

Lister M. Matheson (ed) *Icons of the Middle Ages: Medieval Masters*, ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara, 2011

## Chinggis Khan: World Conqueror

Chinggis Khan loomed large in the nightmares of mediaeval Europe and his image haunts the conscience if not nightmares of European and American leaders today as they instigate the return of Mongol troops to the ruins of Baghdad in what some see as a re-run of history. The man who became the myth lives on through a legacy which is very much alive and thriving today in many different guises and a multitude of conceptions throughout the lands where he and his immediate descendants first established their writ. Recent DNA research suggests that the man is literally responsible for as much as one percent of the male population of the planet and his legacy is peopling rather than depleting the world, the association which has so often been coupled with Eurasia's greatest hero, Chinggis Khan.

Freed from the shackles of Soviet political correctness, Russia's easterly neighbours have reinstated their most famous ruler to the heroic and sometimes even divine status to which he is more deserving than either the dismissive or the demonic status he 'enjoyed' under Soviet patronage. The demonic Genghis Khan and his 'Storm from the East' found himself seated along side Hitler and Stalin as visitations from hell in the European pantheon of evil. Therefore when the newly liberated former communist states adopted Chinggis Khan as a role model and national hero and in the case of Mongolia, as very much the national hero and the embodiment of the state, the shock felt in much of the world was palpable. However, this shock was not universal and what was also surprising was the number of countries which shared if not the hero worshipping of the Great Khan certainly a deep respect and admiration for the Mongolian world conqueror. China had adopted the Mongol emperors as their own, Turkey had always viewed the horsemen from the East with approval, Iran certainly recognised that the Mongol century represented a golden age in literature and the arts, and Central Asia was in the process of raising Timür Khan onto a pedestal while recognising their own hero's debt to the Mongol conqueror.

Realising that some kind of reassessment of history was urgently needed, scholars were quick to dust off the many long neglected tomes and examine again the many florid words and illustrated manuscripts in a rich array of tongues and from a exotic collection of courts, composed by eye-witnesses and participants in the history of that time. What began as a

revisionist trickle has since 2000 become an increasingly excited torrent and today the study of Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Empire is a particularly exciting field of history in which to be involved.

Temüjin was born into the Turco-Mongol world of nomadic pastoralists who inhabited the vast steppes of Eurasia. Much of his early life is obscure and clouded in both mystery and myth. This includes the date of his birth for which at least three dates are widely cited. 1155CE is cited by Rashīd al-Dīn (d.1318), the historian and Grand Wazir [Prime Minister] at the court of the Persian Mongols, 1162CE by the *Yuan shih*, a history of the Mongol Yüan dynasty of China compiled and edited by Ming scholars (1368-1644), and 1167CE by various traditions citing direct and indirect evidence. While 3 May, 1162 remains the official date of birth in the Mongolian Republic and 1162 is accepted in China and Russia, it is the last date, 1167, which most Western historians consider most likely and which most logically ties in with later recorded events in the Conqueror's life.<sup>1</sup> However, de Rachewiltz in his definitive edition of the *Secret History* has backed 1162 as the year of Chinggis Khan's birth and it is very probable that he will be granted the last word. What all the histories agree is that the infant was born in Del'iun-bolduk on the Onon River and many embellish this fact with the tradition that tight in his tiny hand he was clutching a clot of blood as big as a knucklebone.<sup>2</sup> Temüjin was related to the Tayichi'ut, a forest tribe of hunters and fishers, through his father and to the Mongol Onggirat tribe on his mother's side.

The Tatars were the dominant Turco-Mongol tribe at that time and enjoyed the support of the powerful sedentary Jurchen of the Chin dynasty [1115-1234] from the settled north of China. A symbiotic relationship existed between the steppe and the sown and though often portrayed as an association marked by animosity and incompatibility, the bonds uniting the two were stronger and deeper than those forcing them apart. By tradition, the Chin would ally themselves with one of the nomadic steppe tribes in order to encourage rivalry and thereby increase their own security. Tatars were one of a number of nomadic Turco-Mongolian tribes, but it was their name that became a generic term for all the Turco-Mongol tribes in Europe possibly because of its resemblance to the Latin *Tartar* meaning "hell", and by implication people who emanated from Hell. Since it was also a generic term for the Mongol tribes in western Asia, the explanation for this widespread adoption of the generic term could simply

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<sup>1</sup> De Rachewiltz, pp.320-21

<sup>2</sup> Urgunge Onon (*tr*), *The Golden History of the Mongols (Secret History)*, The Folio Society, London, 1993, p.9

be that the Tatars were early the most successful, well-known and powerful of the nomadic steppe tribes. However, the identification of the Mongols with the mythical Gog and Magog was common throughout the Islamo-Christian world. At that time these foul monsters were commonly believed to have been imprisoned by Alexander the Great beyond “Alexander’s Gate” (the Derband pass, Daghestan, Russia). According to the Book of Revelations, they would be unleashed upon Jerusalem and the world before the Final Judgment, thus the apocalyptic stories circulating about the Mongols seemed to be confirming the veracity of this prophecy.

The main literary sources for Chinggis Khan’s early life are the anonymous *Secret History of the Mongols*<sup>3</sup> and Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Compendium of Chronicles*<sup>4</sup> (*Jāmi‘ al-Tavārīkh*). The former is the only literary text written in Mongolian about the Mongol Empire. It presented historians with some unique problems when it was first discovered. Since Mongolian was not a written language before the rise of Chinggis Khan, the original history had been written down in an adaptation of the Uighur script the *Secret History* which survived had been painstakingly transcribed into Chinese characters, divorced from their Chinese meaning, that were phonetically equivalent to the spoken Mongolian. It was written in the year of the Rat which would correspond either to 1228, the year after Chinggis Khan’s death, or 1240, the year before the death of Ögödei, Chinggis’ son and successor. In fact, it seems likely that the original text might have been completed during Ögödei’s enthronement and certain abridgements and additional material concerning Ögödei’s reign added later in which case both dates could be correct. In fact it is now believed that substantial editorial adjustments and additions were made during Ögödei’s reign. The author or compilers of this unique work remain unknown, and the history’s English translator, Arthur Waley, dismissed it as fiction and fable. However, the *Secret History* has formed the framework of most accounts of Chinggis Khan’s early life providing the essential chronology and background, and much of what the history relates can be corroborated in a general sense from other primary sources.

Corroboration and a test of the *Secret History*’s reliability can be gained from a work compiled some eighty or so years later. Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Compendium of Histories* used various Chinese sources for its extensive portrayal of early Mongol and Turkish history. These early Oriental chronicles are no longer extant, and almost the only known description

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<sup>3</sup> Igor de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, II vols, Brill, 2006

<sup>4</sup> tr. Wheeler Thackston, Harvard, 1998-9.

of their content and the sole source providing access to their knowledge is from the Grand Wazir Rashīd al-Dīn's laboriously recorded chronicles. Rashīd al-Dīn, who among his many talents was a serious historian, had unparalleled access to Mongol and Chinese sources, much of which was forbidden to non-Mongols, through his friendship with the Mongol administrator, entrepreneur, cultural broker and diplomat Bolad Aqa.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Rashīd al-Dīn was able to utilize the *Altan Debter*, an official Mongol history with a strictly restricted circulation, which independently corroborated much of the background and substance of the stories reported in the *Secret History*. Rashīd al-Dīn was commissioned to write his *Compendium of Histories*, the *Jāmi' al-Tavārīkh*, by Sultan Ghazan Khan, the first Mongol ruler of Iran to convert to Islam. Ghazan had a deep interest in history and recognized that scholars in the Mongol courts had unprecedented access to the representatives of peoples from all over the world.

In these days when, thank God, all corners of the earth are under [Mongol] control, and philosophers, astronomers, scholars, and historians of all religions and nations ... are gathered in droves ... and each and every one of them possesses copies, stories, and beliefs of their own people ... the opportunity is at hand, [for] the composition of such a [history] the likes of which no king has ever possessed.<sup>6</sup>

Central to Rashīd al-Dīn's history was of course, Chinggis Khan, and the Grand Wazir and his team had unlimited access to all available, extant sources. Due to the wazir's friendship with the Yuan ambassador to the Ilkhanid court, the remarkable Mongol courtier and 'renaissance' man, Bolad Aqa Chīnksānk, he also had access to restricted Mongol documents normally for the eyes of the Mongol nobility only.

Much speculation has been offered regarding the authorship of the *Secret History*, but all that appears certain is that it was written from within the Mongol court and while avoiding too exaggerated panegyrics, its author is sympathetic to the image of Temūjin succeeding despite the opposition and treachery of the other khans. Chinggis Khan's considerable political skills are downplayed while the inevitability of his rise and the defeat of those who sought to oppose him through intrigue and perfidy are stressed. Speculation has even extended to the

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<sup>5</sup> See Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*, CUP, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn, p.6; text, pp.8-9.

history having been written by a woman evidenced apparently by inclusion of such anecdotes as Temüjin's fear of dogs, and his childhood murder of his half-brother. The history contains a wealth of detail concerning the minutiae of Mongol camp life, detail which puts lie to the traditional theory that the Mongols had no interest or aptitude for administration and bureaucracy.

### **Early Life**

Though not born into the nobility, Temüjin's early circumstances were respectable, and his father, Yesügei, the son of Bartan-Baghat, was generally recognized as a minor chieftain though not as a khan. His grandfather, Qabul Khan, was recognized as a Khagan or chieftain, by the Chin. Qabul Khan was a grandson of Qaidu Khan who is credited with being the first leader to attempt to unify the Mongol tribes. Temüjin's father was named after a Tatar killed by his father in battle, and it was a Tatar who was to kill the father and leave Temüjin a nine-year-old orphan, too young to succeed his father as chieftain of the Kiyad clan. It would be some years before Temüjin attained a position to exact his revenge on the Tatars.

Temüjin's mother, Hö'elun, bore Yesügei Bahadur<sup>7</sup> three more sons, Khasar, Khajiun, and Temüge, and lastly one daughter, Temulin, born when her oldest was nine. There were also two other brothers, Bekhter and Belgutei from a second wife. The family had their base by the River Onon where the children learned riding and archery from an early age. During these years Temüjin formed a close friendship with Jamuka, a son from a neighboring family, with whom he formed a blood-brotherhood (*anda*) by exchanging knuckle-bones and arrows. The relationship between *andas* was often considered stronger than that between blood brothers and could not be idly disregarded. It was also during this time that Temüjin's father betrothed him to a daughter of Dei-sechen from the Boskur tribe, a sub-group of a leading Mongol tribe, the Onggirad. Upon departing from the bride's father's camp, leaving his son with his new in-laws, Yesügei Bahadur passed by a group of Tatars who had struck camp in order to eat. He availed himself of the ancient nomadic custom of hospitality and was invited to share their meal. However, the Tatars recognized him as an enemy who had previously

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<sup>7</sup> 'Bahadur' is a title awarded brave warrior leaders used by both Rashīd al-Dīn & the Secret History. Chinggis Khan alone described his father as 'khan'.

robbed them, ‘Yesügei the Kiyan has come’<sup>8</sup> and so poisoned his food. He died upon reaching home and entrusted the loyal Mönglik with ensuring his eldest son’s safe return.

Temüjin’s mother, Hö’elun, was from the Olkhunut forest tribe and she had been abducted by Yesugei and his brothers from her newlywed husband of the Merkit tribe as she and her husband were traveling back to the Merkit camp. Yesügei then made Hö’elun his chief wife, a honour since only one of his wives could bear his heirs. Though abduction was a common and traditional form of marriage, the custom continued to cause resentment, anger, and was a common cause of hostility and inter-tribal warfare.

Temüjin’s early life was punctuated by four defining incidents: the murder of his father and the family’s subsequent fall into near destitution; his murder of Bekhter, his half-brother; his kidnapping by the Tayichi’ut; and the abduction of his new bride, Börte Fūjin.

After his father’s murder, Temüjin’s family fortunes declined abruptly, and as eldest son, on whom the responsibility of breadwinner fell, Temüjin was summoned home to provide for his family. His mother famously

hoisted her skirts up ... running upstream on the banks of the Onon, gathering wild pear, fruits of the region, nourishing the bellies and throats of her children. ...digging up roots to nourish her children, she fed them with onions, fed them with garlic, saw how the sons of her belly could flourish ... Thus on a diet of seeds they were nourished<sup>9</sup>

This was a harsh and bitterly learnt lesson which left a profound impression on his character. The family’s predicament worsened when their relatives decided that continued loyalty to a departed leader was strategically prejudicial, politically inopportune and economically detrimental. Dismissing Temüjin as too young to lead the clan, Yesügei Bahadur’s Tayichi’ut followers, his *nökhöd*, deserted the camp declaring:

The deep water has dried up; the shining stone is worn away. It is over.<sup>10</sup>

It was not only the *nökhöd*, whose expectations of plunder and martial adventure had now been dashed, who deserted Yesügei’s stricken family but also less explicably the family’s

<sup>8</sup> De Rachewiltz, p.16.

<sup>9</sup> Onon , pp.14-5.

<sup>10</sup> Onon , p.14

close relatives. According to steppe tradition, a widow should be taken in marriage and given protection by the youngest brother, in this case, Da'arитай-otchigin. Hö'elun declined asserting her wish to raise her family alone. However, since Rashīd al-Dīn records that in fact the bereaved family did receive considerable support from family members including Yesügei's elder brother, Kuchar this might well be the *Secret History* over dramatizing Temüjin's plight in order to portray the mounting adversities out from which the future World Conqueror was so determinedly and remarkably able to extricate himself. What is clear is that times became considerably harder for Hö'elun and her young family and such filial occupations as horse-rustling became necessities rather than pastimes.

The murder, when he was thirteen or fourteen, of his half-brother, Bekhter, is perhaps the most controversial of the four defining incidents from Temüjin's early life. It is an incident that figures prominently in the *Secret History* but which appears to have been ignored in the *Altan Debter*, an official history. Ostensibly the reason behind the murder was the theft of a fish and a lark from Temüjin and his brother, Jochi-Kasar, by the two half-brothers, Bekhter and Belgutei which highlighted a certain rivalry simmering between the two branches of the family. The official history, the *Altan Debter*, avoids reference to the incident which undoubtedly besmirches the reputation of Chinggis Khan whereas the *Secret History* does not hide Hö'elun's grief, shock and anger at her sons whom she brands murderers, and destroyers.

In response to Bekhter's theft of a fish an incident which followed accusations of the half-brothers' failure to share their hunting spoils, the division of spoils being a practice sanctified by Mongol custom and tradition, Temüjin and Kasar confronted the older brother who, apparently accepting his fate, asked only that his younger brother, Belgutei, be spared. Bekhter was dispatched with horn-tipped arrows, and Belgutei was spared to eventually find honor and recognition serving his brother's murderer. Chinggis Khan was later to speak of both brothers, "It is to Belgutei's strength and kasar's prowess as an archer that I owe the conquest of the World Empire."<sup>11</sup>

It seems likely that more was at stake than ownership of a fish to have caused this fratricide. The age of the half-brothers is not explicitly stated in the sources, and there is evidence suggesting that Bekhter might have been older than Temüjin, in which case he could have

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<sup>11</sup> from the *Yuan Shi* cited in Paul Ratchnevsky, tr. T.N. Haining, *Genghis Khan*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991, p.24.



been perceived as a threat to Temüjin's leadership of the family. Had Temüjin been the oldest of the boys such breaches of tradition as the theft and refusal to share hunting spoils could not have occurred since his status could not have been questioned. Belgutei is reported by Rashīd al-Dīn to have voted in the election of Möngke Qa'an in 1251 before dying in 1255 at the age of 110. While assuming the figure of 110 to be exaggerated but indicative of unusual longevity, it could be that even the younger of the half-brothers was older than Temüjin. However, as the first son of the first wife, Temüjin would have regarded Bekhter's behavior as an infringement upon his privileges, almost as insurrection, and would have felt full justification in meting out appropriate punishment. Bekhter's apparent lack of resistance and his brother's failure to seek revenge suggests that they also understood Temüjin's response.

In the *Secret History*, Temüjin's kidnapping and imprisonment by the Tayichi'ut follow immediately after the account of the murder, though no suggestion is made that the two events were linked other than portraying Temüjin's treatment as that befitting a common criminal. Whether his capture was retribution for the killing or because Tarkutai-Kiriltuk, a leading noble of the Tayichi'ut, considered him a potential rival, or both, is never clarified, and Rashīd al-Dīn suggests that throughout his youth Temüjin suffered continually at the hands of not only relatives from the Tayichi'ut but also rivals from the Merkits, the Tatars and other tribes. Such tribulations were hardly uncommon for the young Turco-Mongols and kidnappings for ransom, for servants or even for forced fighters were not uncommon as the many examples mentioned in the *Secret History* testify.

The *Secret History* recounts how Temüjin escaped still wearing the wooden *cangue*, a collar-like implement which entrapped his head and two arms, and plunged into a river. By using the *cangue* as a pillow, he was able to lie on the bed of the river and keep his head above water. His escape had been cleverly planned and calmly executed. He had chosen the night of a feast when he was carelessly guarded. Rather than continue to flee he bided his time and hid. He was discovered by Sorqan-shira of the small Suldus tribe who rather than betraying him assisted the fugitive in his escape. Sorqan-shira, like others who were to follow him, said of Temüjin, "There is a fire in his eyes and a light in his face."<sup>12</sup> Rejecting the advice of his savior to head straight for his family's camp, Temüjin sought out the camp of Sorqan

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<sup>12</sup> Onon, p.19.



himself where he knew Sorqan's children were sympathetic towards him. While the *Secret History* might well have embellished this anecdote somewhat, the essential elements of Temüjin's character remain evident. The careful planning, the self-control, the understanding of people, the awareness of his powers over others and young people in particular, the lack of impulsiveness were all qualities that he was to develop over the next decades. The lessons he learned from this encounter with the Tayichi'ut were never to be forgotten.

A fourth defining incident in Temüjin's early life resulted in a gradual turn in his fortunes and the beginning of his rise to unifier of the Turco-Mongol tribes and world conqueror. This incident was the kidnapping of his new bride, Börte Fūjin, by the Merkits and the repercussions were to echo far into the future political history of the Mongol Empire.

Not long after his escape from the Tayichi'ut and having reached the age of fifteen, the Mongol age of majority, Temüjin returned to reclaim his bride Börte Fūjin from her father, Dei-sechen. He also sought to consolidate himself as head of his small tribe and gather supporters and outside protection in order that he might never again to fall victim to the dictates and bullying of neighboring tribes. To this end he summoned his friend and fellow horse-rustler, Bo'orchu, collected his brothers, Kasar with his bow and Belgutei with his axe, packed his wife's wedding gift, a sable-cloak, as a very persuasive and valuable offering, and set off in search of a powerful protector.

Parallels between Temüjin and the leader he chose as his protector are possible. Toghrul, the leader of the powerful Kerait, had been abducted by the Merkits when he was a boy and for a while, forced into hard labor. Later, at thirteen, he and his mother were carried off by the Tatars, and the young Toghrul was made to tend their camels. After the death of his father the young Toghrul also murdered his brother and as a result became head of his family. This role was short-lived and as a consequence of the murder of his brother, his uncle forced him into exile. It was Temüjin's father who assisted the exiled Toghrul, the two becoming *anda*, and together they attacked Toghrul's uncle, the *gurkhan* [leader of the tribe]. Thus Toghrul became the powerful leader of the Kerait with the title of Ong-Khan or Wang-Khan, and at the time when Temüjin appeared to remind the Kerait ruler of his debt to Yesügei Bahadur, Toghrul's authority had spread from the River Onon over the Mongol homelands to the lands of the Chin emperor to whom he paid tribute and from whom he received recognition in return.

When Toghrul accepted the black sable cloak and with it Temüjin, as an adopted son, he gained a much needed ally against the intrigues of his own family and in return bestowed some much needed status and security on Temüjin. In recognition of this new status, Temüjin was presented with a “son” as a personal servant. This was Jelme, the future Mongol divisional commander. The value and advantages of this new alliance were to be made clear within a very short time.

The details of the abduction of Börte Fūjin by the Merkit differ in the *Secret History*, and in Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Altan Debter*-based account. Both agree, however, that a force of Merkits attacked Temüjin’s camp and seized Börte Fūjin and also Belgutei’s mother while the men and Hö’elun with her daughter Temulun on her lap escaped. Both accounts also agree that Temüjin sought immediate assistance from his adopted father, Toghrul, who was only too pleased to wreak revenge on his enemies of old, the Merkits. The Merkits were in fact exacting revenge themselves for the original abduction of Hö’elun from them by Temüjin’s father, Yesügei.

The discrepancy in the accounts surrounding this episode is not difficult to explain. Temüjin’s first son, Jochi, was born approximately nine months after Börte Fūjin’s abduction, and the uncertainty of his paternity reverberated down through his line, sons who became rulers of the Golden Horde, the *ulus* (the lands and people designated to be under a Mongol prince’s command) which held sway over Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Pontic (Qipchaq) steppes. Women abducted from other tribes were awarded to members of the capturing tribe as a matter of course. Bugetai’s mother was filled with shame after her release, not so much because she had been given to a Merkit as a wife but because the Merkit to whom she had been given was a mere commoner while her sons were khans. Rashīd al-Dīn’s account has Börte Fūjin treated with the greatest respect by her abductors due to her pregnancy and claims that the Merkits happily turned her over to their sworn enemy the Kerait leader, Toghrul. Toghrul refused to take her as a wife since he considered her his daughter-in-law, returning her to Temüjin. This account is obviously contrived and implausible and served the political aim of avoiding embarrassing a neighboring Mongol dynasty and tarnishing the name of Börte Khātūn (Lady). Rashīd al-Dīn adds that Toghrul sought to “preserve her from the gaze of strangers and non-intimates”<sup>13</sup> an obvious

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<sup>13</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn, *Jāmi‘ al-Tavārīkh*, tr. Thackston, p.347.

anachronism since the Keraits were not Muslim and would never have entertained such sentiments unlike Rashīd al-Dīn himself and others in the Muslim Mongol court where he served.

Though not explicit, the *Secret History*, written for insiders who would have been well acquainted with the facts of this incident, does not weave any falsehoods around the events while at the same time it romanticizes the eventual reunion of Temüjin and his “beloved” Börte Fūjin, a depiction worthy of Hollywood.

Then Lady Borte, who was fleeing for her life, heard Temüjin’s voice and recognized it. She leaped from the still moving cart and came running to him. ... By the light of the moon he saw her, and, as he jumped from his horse, he took her in his arms.<sup>14</sup>

Such romantic love and moonlight tenderness sits strangely with the fact that Temüjin had abandoned his beloved apparently without a second thought when the Merkits launched their attack. However, this might be explained by the fact that whereas Temüjin and the other men in the party and possibly even Hö’elun, who was also there, would have faced almost certain death had they been captured, young women were too valuable a commodity to wantonly dispose of, and though paternity of any children could be important, ownership of a woman’s body was never considered totally exclusive in Mongol society. This attitude is clearly evident in the inheritance laws which stipulate that the wives and concubines of deceased Mongols were inherited by their nearest relatives, with sons inheriting their father’s wives. Temüjin would therefore have realized that it was imperative that he should escape rather than confront a stronger enemy and that he would later be in a position to impose his revenge and reclaim his bride.

Temüjin called on his adopted father, Toghrul, his *anda*, Jamuka, his brothers Kasar and Belgutei, his boon-companion (*nökor*), Bo’orchu, and his servant and *nökor*, Jelme, to assist him in rescuing his bride and his step-mother from the Merkits. Toghrul had not forgotten his pledge:

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<sup>14</sup> Onon , p.33.

Didn't I tell you last time that you could depend on me? Your father and I were sworn brothers, and when you brought me the sable jacket you asked me to be a father to you ...

In return for this sable I shall trample the Merkit;

Lady Börte shall be saved.

In return for this sable I shall trample the Merkit;

Lady Börte shall be rescued.<sup>15</sup>

The victory was total. However, having retrieved his bride and scattered his enemies, Temüjin called a halt to the assault and though taking some youngsters as slaves and women as concubines, he spared many of the Merkit men. In future encounters this was often the case, and the defeated enemy were usually encouraged to join the growing Mongol forces and become incorporated into Chinggis' army, a welcome option for most since it offered the likely prospect of plentiful booty and future reward. Temüjin had begun his rise to power.

### **The Rise to Power**

Temüjin's rise to supreme leader was neither smooth nor in any way assured. The break with his boyhood *anda*, Jamuka, is often cited as the event that signified the real start of his pursuit of power. Jamuka was also singularly ambitious, and the two would have both scented in each other a dangerous rival. This rivalry split them as it would also split the Mongol tribes, and as this rivalry intensified both knew that there could be only one ultimate winner and that the price of losing would be dire.

Eighteen months after their successful campaign against the Merkit, the two *andas* broke camp and went their separate ways. Jamuka, as the legitimate ruler of the Jadarat tribe, could expect support from the more conservative and traditionalist Mongol elements who upheld the solidarity of the nobility and the constitution of the tribe. Temüjin, whose noble lineage had been effectively severed by the defection of his own tribe following his father's death, relied on personal loyalty and on those who would question the traditional tribal hierarchy or who sought refuge from the claims and strictures of clan and bondage. The night that

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<sup>15</sup> Onon, pp.28-9.

Temüjin swept away from the *andas*” shared camp, he was followed by a defecting detachment of Jamuka’s men. Temüjin’s reputation as a just and generous master who inspired and rewarded loyalty was growing. Those who joined his ranks came as individuals or in small groups, often defying their leaders who generally remained supportive of Jamuka. Among those groups who rallied to Temüjin’s banner were ancestral subject tribes, *ötögus bo’ol*, such as the Jalair, the Soldu and the Baya’ut. Individual serfs, *ötögu bo’ol*, were also welcomed with the result that representatives from all the tribes and from every level of tribal society could be found within Temüjin’s following.

With a growing power-base of loyal followers and even talk of a heavenly mandate, Temüjin could now realistically aspire to leadership of the steppe tribes. He was proclaimed Khan<sup>16</sup> by his supporters in 1185 even though many out-ranked him in the tribal hierarchy.

We will make you khan,  
And when you are khan  
We shall gallop after all your enemies,  
Bring you girls and women of good complexion,  
Bring palace-tents and foreign girls with cheeks  
Like silk, bring geldings at the trot,  
And give them to you.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Toghrul, the Ong-Khan of the Keraites, offered his congratulations to the new khan, Jamuka was determined to thwart his former *anda*’s ambitions, and using the pretext of revenge for an executed horse-thief, he rode at the head of 30,000 men from fourteen tribes against his one-time brother. Defeated, Temüjin fled to the higher reaches of the Onon River. Behind him he abandoned some of his men to Jamuka’s non-existent mercy. The unfortunates were boiled alive in seventy vats,<sup>18</sup> and their two leaders were decapitated, their heads later used as tail-adornment on Jamuka’s horse. This action would seal Jamuka’s eventual fate.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Secret History* anachronistically claims the title ‘Chinggis Khan’ to have been awarded at this time.

<sup>17</sup> Onon, pp.38-9

<sup>18</sup> on this form of execution, see Ratchnevsky, pp.46-7.

Before he could regroup and counter-attack, however, Temüjin was summoned to the aid of his patron, the Kerait Ong-Khan. Temüjin's defeat at the hands of Jamuka had repercussions throughout the Turco-Mongol tribes, one of which was the toppling from power of Toghrul, and Temüjin's once powerful patron was forced into exile under the protection of the Kara-Khitai.

In fact mystery surrounds this whole period in the sources, and a certain amount of conjecture is necessary to ascertain the events clearly. In his authoritative biography, Paul Ratchnevsky surmises that Temüjin was held, possibly as a captive, at the Chin court following his defeat by Jamuka. Toghrul had ruled with the acquiescence of the *Altan Khan* (Golden Khan), as the nomads called the Chin emperor, and he would not have welcomed the Chinese ruler's downfall. When the Tatars, the Chin's acting *gendarme* [police force] during this obscure decade between 1186 and 1196, fell foul of the *Altan Khan*, Temüjin was on hand to offer his services and at the same time take some revenge for his father's murder. Whether Toghrul took part in the battle against the Tatars is disputed in the sources, but as a result of the victory Temüjin was awarded a title by the Chin emperor, and Toghrul, now an old man, had his title Wang-Khan confirmed and his leadership of the Keraites restored. By 1197 Temüjin and the Wang-Khan<sup>19</sup> were therefore both restored to positions of prestige and power.

Temüjin was content at this time to serve as the Wang-Khan's protégé, and their alliance brought success to both the Mongols and the Keraites. Jamuka continued to inspire envy and hatred against Temüjin's growing prestige, and discontented Merkits, Naimans, Tayichi'uts, Unggirats, and remnants of the Tatars allied against him. The climax to this steppe war pitting Temüjin and Toghrul against an alliance loosely gathered under Jamuka, who had been hastily elected *Gurkhan* (Khan of all the tribes) in 1201, was reached in 1201-2 in the foothills of the eastern Khinghan mountains. Victory over the confederation was snatched by Temüjin who followed it up by forcing a confrontation the following year near the Khalkha river with his old, hated enemy. This bloody battle resulted in the massacre and near extermination of the Tatars, final revenge for the murder of Temüjin's father, Yesügei.

### **Early Anecdotes.**

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<sup>19</sup> This was the legendary Prester John, tales of whom entranced Europe.

These decisive battles of 1201-2 have furnished historians with some enduring stories about Chinggis Khan the man, which whether they be literally true or later fabrications certainly reflect aspects of his character that history has shown to be accurate.

The *Secret History* records the surrender of some Shirkutu tribal leaders. On their way to surrender they had captured their overlord, Tarqutai of the Tayichi'ut, but before reaching Temüjin's camp they had decided to release their former lord. They admitted this when they arrived and Temüjin responded thus:

If you had laid hands on your own Khan, Tarqutai, I would have executed you and all your brethren. No man should lay hands on his rightful lord. But you did not forsake him and your hearts" were sound<sup>20</sup>

In another incident Temüjin was interrogating some prisoners after the battle when he demanded to know the identity of the soldier who had shot and killed his "yellow war-horse with the white mouth". A certain Jirqo'adai (Tödöge) stepped forward and admitted his guilt. Temüjin responded as follows:

When a foe is faced with his enemies, with those he has killed, he usually keeps his mouth shut, too frightened to speak out. Not this man. Faced with his enemies, with those he has killed, he does not deny it, but admits it openly. That is the kind of man I want on my side. His name is Jirqo'adai, but because he shot my yellow war-horse with the white mouth in the neck, he shall hence forth be known as Jebe, which means "arrowhead". He shall be my arrow.<sup>21</sup>

Jebe was to become one of Chinggis Khan's four great generals, one of his 'Four Hounds' and he would achieve great renown.<sup>22</sup>

Before launching his terminal attack on the Tatars, Temüjin announced a break with steppe tradition and a defining battle tactic.

If we triumph, we should not stop for booty, but press home our advantage. Once victory is secure, the booty will be ours anyway,

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<sup>20</sup> Onon , p.56.

<sup>21</sup> Onon , p53

<sup>22</sup> Chinggis Khan's four 'Hounds of War', Jelme, Kubilai, Jebe, and Subodai.



won't it? Then we can divide it amongst ourselves. If we are forced to retreat, let us regroup in the original spot where we began our attack. Anyone who does not come back will be executed.<sup>23</sup>

By ordering his troops to ignore the plunder and continue the battle, Temüjin was breaking with an ancient nomadic custom which saw the aim of warfare solely as the acquisition of booty and which gave the chiefs the sole right for the dispersal of these spoils. Temüjin knew that unquestioning discipline was essential if victory was to be achieved over a superior enemy, and he knew also that such a decree would be a trail of strength between him and his tribal leaders. In accordance with these orders, after the battle he dispatched Jebe and Qubilai to confiscate the booty acquired by three "princes" who had disregarded his orders. Though these three were later to defect, Temüjin's resounding victory had proved his point and reinforced his reputation as a strong, disciplined and just ruler who valued such traits in others, especially courage and honesty, be they friend or foe.

### **The Final Fall & Its Aftermath**

Temüjin had won a decisive victory over the confederation that Jamuka had collected against him, but he had failed to defeat Jamuka. In 1202 the Tatars had been practically exterminated, but resentment against Temüjin was still widespread amongst the old steppe order, and many of the tribal prince s, jealous of their independence and suspicious of this warrior's growing might, were open to suggestions of resistance. The whispers became a call to arms when the growing ill will between the Wang-Khan, Toghrul, and his "son" became formal.

Temüjin's proposal that one of Wang-Khan's daughters be given to his eldest son, Jochi, in marriage and that one of his daughters be given to Wang-Khan's grandson, Nilka-Senggum's son, Tusaqa, had been rejected out-of-hand by Nilka-Senggum. Senggum in his arrogance had declared, "We shall not give Cha'ur-beki [his younger sister] to you," a refusal which greatly displeased Temüjin. Jamuka capitalized on this ill feeling and immediately began intriguing against his once-loved enemy.

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<sup>23</sup> Onon , p.58

Informed of a planned ambush by Wang-Khan and Jamuka, Temüjin was able to escape, but his forces suffered serious losses, only 4600 men surviving with him. Ögötei, his second son, was badly injured. It is thought that the only reason Jamuka did not continue to hunt his one-time *anda* Temüjin down was that Jamuka considered his adversary a spent force and no longer any kind of threat to his own ambitions. In the year 1203 on the shores of Lake Baljuna, Temüjin began to regroup his forces and once again call on his allies for their support. Those who remained with him at Lake Baljuna were accorded the highest honors in the years to come.

Meanwhile, the Keraits had grown in power, but, now under the leadership of Senggum rather than the ailing Wang-Khan, signs of fragmentation had appeared, and many of their allies once again turned to the exiled Temüjin. The epic battle (1203) that eventually ensued lasted three days, but the Keraits, who had been taken unaware, were soundly defeated. Wang-Khan fled, but he was quickly captured and executed before his “son” could intervene. Senggum also escaped and fled, but he too was eventually killed. Anxious to avoid a repeat of the Tatar solution, Temüjin ordered that the defeated Kerait commanders should not be punished but should rather be offered the opportunity to pledge their allegiance and join the Mongol “nation”. He made a point of commending the bravery of the Keraits’ commander-in-chief. To further cement his absorption of the Keraits, he married off their leading prince sses. Two of these prince sses, Sorkaktani, the Wang-Khan’s youngest daughter and his grand-daughter, Dokuz Khatun, both Nestorian Christians like many of the Keraits, were given to Temüjin’s youngest son, Tolui, as wives and were to play a prominent political role in later events. Dokuz Khatun eventually became the principal wife of Hülegü Khan, the first Il-Khan<sup>24</sup> of Persia.

Temüjin now sat on the throne of his one time protector, the Wang-Khan, but he still felt insecure knowing that one great tribal grouping, the Naiman, remained beyond his control and were also harboring enemies, including Jamuka. The Naiman dwelt in the regions northwest of the traditional Kerait lands, between the Selenga River and the Altai mountains. If he could defeat the Naiman, his enemies would have nowhere to shelter, and he would be undisputed leader of the unified Turco-Mongol steppe tribes. With so much at stake Temüjin could not risk failure, and so he devised a careful and militarily prudent plan which would

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<sup>24</sup> Hülegü Khan, grandson of Chinggis Khan founded the Il-Khanid dynasty which ruled Iran from 1256 until 1335.

form the basis of his world conquering army in the decades to come. The army was organized into decimal units of regiments (1000s), squadrons (100s), and troops (10s) with each unit headed by a commander and these units often composed of men from different tribes. He appointed six commanders-in-chief. His own bodyguard consisted of the sons of the unit commanders as well as the sons of individual soldiers personally known to him. There were eighty night guards and seventy day guards, these facts being detailed in the *Secret History*.<sup>25</sup> On the day of the Feast of the Moon in the year of the Rat (1204), Temüjin led his troops into battle. To bolster the morale of his own meager forces and intimidate the numerically superior Naiman waiting to greet him, Temüjin employed a strategy that he was to use to great effect in future conflicts. By lighting innumerable campfires, mounting dummies on their spare horses and trailing branches and bushes from their own mounts, the Mongols were able to create the impression that their numbers were far greater than they actually were.

The Mongols' victory was total, and the Naiman were decimated. Following this victory all the other tribes that had once had thoughts of independence were quick to pledge their full loyalty to the Mongol Khan. Only the Merkits sought to escape, but within the same year they too had been destroyed. When eventually Jamuka, betrayed by his followers, was brought before Temüjin, these same treacherous companions and followers were first executed, reputedly at Jamuka's request, before Jamuka himself was killed. Temüjin considered treachery the gravest of sins and happily granted this wish. Temüjin was now undisputed leader of the united nomadic Turco-Mongol tribes of the Asiatic steppes.

During the period of Chinggis Khan's rise to power, China was divided into three separate kingdoms. South of Mongolia was the Hsi-Hsia, Tangut territory, in what is today the northwest. To the east of Mongolia, the Jurchen ruled northern China. The Jurchen and their dynasty known as the Chin, were a semi-nomadic people from Manchuria, who had conquered and established their own dynasty, the Chin. They were more powerful than the Tangut dominated Hsi-Hsia. The most powerful and sophisticated of the three kingdoms was in the south, often considered the real heartland of China. This kingdom south of the lands of the Chin was ruled by the Sung. The Sung regarded themselves as a pure Chinese dynasty,

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<sup>25</sup> Onon , pp.86-7.

who traced their heritage back hundreds of years. The Sung empire was widely believed to be the most powerful and sophisticated in the world.

Traditional accounts of Chinggis' life say that once he had created the Mongol nation he turned on China, to extend his empire. However, initially this was not the case for traditionally these nomadic horsemen had never before shown any real interest in conquest, their periodic raids providing all they needed from the urbanised and settled world. The conquest of China was not contemplated when Chinggis Khan rode forth in 1207. For the Great Khan and his 'nation of archers', China was just a rich quarry to be plundered.

In 1209 Chinggis Khan launched a raid on the Tangut and forced them to retreat into their fortified capital. Chinggis had not come across such defences before and he had no immediate answer to this alien tactic of hiding behind fortifications. Although, the Tangut king eventually accepted the Mongols' terms, it was an important lesson for the Mongols. The Tangut kingdom recognized Chinggis Khan as its overlord. The Tangut monarch pledged to supply future Mongol military operations with troops, and to cement the allegiance he presented Chinggis Khan with a princess as a new wife.

Chinggis' name first became widely known and feared with his campaign against the Chin in 1211 which catapulted the name of Chinggis Khan with the associations of fear and rampage, onto the international stage. This campaign started with the time-honoured Mongol practice of extorting money and other concessions. However, the Chin felt they had little to fear from these unsophisticated horsemen. They had constructed a series of fortified cities to protect their empire from invasions from the north; they also possessed a large and powerful army. Chinggis scattered units of his force across the northern part of the Chin Empire, systematically laying waste to the land as they rode. They avoided the major fortified cities until they were confronted with a vast Chin force at Huan-erh-tsui. Chinggis decided to attack them. In their first serious engagement with a large foreign army, the Mongol cavalry proved devastating. They completely outmanoeuvred the Chin, virtually destroying a force of some

70,000 within a matter of hours. Jochi, Chinggis' eldest son, rode as far as the gates of Chung-tu (modern Peking) but having no knowledge of siege warfare he withdrew.

Although the Mongols had gained control of key passes into China and a number of small fortifications, they had no use for these; so early in 1212 they rode back to Mongolia. They had failed to extort much out of the campaign and the Chin quickly reclaimed the towns that Mongol invaders had destroyed. Chinggis learnt an important lesson: even though they had routed a huge Chin army, they would never extract a submission from the Chin emperor as long as he and his government could retreat into their large fortified cities.

Chinggis Khan returned to raid the Chin in 1213. By a series of overwhelming victories in the field and a few successes in the capture of fortifications deep within China, Chinggis extended his control as far south as the Great Wall. He also captured or extorted vast amounts of plunder in silks and gold and took hundreds of Chin captives, including engineers and soldiers. In his typically logical and determined fashion, Chinggis and his staff studied the problems of the assault of fortifications. With the help of the captured Chin engineers, they gradually developed the techniques and built the siege engines that would eventually make them the most successful besiegers in the history of warfare. Many of their captives were found to be willing advisors and recruits. These were Khitans who had been defeated and exiled one hundred years before in 1125 and the memories and resentment among the Khitans was still strong as was their deeply felt animosity against the Jurchens.

As often happens with newcomers, Chinggis and his generals assisted by the Khitan specialists were soon making their own improvements and developing their own techniques. The two Chinese engines which the Mongols adopted, and later modified when they compared them to the siege weapons of the Persians, were the light catapult which could launch a 2 lb missile over 100 yards and required a crew of 40 prisoners to create the tension on its ropes, and a heavier machine, with a crew of 100 that would fire a 25 lb projectile over 150 yards. Although the lighter device was limited in range it had the advantage that it could be dismantled and carried with the main body of the army. Both of these machines could be used to launch either rocks at walls and gates, or to hurl naphtha or burning tar into the enemy's ranks. After his campaign against the Persians, Chinggis adapted the siege machines

captured from the Persian army. The Islamic design was adapted to the lighter Chinese models to create something similar to the European catapult or trebuchet, with a range of more than 350 yards. Chinggis' men also adapted the ballista which looked like a giant crossbow and fired a heavy arrow over the same range as a catapult but with far more accuracy. Ballista were light enough to be carried on to the battlefield.

But the most important war-making technique that the Mongols adopted was the Chinese invention of explosives. These were used either in the form of rockets, which were fired en masse into the enemy's ranks, causing little damage but much alarm; or as grenades – clay vessels packed with explosives and hurled either by catapult or by hand. Virtually every new military invention were taken up and adapted by the Mongols and with these machines they quickly developed the modern principles of artillery.

A prolonged battering from rocks, burning tar, grenades and fire bombs into the enemy lines would be followed up by an attack from mounted archers. These carefully rehearsed manoeuvres depended on great mobility and discipline. Although the bombardment was not nearly as accurate as the mounted archers, it spread fear and confusion amongst the enemy and made the archers' job easier.

In 1215, Chinggis Khan's army besieged, captured, and sacked Chung-tu, one of the largest cities in Asia. Squadrons of Mongol horsemen rode the streets firing incendiary arrows into the wooden houses, while others put thousands of the civilian population to the sword. There was some method in this madness. Chinggis preferred to secure submission from his neighbours without resort to warfare. His military excess sent a signal to others:

*“All who surrender will be spared; whoever does not surrender but opposed with struggle and dissension, shall be annihilated.”*

To the west where the Uighurs had pledged their loyalty to the Great Khan events, political and military, were also unfurling. Küchlüg the Naiman, the last remaining enemy from the days of Temüjin's rise to power, still retained his oppressive grip on power over the Qara Khitai. Küchlüg was a Buddhist neophyte and he ruled his newly acquired kingdom with a convert's zeal, the Muslim population suffering accordingly. Such was the hatred felt for

Küchlüg by his Islamic subjects, that the Mongols were viewed as potential liberators and Chinggis Khan as their saviour. Their former rulers, the Qara Khitai whom Küchlüg had brutally ousted, had been popular and their ethnic ties to the Mongols were duly noted by the Muslims suffering under the cruel oppression of their new ruler, Küchlüg. For Chinggis Khan, Küchlüg who had gathered to his cause the remnants of the rebel Naimans, represented a potential military threat and also unfinished business.

In the west, the first contact the Mongols had with the Islamic world was ultimately positive and after the objectives of their advance became clear one of welcome. This is often forgotten and the Mongols' subsequent bloody confrontation with the armies and cities of the Khwārazmshāh is often erroneously interpreted as the Mongols war on Islam.

The Qara Khitai (Black Cathays) were descendants of Khitans, semi-nomadic Turco-Mongols, who fled westward in the 1120s after their defeat by the Jurchans from Manchuria. They left some of their people behind who resentfully served their new masters, the Jurchens while under the leadership of Yelü Dashi [d.1142], the Khitans were adopted by the Islamic world as their 'Great Wall' against the barbarians to the north and east. They established a state in Transoxiana and Turkestan in 1141 after defeating the last Great Saljuq, Sultan Sanjar at the historic battle of Qatwan.<sup>26</sup> They practiced the religious tolerance endemic to the Eurasian steppe societies and Christians, Buddhists, Manichaeans and Muslims all existed harmoniously under their decentralised regime. They were accepted and recognised by their Muslim subjects but also very significantly by the wider Islamic world including the Caliph in Baghdad. The Muslim sources such as the 'Arundī's *Chahar Maqala* refer to the Qara Khitai in the most respectful and positive terms. Even though they were accepted and became an integral part of the Islamic world the Qara Khitai never lost their dream of returning to their ancestral lands in North China, usurped by the hated Jurchen. It was their defeat of the Muslim Saljuqs which gave rise to stories of the Christian king, Prestor John, answering the call of the hard-pressed Crusaders in the Holy Lands. During the Chinggisid raids into the Chin territories many Khitans had defected to the Mongol forces so with the arrival of the Mongols in neighbouring Uighur lands, many Qara Khitai saw a potential ally against the usurper, Küchlüg, rather than an invader. In 1218 Chinggis Khan sent his general, Jebei Noyen, 'the Arrow', to dispose of the Naiman Küchlüg which task he completed

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<sup>26</sup> Michal Biran, 'Like a Mighty Wall: the Armies of the Qara Khitai', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 25, 2001, pp.44-91



promptly and with the support of the Qara Khitai people. The rights and freedoms of the Muslims were restored and the Mongols were welcomed. The incorporation of the lands and people of the Qara Khitai was one of the most significant phases in the development of the Mongol Empire since it was these people whose influence was to be so crucially important and pervasive in the organisation and administration of the growing empire. The Khitans shared common roots, traditions and culture with the Mongols. However, they had already progressed far from their nomadic beginnings and in the Qara Khitai they had a fully developed state and the experience of statecraft and administration and these were things they were now willing to share with their new masters and allies, the Mongols. Just as the top commands and military posts had gone to those who had shared Temüjin's lean times many of the empire's top administrators emerged from the ranks of the Qara Khitai and the Uighur.

One reason for the collapse of the Qara Khitai forces other than the widespread dislike of Küchlüg and the popular uprising at the appearance of Jebei Noyan, was the weakness of the Qara Khitai army. With the connivance of Küchlüg, Sultan Mo□ammad, the Khwārazmshāh, and vassal of the Qara Khitai, had risen in revolt against the *Gurkhan* [ruler of the Qara Khitai]. While the Sultan declared Khwārazm, Khorasan, Persia, Ghur [Afghanistan] and Transoxiana independent and under his sovereignty, Küchlüg imprisoned the *Gurkhan* and made himself ruler of eastern Turkestan and the remaining lands still under nominal Qara Khitai control. The dispirited army he inherited were no match for the growing Mongol forces who arrived at his borders fresh from their victories in the east.

Chinggis Khan now found himself neighbour to one whom he held in the highest esteem, even awe and his early communications with the Khwārazmshāh reflect this respect. 'I am the sovereign of the Sun-rise, and thou the sovereign of the Sun-set.'<sup>27</sup> However the reality of Sultan Mo□ammad's kingdom did not match either his own grandiose vision nor the reputation believed by his new neighbour. Chinggis Khan had grave misgivings about assailing such a powerful ruler and yet the Khwārazmshāh was a paper tiger and once hostilities had begun there was no real opposition to the relentless march of the Great Khan's armies. The bloated and strife ridden Khwārazmian Empire crumpled because it had no internal cohesion and was unable to present a united front to the Mongol assault and because it was led by a Sultan who harboured grave illusions concerning the extent of his true

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<sup>27</sup> Juzjani, trans. Raverty. p.966. Kabul, 1343, (1964)  
vol.2, p.103

authority and his military prowess. The Khwārazmshāh was a petty tyrant briefly sitting atop an artificially united bandit kingdom, whose delusions of his own grandeur were initially shared by Chinggis Khan.

Another institution associated with Chinggis Khan and often erroneously dated to 1206 is the so-called ‘Great *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan’. The common assumption that a new steppe conqueror will ‘mark the foundation of his polity by the promulgation of laws’<sup>28</sup> has often been applied to Chinggis Khan and the belief that the so-called ‘Great *Yasa*’ is just such an example, has been held by many since within a few decades of the great conqueror’s death.<sup>29</sup> The term *yasa* is a Mongol word meaning law, order, decree, judgement. As a verb it implied the death sentence as in ‘some were delivered to the *yasa*’ usually meaning that an official execution was carried out. Until Professor David Morgan exploded the myth in 1986, it was the accepted wisdom that Chinggis Khan had laid down a basic legal code called the ‘Great *Yasa*’ during the *Quriltai* of 1206 and written copies of his decrees were kept by the Mongol princes in their treasuries for future consultation. This code, the so-called Great *Yasa*, was to be binding throughout the lands where Mongol rule prevailed though strangely the actual texts of the code were to remain taboo in the same way as the text of the *Altan Debter* was treated. This restriction on access to the text explains the fact that no copies of the Great *Yasa* have ever actually been recorded.

The Great *Yasa* became a body of laws governing the social and legal behaviour of the Mongol tribes and the peoples of those lands that came under their control. Initially it was based on Mongol traditions, customary law and precedent but it was never rigid and it was always open to very flexible and liberal interpretation, and quite able to adapt, adopt and absorb other legal systems. Speaking of the *yasas*, the Muslim Juwaynī was able to declare, ‘There are many of these ordinances that are in conformity with the *Shari‘at* [Islamic law]’.<sup>30</sup> The Great *Yasa* must therefore be viewed as an evolving body of customs and decrees which began long before Chinggis Khan’s *Quriltai* of 1206. His son Chaghatai was known to adhere strictly to the unwritten Mongol customary law and many of his strictures and rulings would have been incorporated into the evolving body of law. Many of the rulings which appear to be part of this Great *Yasa* are based on quotations and *biligs* [maxims] of Chinggis

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<sup>28</sup> Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: the Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (1980), p.20.

<sup>29</sup> The debate has raged since Professor David Morgan published his now generally accepted paper on the subject, ‘The Great *Yāsā* of Chinggis Khān’, *BSOAS*, 49/1, 1986, pp. 163-76.

<sup>30</sup> Juwaynī, tr. Boyle, p.25

Khan which are known to have been recorded. Another source of the laws which made up the Great *Yasa* is the Tatar, Shigi-Qutuqu, Chinggis Khan's adopted brother, who was entrusted with judicial authority during the 1206 *Quriltai*. He established the Mongol practice of recording in writing the various decisions he arrived at as head *yarghuchi* [judge]. His decisions were recorded in the Uighur script in a blue book [*kökö debter*] and were considered binding thus creating an ad hoc body of case histories. However, this in itself did not represent the Great *Yasa* of Chinggis Khan and it must be assumed that such a document never existed even though in the years to come the existence of just such a document became a widespread belief.

With or without the existence of a written Great *Yasa* the Mongols especially under Chinggis Khan had a strict set of rules and laws to which they adhered and their discipline was everywhere remarked on and admired. An intelligence report prepared by Franciscan Friars led by Friar John of Plano Carpini who visited Mongolia in the 1240s commented as follows.

Among themselves, however, they are peaceable, fornication and adultery are very rare, and their women excel those of other nations in chastity, except that they often use shameless words when jesting. Theft is unusual among them, and therefore their dwellings and all their property are not put under lock and key. If horses or oxen or other animal stock are found straying, they are either allowed to go free or are led back to their own masters. ... Rebellion is rarely raised among them, and it is no wonder if such is their way, for, as I have said above, transgressors are punished without mercy.<sup>31</sup>

Even the Moslem historian Jūzjānī does not hold back.

The Chinggis Khan moreover in [the administration of] justice was such, that, throughout his whole camp, it was impossible for any person to take up a fallen whip from the ground except he were the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Tartar Relation*, pp.97-8

owner of it; and, throughout his whole army, no one could give indication of [the existence of] lying and theft.<sup>32</sup>

Nor does he refrain from treating Chinggis Khan's son and successor, Ögödei Qa'an, who was generally credited with having shown compassion and great sympathy for his Muslim subjects, with respect and positive treatment.

Religious tolerance became enshrined in the *Yasa* though some would say that the Mongols were just playing safe by safe-guarding religious leaders of all faiths. Priests and religious institutions were all exempted from taxation. Water was treated with great respect and it was strictly forbidden to wash or urinate in running water, streams and rivers being considered as living entities. Execution was the reward for spying, treason, desertion, theft and adultery and persistent bankruptcy in the case of merchants. Execution could take on various horrific forms and one particularly gruesome example has been recorded by Rashīd al-Dīn. A rash Kurdish warlord had attempted to double-cross Hülegü Khan. He was apprehended and received this fate.

He [Hülegü] ordered that he [Malik Salih] be covered with sheep fat, trussed with felt and rope, and left in the summer sun. After a week, the fat got maggoty, and they started devouring the poor man. He died of that torture within a month. He had a three-year-old son who was sent to Mosul, where he was cut in two on the banks of the Tigris and hung as an example on two sides of the city until his remains rotted away to nothing.<sup>33</sup>

Reflecting the Mongols' respect for and superstitious fear of aristocracy, they were fearful of shredding the blood of the high-born upon the earth. They therefore reserved a special form of execution for kings and the particularly mighty. Such nobles, in recognition of their status, were wrapped in carpets and kicked to death.

In a grand *Quriltai* (assembly) held near the source of the Onon River in the Spring of the year of the Tiger (1206), the assembled leaders, princes and steppe nobility of the now united Turco-Mongol tribes awarded Temüjin Khan the title Chinggis Khan, Oceanic or Universal

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<sup>32</sup> Jūzjānī, p.144, Raverty, pp.1078-9.

<sup>33</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn, p.1043, *tr.* Thackston, pp. 510-1

Ruler.<sup>34</sup> Why Chinggis Khan set out on his mission of world conquest can only be surmised and explanations have been numerous including those put forward in his own life-time. Many of his people and indeed his enemies believe that he had a mandate from God and that he had been divinely inspired and commanded to go forth and spread his word and laws over the whole known world. Such a belief was eventually reflected in the messages demanding submission that his offspring sent to kings, popes and emperors during the empire's rise to power. Chinggis Khan is famously quoted as haranguing the cowed people of Bokhara from the pulpit of their central mosque that he was a judgement from God.

O People, know that you have committed great sins, and that the great ones among you have committed these sins. If you ask me what proof I have for these words, I say it is because I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.<sup>35</sup>

Most of those who experienced the Mongol onslaught and survived and certainly those who heard tale of the invasion second or third hand were quite willing to believe that Chinggis Khan was indeed the 'Punishment of God'. His own followers and his family were also quite content for this belief to persist and also later the belief that his mission of conquest was sacred and his and their destiny was at least sanctioned if not written by God.

However in the period around 1206 when Temüjin was awarded the leadership of the Eurasian steppe tribes and was proclaimed Chinggis Khan there is no evidence that the would-be World Conqueror regarded himself anything other than a very powerful and unstoppable warrior-king. He had fought, connived, plotted, intrigued and battled his way to the top and he had rewarded those that had remained loyal to him. But his rise had been hard and demanding and he had been given few breaks by smiling fortune. He owed his success to his own cunning, bravery, tenacity and cold insight into the hearts of his fellow men. He knew that loyalty had usually to be bought and that for loyalty to be held, payments had to be forthcoming. The tribes flocked to his banner because of the promise of reward. His continued aggrandisement was dependant on his ability to replenish those coffers of promised plenty.

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<sup>34</sup> Some sources, including the *Secret History*, suggest this title might have been awarded Temüjin by his own tribe at an earlier date and then endorsed in 1206.

<sup>35</sup> Juwaynī, tr. Boyle, *Tārīkh-i Jahān Gushā*, p.105

## The Army

Immediately after the *Quriltai* of 1206 the Great Khan, Chinggis, began to consolidate power and re-organise his army in anticipation of dipping into the rich pickings of the Sung, the power centre of China to the south. He continued the process of decimalisation and where possible he broke up tribal structures and rewarded with command postings those who had been loyal to him during the lean years. The break up of the tribal make-up of his fighting force was to have profound effects on the loyalty, discipline and effectiveness of his army. The *Ordu* (base camp) was a tightly regulated unit and its layout and organisation were often uniform so that new-comers and visitors would immediately know where to find the armoury, the physician's tent, or the chief. The fighting men which included all males from fourteen to sixty years were organised into the standard units, *arbans* (10), *jaguns* (100), *minghans* (1000), *tümens* (10,000), and were overseen by the *tümen* quartermaster, the *jurtchi*. Such an organisation meant that no order would ever have to be given to more than ten men at any one time. Transfers between units was forbidden. Soldiers fought as part of a unit, not as individuals. Individual soldiers, however, were responsible for their equipment, weapons and up to five mounts. Their families and even their herds would accompany them on foreign expeditions.

Soldiers wore protective silk undershirts, a practice learnt from the Chinese. Even if an arrow pierced their mail or leather outer garment, the arrow head was unlikely to pierce the silk. In this way though a wound might be opened up in the flesh, the actual metal would be tightly bound in the silk and so would be prevented from causing more extensive harm and would also be easier to withdraw later. The silk undershirt would be worn beneath a tunic of thick leather, lamellar armour-plate or mail and sometimes a cuirass of leather-covered iron scales. Whether the helmet was leather or metal depended on rank. Contemporary illustrations depict helmets with a central metal spike bending backwards, and others ending in a ball with a plume and wide neck-guard shielding the shoulders and the jaws and neck. Shields were leather-covered wicker.

The Mongols were famous for their mastery of firing their arrows in any direction while mounted and galloping at full speed. Strapped to their backs, their quivers contained sixty arrows for use with two composite bows made of bamboo and yak horn. The light cavalry

were armed with a small sword and two or three javelins while the heavy horsemen carried a long lance (4m) fitted with a hook, a heavy mace or axe and a scimitar.

On campaign all fighting men were expected to carry their equipment and provisions as well as their weaponry. A horsehair lasso, a coil of stout rope, an awl, needle and thread, cooking pots, leather water bottles, a file for sharpening arrows would be among the utilities possibly carried in an inflatable saddle-bag fashioned from a cow's stomach. When fording rivers, this saddle-bag if inflated, could double as a float.

Much is known about the Mongol fighting forces simply because they succeeded in causing such a wide impact and artists of the pen, the brush, and the song as well as various artisans of all skills, media and provenance have all vividly recorded in their different ways the details of the Mongol war machine, its composition, organisation and methods.<sup>36</sup>

Two other aspects of the army deserve mention before returning to the account of the Mongols rise to greatness since both were crucial to the success that Chinggis Khan achieved after the *Quriltai* of 1206. One was the *Nerge* or hunt which was not only a source of entertainment and food but was vital in the training of the Mongol fighting force and in the installation of discipline and co-ordination into the tribe as a military unit. The other institution was the *yam* and *barid* or 'postal' system, the communications network, the efficacy of which ensured the unity and cohesiveness of the empire and its armies.

### **Chinggis Khan and Muslims**

Though few now believe that the Mongol armies under Chinggis Khan or his successors had pointedly negative designs on the Muslim world, it is still widely believed that the advent of the Mongols bode ill for people and countries of the Islamic world. This view, however, is increasingly being challenged and in fact has very little basis in fact. Chinggis Khan and his successors enjoyed positive and fruitful relationships with those Muslims they encountered and with whom they had political, cultural and mercantile dealings. It has already been remarked on that with the initial encounter with the Islamic world, Jebe Noyen, one of Chinggis's four 'Hounds of War', was regarded as a liberator and welcomed by the Uyghur Muslims of the former lands of the Qara Khitai as their deliverer from oppression. When the full force of the Mongol war machine was ranged against the Khwārazmshāh, the foremost

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<sup>36</sup> The Osprey Military *Men-At-Arms* series have an edition devoted to the Mongols, by S.R. Turnbull & Angus McBride.



representative of the Islamic World, there was a tradition emerging that the figure rallying the hosts of barbarism and ranks of infidels was not Chinggis Khan but in fact was the figure of the Sufi saint, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā.<sup>37</sup> Sufi tradition believes that God had sent the Mongols to punish the blasphemous Khwārazmshāh who had defied the Caliph and who was an insult to the Islamic world. The Mongols in the role as the Punishment of God was a common image of the time and one found in Armenian, Georgian, Chinese as well as Persian and Arabic sources

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<sup>37</sup> Devin DeWeese, 'Stuck in the Gullet of Chinggis Khan', in Judith Pfeiffer, *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Middle-East*, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006