolian or Central Asian official to co-administer major regional offices. The tax system became a tax farming system, where people would buy the rights to collect taxes for a certain amount of money and be able to keep the profit they made. This was brought in and done under Central Asian leadership.

The chief financial officers of the Yuan were actually Muslim financiers from Central Asia. The religious establishment, the Buddhist religious establishment in China, or in the Yuan, was given over to Tibetan Buddhists to manage. The Mongols were concerned with defending their own interests. And in order to do this, they recognized that they were the masters of many different peoples. In fact, they created within Yuan an ethnic hierarchy of four groups. And this is very apparent, in fact, when they restore the examination system, the civil service examination system, in 1315.

At the top are the Mongols. The second group are peoples called the "Many Categories", the symbol-- basically people from Central Asia. The third group down are what they call the Han, but in fact includes the Khitans of the Liao Dynasty, and the Jurchens of the Jin Dynasty, and Tanguts of the Xia Dynasty. And the last group are the Southerners, sometimes referred to by the Northerners as Southern barbarians, much to the horror of the literati of the South. In fact, this ethnic hierarchy simply reflects the groups that the

Mongols conquered. Beginning in Mongolia, all of the different tribes became Mongols, and then going on to Central Asia, and then North China, and then South China.

2. The Weight of Empire: Diverging Mongol Visions and Identities

The Mongols in China could see the Chinese territory as a source of great wealth, but it was also a territory in which people lived lives that were very different from what they were used to. It's hard to go hunting when the fields are planted full of grain, whether it's wheat or rice. Yurts, which you could move around with, are quite different from living in palaces. Livestock that have to travel with the season is very different from living in cities.

And there were Mongols who thought that they should keep their Mongol identity and be prepared to return to the steppe at any moment. In fact, some went so far as to say, why not just eradicate the population of North China and turn it all into hunting grounds and pasture lands? That point of view did not win the day in part because Mongols were persuaded or Mongol leadership was persuaded that much more could be gained by a tax system, something unknown, of course, to nomads, something that they could know about, but they did not practice on themselves.

And this leads to a division among Mongols who settle on Beijing as the Dadu-- as the great capital of the Yuan Dynasty, between those who we might say are of the steppe party and those of the civil party. For those who see that, in fact, civil government is a way of ruling China and will be in the interest of the Mongols themselves. The Civil party, which gains Chinese adherence, which includes people who come from Central Asia, who learn Chinese, who become quite civilized and erudite. The Civil party in the end is not the winner among battles among Mongol factions.

This brings us to a second question then. If we think of that Civil party and the fact that many people in it-- not all-- Mongols who were part of it, who supported bringing Chinese literati into government, for example, who saw civil government as a way of ruling without having to resort constantly to armed force. To what extent would these people, in fact, were they on their way to becoming Chinese? In this study of the nomadic peoples, the northern peoples in relationship to China, particularly those who conquer Chinese territory, it's very common to speak of Sinification-- that is, becoming Chinese.

And the Chinese word for this is hanhua, being transformed into Chinese. I'm not sure, however, that that's a useful way of thinking about the Mongols. For one reason, there were significant numbers of Mongols who were prepared to return to the steppe, and when eventually-- in the 1360s-- they were forced out of the North, did return to the steppe.

And if we look at those who became much more aligned with civil life and civil culture in China, it might make more sense to think of them not so much as becoming Chinese or Hans as becoming literati, as accepting a literati view of government from literati advisers.

Section 5: Conclusion: Encountering the Mongol Empire, Then and Now

So let's reach a conclusion then about the triumph of the Mongols and the creation of this great world empire. We can see it, perhaps, as a Pax Mongolica that brought East and West together, provided safe travel across the Khanates from all the way from Beijing to Baghdad and Constantinople. But perhaps, we should see as an example of that one of the many Europeans who ended up going to Yuan, going to China under the Mongols to trade, to do business as ambassadors from the Vatican in whatever form.

And that's Marco Polo. His father and uncle had traveled once to Karakoram and perhaps Beijing. When they go back to Venice, they pick up young Marco and bring him with them on their next trip. Marco Polo lives from 1254 to 1324. He travels through the Ilkhanate, through Central Asia, the Chagatai Khanate, and then to Beijing.

He gives an account of his travels to this place he calls Cathay, which probably comes from the Russian for-- well, it comes originally-- the Russian Cathay is from the Mongolian Cathay which refers to the Khitans, which is how they thought of North China. He gives an account of a return trip that goes by sea going down through the southern ports of Fujian, Fuzhou, and then going around through Southeast Asia, South Asia to Arabia. It's not clear that he went by sea. He may have been reporting from other travelers, who certainly did go by sea, but it's quite clear that he was in fact in Mongolia and in Beijing.

He never learned to speak Chinese. He didn't have to. He had a safe and profitable journey. He sees markets that are far richer than anything he had known. He sees things that people in his part of the world were not yet used to. Writing with brush and ink on paper, for example, or burning black stones-- that what he meant, of course, was coal-- for heat. Certainly, the markets he saw he said were the richest, most fabulous markets he had ever seen. And he provides long-- as you would expect of a merchant-- he provides long descriptions.

His book told to his cellmate in prison was regarded as lies. And it wasn't until the 16th century that the Jesuit missionaries in China could confirm that the Cathay of Marco Polo's record was in fact the place they knew as Ming China. And I think we should leave Marco Polo with a last word and of what he had to say about the Khan, the Great Khan.

The Khan, he said, is the greatest, most powerful and richest ruler since Adam. And that was so.