

The Mongol Empire and the Modern World

Swarming like locusts over the face of the earth, they [the Mongols] have brought terrible devastation to the eastern parts [of Europe], laying it waste with fire and carnage. After having passed through the land of the Saracens [Muslims], they have razed cities, cut down forests, overthrown fortresses, pulled up vines, destroyed gardens, killed townspeople and peasants.

—Matthew Paris, from the *Chronica Majora* (1240)

Essential Question: How did Eurasian empires grow over time, and how did their expansion influence trade and communication?

The Mongols of Central Asia marched across much of Eurasia throughout the 13th century, leaving destruction and chaos in their wake. The reputation of the Mongols for slaughter spread even farther than their actual conquest. Matthew Paris had no firsthand knowledge of the Mongols as he wrote from the safe vantage point of a Benedictine abbey in England. Like Paris, most writers of the time focused on Mongol atrocities. However, in their quest for blood and treasure, the Mongols also sparked a period of interregional connection and exchange at a level that the world had not experienced in a thousand years.

The Mongols and Their Surroundings

In the 12th century, the Mongols were multiple clans of pastoral nomads who herded goats and sheep and who were also hunter-foragers, north of the **Gobi Desert** in East Asia. Life on the arid Asian steppes was harsh, and it shaped the Mongol culture.

The Mongols expected everyone, male and female, to become skilled horse riders, and they highly valued courage in hunting and warfare. They were surrounded by other tribes—the Tatars, the Naimans, the Merkits, and the powerful Jurchen in northern China. The Mongols coveted the relative wealth of tribes and kingdoms that were located closer to the Silk Roads and had easier access to luxury goods such as silk clothing and gold jewelry.



Genghis Khan

The Mongol leader Temujin, born in 1162, spent the early decades of his life creating a series of tribal alliances and defeating neighboring groups one by one. He formed key friendships and married his oldest son to the daughter of a neighboring **khan**, or king. Temujin was intensely focused on building power. With this focus, he sometimes appointed talented nonfamily members to positions over family members. He was often also ruthless. For example, he killed his own stepbrother. He considered personal loyalty the best way to run his growing kingdom. In 1206, Temujin gathered the Mongol chieftains at a meeting called a **kuriltai** where he was elected khan of the Mongolian Kingdom. He took the name **Genghis Khan**, or “ruler of all.”



Temujin, better known as Genghis Khan. 14th century, National Palace Museum

The Beginning of Conquest In 1210, Genghis Khan and his troops headed east and attacked the powerful Jin Empire, which had been established by the Jurchens a century earlier and now ruled Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and northern China. Its capital was the city of Zhongdu, present-day Beijing. Genghis Khan earned his reputation as a terrifying warrior during this campaign; anyone who resisted him was brutally killed in retribution. Sometimes the Mongols wiped out the civilian populations of entire towns after defeating their armies. Stories of Khan’s brutality spread in advance of his new westward campaigns, inducing some leaders to surrender before an attack. In 1219, Khan conquered both the Central Asian Kara Khitai Empire and the Islamic Khwarazm Empire farther west. By 1227, Genghis Khan’s **khanate**, or kingdom, reached from the North China Sea to eastern Persia. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing the reign of Genghis Khan to the reign of Sundiata. See Topic 1.5.)

Genghis Khan at War Khan’s empire would not have been possible without the skilled and fearsome soldiers under his command. Mongolian soldiers were strong riders and proficient with the short bow. They were also highly disciplined, and Khan developed an efficient command structure. To help with communication between units, a messenger force was created whose members rode for days without stopping, even sleeping on their horses while continuing to ride. With the help of Genghis Khan, the Mongolian armies developed special units that mapped the terrain so that they were

prepared against attacks and knew which way to go to attack their enemies. Their military strategies extended to surprise and craft. For instance, Mongol forces frequently deployed a band of warriors smaller than that of their enemy, retreating in feigned defeat; usually, enemy forces pursued the retreating Mongols, who then amassed larger forces to confuse and outflank the enemy.

When coming upon an enemy settlement, Genghis Khan sent a small group ahead to ask for surrender. If the enemy refused, he killed all the aristocrats. Craftworkers, miners, and others with skills, such as the ability to read and write, were recruited for the Mongol Empire. Others were used as laborers for tasks such as carrying looted goods back to the Mongol capital or as fodder in the front lines of battles.

Mongols quickly incorporated into their military the weapons and technology of the peoples they conquered. For example, when they conquered parts of China and Persia, they exploited the expertise of captured engineers who knew how to produce improved **siege weapons**, such as portable towers used to attack walled fortifications and catapults that hurled stones or other objects. To keep contact with the far reaches of the empire, Genghis Khan created a type of pony express, except instead of carrying written letters riders carried oral messages.

Genghis Khan at Peace Those who expected Genghis Khan to govern the way he made war were surprised. The period of Eurasian history between the 13th and 14th centuries is often called the **Pax Mongolica**, or Mongolian peace. Genghis Khan established the capital of his empire at Karakorum, near the center of what is now the modern country of Mongolia. In constructing the city and establishing his government, he consulted with scholars and engineers of Chinese and Islamic traditions. Genghis Khan may have been responsible for more new bridges than any other ruler in history. The social policies of Genghis Khan were liberal for the day. For example, he instituted a policy of religious tolerance throughout the empire, which was unusual in the 13th century. Freed from years of warfare, Genghis Khan's soldiers took charge of protecting the Silk Roads, making them safe for trade and ushering in the third golden age of the Silk Roads. New trade channels were also established between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Those who survived the conquests by the Mongols and their descendants benefited from the reinvigoration of trade routes that had not been heavily used since the days of the Roman and Han Empires. (Connect: List the similarities and differences in religious policies between the Pax Mongolica and the Romans. See Prologue.)

Genghis Khan's effort to unify his empire included directing a scribe captured in 1204 to adapt the **Uyghur alphabet** to represent Mongol. Although the effort to establish one system throughout the empire failed, the alphabet is still used in Mongolia today.

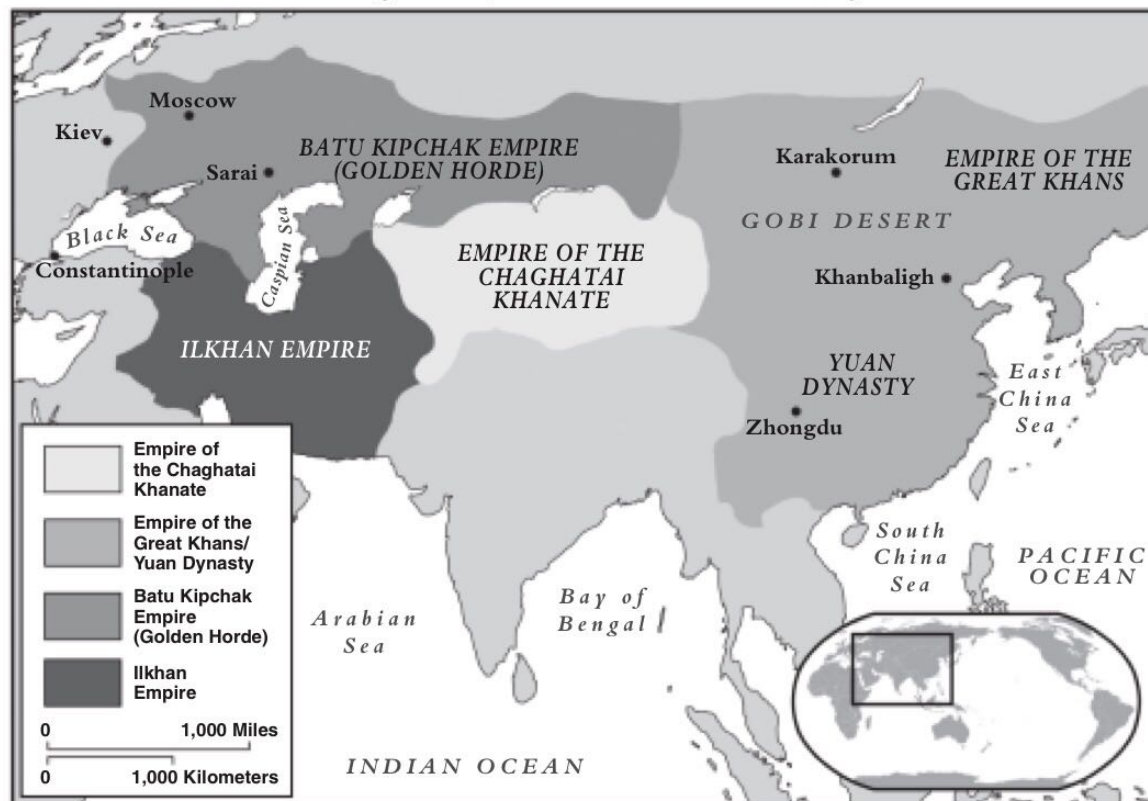
Mongolian Empire Expands

Three of Genghis Khan's grandsons set up their own khanates, further expanding the empire into Asia and Europe. With each conquest, the empire expanded, with new people absorbed into its economy and networks of exchange.



Batu and the Golden Horde In 1236, **Batu**, the son of Khan's oldest son, led a Mongolian army of 100,000 soldiers into Russia, which at the time was a loose network of city-states and principalities. Batu's army, which came to be known as the **Golden Horde**, marched westward, conquering the small Russian kingdoms and forcing them to pay tributes. In 1240, the capital city of Kiev was looted and destroyed.

Mongol Empires in the 13th Century



The Golden Horde continued pushing westward. An initial period of sympathy for the Mongols, based on religious toleration and promotion of trade, evaporated when Western Europe saw the Golden Horde conquer a Christian region, Russia. In 1241, Batu led the Golden Horde into a successful military encounter with Polish, German, and French knights under the leadership of King Henry of Silesia. Soon afterward, Batu defeated a force of Hungarian knights. He next set his sights on Italy and Austria, but fate intervened. Back in Karakorum, Ogodei Khan, the Great Khan's successor, had died. Batu called off the attacks and returned home to attend the funeral and to see to issues of succession. By the time Batu returned to Europe, he had apparently lost interest in conquering Western Europe.

The Mongols ruled northern Russia by working through existing Russian rulers, who sent regular tributes. The Mongols chose this form of indirect rule because they did not want to live in the forests. The rulers of the city-state of **Moscow** began collecting additional tributes, which they set aside to develop an army to resist the Mongols, and began building an anti-Mongol coalition among the Russian city-states. This coalition, under Moscow's leadership, rose up against the Golden Horde and defeated it in 1380 at the Battle of Kulikovo. After this battle, Mongol influence began to decline. By the mid-16th century, Russia had defeated all of the descendant khans

of the Mongols except the Crimean Tatars, who were not defeated until the late 18th century. (Connect: Create a five-event timeline tracing the history of Russia from the Mongols to the development of the modern state. See Topics 1.6 and 2.1.)

The Mongols had long-lasting impact on Russia. As elsewhere, Russia suffered widespread devastation and death from the Mongol attacks. But once the destruction by the Golden Horde was over, Russia began to recover. The invasions prompted Russian princes to improve their military organization and to accept the value of more centralized leadership of the region. In addition, three centuries of Mongol rule severed Russia's ties with much of Western Europe. As a result, Russia developed a more distinctly Russian culture than it had before, and resistance to the Mongols created the foundation for the modern Russian state.

Hulegu and the Islamic Heartlands While Batu led the western armies, **Hulegu**, another grandson of Genghis Khan, took charge of the southwest region. In 1258, Hulegu led the Mongols into the Abbasid territories, where they destroyed the city of Baghdad and killed the caliph, along with perhaps 200,000 residents of the city. Hulegu's Mongolian armies continued to push west, threatening more of the Middle East. In 1260, however, they were defeated as a result of a temporary alliance between the Muslim Mamluks, under their military leader Baibars, and Christian Crusaders in Palestine. Both religious groups viewed the Mongols as a serious threat.

At the time of this defeat, Hulegu's kingdom, called the **Il-khanate**, in Central Asia stretched from Byzantium to the Oxus River, which is now called the Amu Darya. Mongols ruled this kingdom, but Persians served as ministers and provincial and local officials. The Mongols found that this arrangement resulted in maximum tax collection.

Eventually, Hulegu and most of the other Mongols living in the Il-khanate converted to Islam. Before this conversion, the Mongols had tolerated all religions in Persia. After the conversion, however, Mongols supported massacres of Jews and Christians.

Kublai Khan and the Yuan Dynasty Meanwhile, in the eastern part of the Mongolian Empire, a grandson of Genghis Khan, **Kublai Khan**, set his sights on China, which was then ruled by the Song Dynasty. China was a more formidable opponent than those faced by the other khans, and Kublai's armies spent the years from 1235 to 1271 attempting to conquer China. In 1260, Kublai assumed the title of Great Khan, and eleven years later finally defeated the Chinese. Adhering closer to Chinese tradition, rather than enforcing Mongolian practices of leadership and control, Kublai Khan established the **Yuan Dynasty**. He rebuilt the capital at Zhongdu, which had been destroyed by the Mongols in 1215, calling it Dadu. Kublai Khan proved to be skilled at governing a large, diverse territory. Like his grandfather, he instituted a policy of religious tolerance, which inspired loyalty in formerly oppressed groups such as Buddhists and Daoists, who were out of favor in China at the time. His policies were also tolerant toward Muslims, Jews, and Christians. With these and other reforms and the protection of the Mongolian armies, most Chinese initially enjoyed the rule of the Great Khan; he brought prosperity to China

because of cultural exchanges and improved trade with other countries, including European ones.

Mongol women led more independent lives than women in other societies of the time. In their nomadic culture, women tended flocks of sheep and goats in addition to raising children and providing meals for the family. Since they rode horses as Mongol men did, the women wore the same kind of leather trousers. Mongol women could remarry after being widowed and could initiate divorces.

Mongols Lose Power Despite Kublai Khan's adoption of many Chinese customs, Mongolian leaders eventually alienated many Chinese. They hired foreigners for the government rather than native-born Chinese. By promoting Buddhists and Daoists and dismantling the civil service exam system, the Mongols distressed the Chinese scholar-gentry class who were often Confucians. Although the official policy was one of tolerance, the Mongolians tended to remain separate from the Chinese and prohibited non-Mongols from speaking Mongolian.

Just as Batu had reached the limit of Mongol expansion to the west, the Mongolian rulers of China failed to expand beyond China. Starting in 1274, the Yuan Dynasty tried and failed to conquer Japan, Indochina, Burma, and the island of Java. These defeats suggested to the already disenchanted Chinese population that the Mongols were not as fearsome as they once had been. In the 1350s, the secret **White Lotus Society** began quietly organizing to put an end to the Yuan Dynasty. In 1368, **Zhu Yuanzhang**, a Buddhist monk from a poor peasant family, led a revolt that overthrew the Yuan Dynasty and founded the **Ming Dynasty** (1368–1644).

The Mongols' defeat in China paralleled a general decline in their power elsewhere, and the empire began to shrink. The Golden Horde had lost its territory by about 1369, while Central Asian territories were conquered by Tamerlane, also known as Timur the Lame, at around the same time.

(Connect: Describe what the Mongols desired in each of their conquests. See Topic 2.1.)

The Long-Term Impact of the Mongolian Invasions

The Mongolian invasions played a key role in history in many ways, positive and negative.

- Mongols conquered a larger area than the Romans, and their bloody reputation was usually well-earned. Their empire was the largest continuous land empire in history.
- During the period known as the Pax Mongolica (c. 1250–c. 1350), Mongols revitalized interregional trade between Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The Mongols built a system of roads and continued to maintain and guard the trade routes.



- Interregional cultural exchange occurred as well. Islamic scientific knowledge made its way to China, and paper from China made possible the revolution in communication powered by the Gutenberg printing press (see Topic 1.6). The Mongols transferred Greco-Islamic medical knowledge and the Arabic numbering system to Western Europe.
- The Mongol conquests helped to transmit the fleas that carried the **bubonic plague**, termed the Black Death, from southern China to Central Asia, and from there to Southeast Asia and Europe. It followed familiar paths of trade and military conquest.
- The Mongols ruled successfully due to their understanding of centralized power, a capacity that would transfer in many cases to the occupied civilizations. The Mongols devised and used a single international law for all their conquered territories. Thus, after the Mongols declined in power, the kingdoms and states of Europe, Asia, and Southeast Asia continued or copied the process of centralizing power.
- Mongol fighting techniques led to the end of Western Europe’s use of knights in armor. The heavily clad knights could not react in time to the Mongols’ use of speed and surprise.
- The era of the walled city in Europe also came to an end, as walls proved useless against the Mongols’ siege technology. Some consider the **cannon** a Mongol invention, cobbled together using Chinese gunpowder, Muslim flamethrowers, and European bell-casting techniques.

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>GOVERNMENT: Northern China and Central Asia</p> <p>Mongols khan kuriltai Genghis Khan khanates Pax Mongolica</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Russia and Western Europe</p> <p>Batu Golden Horde Moscow</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Islamic Heartlands</p> <p>Hulegu Il-khanate</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: China</p> <p>Kublai Khan Yuan Dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang Ming Dynasty</p> <p>ENVIRONMENT: Asia</p> <p>Gobi Desert</p>	<p>TECHNOLOGY: Warfare</p> <p>siege weapons cannon</p> <p>CULTURE: Writing</p> <p>Uyghur alphabet</p> <p>SOCIETY: Revolt</p> <p>White Lotus Society</p> <p>SOCIETY: Disease</p> <p>bubonic plague</p>