

In this *National Geographic* article the author explores the history of the Mongol Empire and its 13th-century leader, Genghis Khan, by touring ancient sites in present-day Mongolia and interviewing inhabitants who have kept the legend of Genghis Khan alive. The spelling of Chinese proper names and places in this article may vary from common usage.

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# Genghis: The Lord of The Mongols

By Mike Edwards

In the northwest wall of old Samarkand stood a gate through which caravans embarked on the Silk Road. It was by that entrance, or the rubble of it, that I walked in. Through this same gate in 1220 rode Genghis Khan, who was about to ravage one of Central Asia's greatest cities.

Samarkand's population, by a modern estimate, was 200,000 or more. Its artisans produced saddles, copper lamps, and silver lamé. An aqueduct sluiced water across the arid steppe, making gardens bloom. There is only grass now, nibbled to the nub by goats. I see bits of porcelain and an occasional brick—nothing more. The remains of workshops, palaces, and all else lie beneath wind-heaped ridges and hillocks.

Samarkand, Bukhara, Urgench, Balkh, Merv, Nishapur, Herat, Ghazni: One after another the cities of Central Asia toppled before the horsemen bursting from the steppe of Mongolia. Rarely had the world witnessed such a whirlwind of destruction.

Nor had an empire existed so vast as Genghis's sons and grandsons would establish—to be exceeded, in fact, only by the British Empire of the 19th century. In 1280 Mongol rule stretched from the Yellow Sea to the Mediterranean. Almost as quickly as the empire rose, however, it began to fracture into independent fiefdoms, such as the Golden Horde in Russia, a remnant of which hung on until 1502.

Off and on for more than three decades, first as a Peace Corps program officer, then as a journalist, I have traveled the Mongol realm. Afghanistan, which was part of it, was the first country that I fell in love with. Ukraine was another. And Russia.

Last year I went back to Asia, and also to eastern Europe, to take another look at what remains from that cataclysmic era. I found that a good deal survives. The cathedral at Vladimir in Russia, for example, where the family of Prince Yuri died when the Mongols lit fires to drive them from the loft. And the fortress-like abbey in Hungary where monks, in all probability, hurled missiles upon their besiegers. And in Bukhara I glimpsed domes that, though dating from the 15th century, cannot be much different from those Genghis saw in the 13th.

In Afghanistan even after 750 years people spoke of the Mongol rampage in voices tinged with apoplexy, as if it had happened yesterday. “Only nine!” exclaimed an old man in the once elegant city of Herat. “That is all that survived here—nine people!” I almost expected to see corpses in the streets.

The question usually asked about the Mongols is: Were they merely pillagers and killers? Not in Mongolian eyes. To Mongolia, Genghis was George Washington, first ruler of united Mongolia. And in China his grandson Kublai is likewise admired as a unifier. Also, to their credit, the Mongols were more tolerant of other religions than many regimes today. In Genghis's own clan were Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians, as well as worshipers (as Genghis was) of Tengri, the ruler of heaven. To be sure, mosques and temples were burned in besieged cities, but it was not Mongol policy to punish people for their faith.

Nevertheless, the Mongols killed ruthlessly—opposing armies as well as hapless noncombatants—and subjugated millions as they pursued the dream of empire. The 13th century was one of the most war torn in history, probably exceeded in cruelty only by our own. Crusaders marched in the Holy Land, Chinese dynasties fought one another, and several wars scourged Central Asia before Genghis invaded. Thus Genghis was a man of his time—only more so.

Yet some cities that offered no resistance escaped with payment of a tribute and with looting by the army—standard practices. Many rulers chose to collaborate. From their kingdoms the Mongols drew not only taxes but also troops; thus the Mongol army that sacked Baghdad in 1258 included Georgians, Armenians, and Persians.

Several cities that felt the Mongol fury thrived in what today is Uzbekistan, one of the five Central Asian nations that calved from the collapsing Soviet Union in 1991. In Uzbekistan, for instance, there is Samarkand, and as I stood upon the ruins and looked out on the tawny steppe, it was not hard for me to imagine Genghis's cavalry approaching—”more numerous than ants or locusts,” more than “the sand of the desert or drops of rain.”

This florid arithmetic is from the pen of a Persian historian, Ala-ad-Din Ata-Malik Juvaini, who wrote his *History of the World-Conqueror* as a Mongol civil servant. As I roamed the places of Mongol destruction, Juvaini was my loquacious informant. Historians consider his book an important account of Genghis's campaigns, but he was writing in part to please his masters, and, like other chroniclers of the time, he never met a fact that couldn't be hyperbolized. So modern historians fall back often on such words as “perhaps.”

At Samarkand, however, the Mongols must indeed have seemed as thick as locusts. There were perhaps (see what I mean?) 80,000 riders, trailed by a great herd of spare mounts. And in front they drove thousands of civilians, a human shield.

Samarkand was the capital of Shah Muhammad of the Khwarizm empire, which sprawled westward to the Caspian Sea and included parts of what are today Afghanistan and Iran. Muhammad had invited disaster by slaying a Mongol ambassador and a caravan of traders. Juvaini says Muhammad had 110,000 troops in Samarkand and that when Genghis appeared, Muhammad speedily decamped with many of his men. After only a day's fighting the city's nobles opened the gates, praying for mercy.

“But there were soldiers who did not want to surrender,” Yuri Buryakov, an Uzbek archaeologist who is an authority on Samarkand's fate, told me. “About a thousand took refuge in the mosque. They thought they would be protected by Allah. They thought the Mongols wouldn't dare kill them there. But to the Mongols it didn't make any difference. They would kill anywhere.”

The mosque was huge. Excavating its site in the 1980s, Buryakov found the remains of carved wood partitions and clay walls measuring 161 by 87 yards. “The Mongols shot flaming arrows. Maybe they hurled vessels of oil—Genghis had mangonels [catapults]. When we excavated, we found burned bones.”

The city walls were leveled, as was the fortress that crowned the city core. Down too came the aqueduct, says Juvaini, and Samarkand's soldiers and citizens took “a sip at the cup of destruction.” Buryakov estimates the dead at 100,000.

In time another Samarkand arose; I gazed at its domes from the ruins. This is the city of another formidable conqueror, Timur, or Tamerlane, a Turkic warrior who built a new empire in the 1300s, after the Mongol collapse.

Near those domes, coals glowed and hammers clanged. I approached Makhmud Dzhurayev, who is so proud of his forged axheads that he stamps them with his initials. “How would you like to go live in Mongolia?” I asked.

“Mongolia?” he stammered.

Then I explained. “If the Mongols captured Samarkand today, you might be taken to Mongolia because you have a skill.”

Makhmud recovered. “Let it be the United States,” he said. “Or Japan—I'd like to learn to make samurai swords.”

Smiths, weavers, falconers, scribes, physicians: Juvaini says the Mongols marched 30,000 skilled men from Samarkand to toil in less developed Mongolia. With them, no doubt, went thousands of their women and children.

In Ulaanbaatar, capital of Mongolia, I saw Genghis Khan every night at dinner. Peel off a few thousand-tugrik bills to pay the check, and there is cat-eyed Genghis, right on the money. He's on a vodka label too.

As a Soviet vassal from 1924 until 1990, Mongolia saw its history swept away, for Moscow feared any vestige of national pride. Ulaanbaatar's Buddhist shrines and lamaseries were cleared to make a Soviet-style city of wide, numbingly empty boulevards.

Professors had to portray Genghis as a “bloody feudal tyrant.” When Mongolia regained its freedom, he was speedily rehabilitated as the father of his country.

Not that he had been forgotten. A shepherd whom I met one day—traditionally dressed in knee boots and sash-tied coat—knew that as a boy Genghis was named Temujin, which means “blacksmith,” and that he and one of his brothers had killed their half brother, who had taken their fish. “The old people tell these stories,” the shepherd explained.

“I know that story,” I said, for I had read *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which is to Genghis what the *Odyssey* is to Odysseus. I mentioned, too, that the *Secret History* says Temujin feared dogs.

“I never heard that; I don't believe that!” the shepherd retorted hotly.

With its sometimes unflattering portrait of Genghis, the *Secret History*—so named by Chinese archivists—seems to be more than a panegyric written to enhance his reputation. “It is full of myths and legends,” says Larry Moses of Indiana University, who has taught Mongol history for 25 years. “But some of it can be corroborated in Chinese sources.”

The *Secret History* relates that Temujin was born by the Onon River some 200 miles northeast of Ulaanbaatar. I wanted to see that country, so I hired a four-wheel-drive van. Once you leave the capital, pavement is a novelty, and my driver chose trails from landmarks on the horizon. Forging streams, we dipped and rose across saucer-shaped valleys of grass. To pause on an October morning and walk on one of the saucer rims is to exult that this beige land is yours alone. Then you see a stipple of gray: a herd of sheep, watched by a shepherd on a shaggy-maned horse.

Somewhere out there, you will also see a ger, as Mongols call their round tent. We stopped at one to ask for hot water for tea. A woman named Gunga hospitably put a kettle on her stove.

I asked if she wouldn't rather live in a house. “You can't move a house,” she answered, as if that were all that mattered. “You can't take it here and”—gesturing with her hands—“here and here.” To me, Gunga's home looked pretty permanent, with beds and chests, even pictures on the felt walls. But she told me that she and her family had moved three times that year to find good pastures for their animals. To collapse a ger takes only an hour or so.

Onward. We turned north across the grassland. I thought about the dots of virgin prairie that have been saved in the United States so that our grandchildren can see what it looked like before the coming of the plow. Mongolia has enough grass to make five Kansases.

At last we crossed the Onon River and reached a great sweep of valley named Gurvan Nuur. No Mongolian can say absolutely where Temujin came into the world, but many believe this to be the revered place.

On one side of the valley was Bayan-Ovoo, a village of log houses, where a fellow by the name of Baldansanja Chimedorj took it upon himself to be my guide. Pride motivated him, not cash. He showed me a spurt of crystal water—the very spring, he assured me, where Temujin's mother washed her newborn son. And there, he proclaimed, indicating a pineclad mountain, is the peak where Genghis worshiped—”He put his battle emblem there before fighting.”

When Temujin is born, in the 1160s, Mongolia is a realm of perhaps 30 nomadic tribes, with a total population between 1.5 million and 3 million. Roughly half are Turkic-speaking peoples who predate the Mongols themselves. From this same territory an even earlier people, the Xiongnu, raided China for centuries; they may have been the same people as the Huns, who scourged Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The *Secret History* offers a wealth of detail on Temujin's rise to power. At first, life is difficult. When Temujin is nine, his father, Yisugei, a minor chieftain, is poisoned by Tatar tribesmen. It is revenge, for Yisugei once robbed them. To survive, Temujin and his brothers catch fish and snare marmots, and their mother gathers berries.

As a young man he makes allies. One is Jamuqa, who becomes his anda, or blood brother. Another is Toghril, a leader of the Kereyit tribe. When the Merkit tribe kidnaps Temujin's teenage bride, Borte, in a raid, these friends muster warriors to rescue her.

In manhood Temujin gradually brings several tribes under his control by conquest or bestowal of booty. Defeating the Tatars, who killed his father, he is merciless. All but the smallest males are killed; children and women are enslaved. The Tatar tribe ceases to

be. (In Europe, however, a variation of the name, “Tartars,” was for centuries used to refer to the Mongols.)

Alliances shift. Temujin's friends Jamuqa and Toghril oppose his growing power. Temujin crushes Toghril's army in a fierce three-day clash. Then, in 1205, he defeats the Naiman, his last powerful enemy tribe. With them is Jamuqa, who is captured. “Let me die quickly,” he asks. Temujin grants his blood brother's wish.

In 1206, at a kuriltai, or great assembly, Temujin is enthroned as Genghis Khan—”strong ruler” or perhaps “oceanic ruler,” hence ruler of the world. He is about 40.

Larry Moses believes the struggles between Temujin and Toghril and Jamuqa did happen. “Chinese records mention them,” he says. “Still, it's interesting that the narrative closely follows the Old Testament story of David, Saul, and Jonathan.” Genghis's eulogist, the originator of the *Secret History*, may have been a Christian of the Nestorian sect, says Professor Moses.

Followers of a Persian prelate, the Nestorians split from the Byzantine church in 431 in a fight over dogma and became early proselytizers in east Asia. Many Mongols were their followers.

Before leaving the valley of Gurvan Nuur, I climbed a hill for a last look. Below, a boy skipped across a stream and leaped onto his pony, as if imagining himself a warrior on some valorous quest. The Mongolian horse was, according to one historian, the guided missile of warfare. Small but sturdy, it remains an essential ingredient of rural life. Boys and girls whose feet cannot yet reach the stirrups ride as easily as they walk.

Perhaps the boy I saw was another Temujin; some Mongols believe a new Genghis will appear and restore their greatness.



Back in Ulaanbaatar, I turned off Genghis Khan Avenue (formerly Lenin Avenue) to call on Shirendev Bagaryn, now retired from a long career as a historian and president of the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. The question I wanted to ask was: What drove Genghis to conquer?

“Once you are strong you want to go find out how other people live,” he said, expressing a gentle view of the national hero. “He needed their knowledge to develop his country.” For example, Genghis borrowed for the mostly illiterate Mongols the script of the Uygurs, his advanced Turkic neighbors in what is now western China.

Genghis's troops expected conquest to yield gold, jewels, silks, horses, and slaves. Genghis seems to have cared little for loot, but warfare was an old tradition among the nomads, and according to Rashid ad-Din, another chronicler in Mongol service, Genghis once declared: “Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding, use the bodies of his women... .” In other words, conquest.

And the more he did it, Shirendev acknowledged, the more he wanted to do it. He quoted a proverb: “When you are eating, your appetite grows.”

Other historians see Genghis as motivated at times by the need to feed his people and provide them with horses and at other times by revenge (that was the fate of Central Asia). “I don't think he consciously set out to be a conqueror,” says another Mongol expert, Morris Rossabi of Columbia University and City University of New York. “In general, he didn't try to hold on to territory, except for Mongolia.”

The Mongol army was on the move soon after Genghis became great khan. Genghis's first campaign beyond Mongolia was against the kingdom of Xi Xia. Its capital, Ningxia, stood at the site of the modern Chinese city of Yinchuan, and to reach it, the

Mongols had to cross the harsh Gobi desert. Such travel was no great obstacle to nomads who, in a pinch, subsisted on mare's milk and blood drawn from a slit in a horse's hide.

Ruled by the Tanguts, a Tibetan people, Xi Xia produced fine cloth. More important, in Professor Rossabi's mind, it controlled oases along the Silk Road and exacted heavy taxes from Mongol caravans.

The army that Genghis led south already was being molded into the disciplined force that would ride into Europe and deep into China. He organized his troops on a decimal system: the squad (*arvan*) of 10 and company (*zuun*) of 100 up to the division (*tumen*) of 10,000. Moreover, he erased tribal hierarchies. Kereyits, Merkits, and others were scattered among various units, and command went to proven campaigners, not tribal chiefs.

Genghis also created a 10,000-man personal guard and kept hostages from powerful families. The possibility of a revolt obviously worried him. In fact, Larry Moses believes, Genghis attacked Xi Xia in part because some of his tribal enemies had fled there.

Xi Xia had a population of perhaps five million and a large army that seems not to have been well led. When Genghis came against the enemy in a mountain pass and could not break through, he feigned withdrawal, a favorite Mongol trick. The Xi Xia army came out in pursuit. Suddenly the Mongols turned, raining arrows and capturing the Xi Xia commander. Emperor Xiangzong sought peace in 1210, offering tribute and a daughter to marry Genghis. Xi Xia was now regarded as a vassal.

Inevitably the Mongols turned covetous eyes upon the kingdom east of Xi Xia. It had at least 20 million people and was vastly richer. Time and again this part of what is now

China (unified in 1279 under Genghis's grandson Kublai) had yielded to raiders such treasures as jade, silk, and gold Buddhas.

In Genghis's era the north China cornucopia was ruled by people known as the Jurchen, who called their dynasty Jin (“golden”). Like dynasties before, the Jin bestowed tribute on the nomads and traded luxury goods, grain, and implements for their animals and hides. Terms were generous. “It was a kind of bribe,” explains Rossabi, “to keep the nomads from attacking.”

But this largesse was drying up, for the Jin had fallen on hard times. Moreover, there were political problems. Native Chinese resented the Jurchen overlords. Disloyalty troubled the army. Genghis knew these things from merchants and defecting Jin civil servants. He knew too that much of the huge Jin army—600,000 or more troops—was tied down on the regime's southern flank, after years of war with the Song dynasty. Thus Genghis took aim at a hobbled regime. In fact, nearly all his victim states were crippled by internal dissent or other problems.

In 1211 the army set out, 70,000 strong. The Great Wall as we know it did not exist, though lesser walls did. Genghis easily broke through them; Chinese texts say dispirited frontier troops even went over to him.

But many battles lay ahead. Elite troops of Genghis's enemy waited in the Juyong Pass to intercept the Mongols, who were heading to the capital, Zhongdu, buried today beneath sprawling Beijing. One of Genghis's trusted generals, Jebe, who was nicknamed “Arrow,” caught the defenders off guard by using the feigned retreat trick.

Genghis did not march immediately on Zhongdu. His horsemen were superb with the bow, able to shoot forward or backward at full gallop, but he lacked the means to attack Zhongdu's 40-foot walls. Instead, Genghis sent his troops to ravage the heartland; the booty would keep them content.

When at last he surrounded the capital in 1214, his arsenal included Chinese bombardiers and mangonels powered by plunging weights that could hurl hundred-pound stones against walls and gates. These were not needed, however. Beset with internal problems, Jin Emperor Xuanzong offered gold, silver, and other treasure if the Mongols would withdraw. Genghis was presented with a Jin princess—yet another wife (he would have six Mongol wives and many others from foreign conquests). She came with 500 servants.

Alas for the Jin, they hadn't seen the last of the Mongols. When the emperor moved his capital south to Kaifeng, distancing himself from this barbarous foe, Genghis suspected him of regrouping to attack. Or perhaps that was just Genghis's excuse. The Mongols stormed back in 1215 to starve Zhongdu into submission, then to sack and massacre. Genghis carried off a hoard of imperial treasure. Years later a traveler, seeing a white hill, was told it was the bones of Zhongdu's inhabitants.

The Mongols had overrun a territory about the size of New York State. Envoys from Korea arrived, offering to pay tribute; they knew the fate of Zhongdu. Genghis expected north China to pay as well, but he seems not to have considered attaching it to Mongolia.

Returning to Mongolia, as he always did after a campaign, Genghis began to think of building a capital. From Xi Xia he had claimed 30,000 artisans, some of whom may have helped raise his citadel, Karakorum, where trade routes intersected on the Mongolian grassland.

Perhaps Genghis intended Karakorum to become a monumental city such as those he had seen that were built by the Chinese and the Xi Xia Tanguts. It never achieved such greatness, although it had huge palaces for the ruler and his kinsmen as well as a

treasury, a mosque, a Buddhist temple, and probably a Christian church. Chinese invaders destroyed the city in 1388.

Ever the borrower, Genghis had co-opted a scholar in China to advise him on building a government. Uygurs were recruited as accountants and scribes. Soon a school was turning out Mongol administrators, who swelled the small bureaucracy of tax collectors and record keepers.

Meanwhile, Genghis was troubled by events in Kara-Khitai, at Mongolia's western edge. Kuchlug, a renegade prince of the Naiman, the formidable tribe that Genghis had defeated in Mongolia, had seized power in that kingdom. And Kuchlug was gathering other allies. Did he plan to attack Genghis? Jebe attacked in 1218 with 20,000 horsemen.

Most of the people of Kara-Khitai were Muslims. Kuchlug had forbidden them to worship and had even crucified an imam. So when Jebe appeared at the walls of Kashgar, where Kuchlug was sojourning, there was rejoicing—a rare reception for the dreaded Mongols. Kuchlug was beheaded, and Genghis took the friendly people of Kara-Khitai under his wing.

Now that his realm touched the Khwarizm empire, Genghis sent an array of gifts to Shah Muhammad at Samarkand: jade, ivory, gold, cloaks of white camel wool. Genghis also proposed trade and sent out a caravan of 450 merchants. They only reached Utrar at the eastern edge of Muhammad's realm, where the governor, suspecting that they were spies (some probably were) seized and executed them. Juvaini says Muhammad approved this. In any case, he soon made a worse mistake.

When Genghis sent an ambassador to demand that the shah hand over Utrar's governor for punishment, Muhammad killed the envoy and sent his head to Genghis. “The Mongols believed in the absolute inviolability of ambassadors,” Morris Rossabi points

out. “To harm them was a heinous crime.” Hence the terrible Mongol campaign in Central Asia was punitive—with, we can assume, the added incentive of great booty.

No doubt Muhammad felt secure. His army, it is said, numbered 400,000, but many were of uncertain loyalty. Nor did Muhammad enjoy the fealty of his heavily taxed subjects. Again it was a crippled regime that braced for a Mongol onslaught.

Genghis's army never exceeded 110,000 men, modern historians say. Before attacking Khwarizm, he requested soldiers from Xi Xia, his supposed vassal. Back came a tart reply: If Genghis did not have enough troops, he had no business being khan. That insult would be avenged too.

Though outnumbered, Genghis boldly split his forces as he advanced in 1219. One column besieged Utrar, another attacked farther south. Genghis rode west to Bukhara. Muhammad froze; he had no strategy to counter envelopment, other than to keep his troops hunkered down in his cities. At Utrar a garrison of several thousand held out for a month or longer, as boulders whistled from Mongol mangonels and rooftops were bombed with flaming naphtha—probably a stubborn-burning mixture of sulfur, niter, and petroleum. Inalchug, the governor who had slain Genghis's traders, fought to the end, flinging bricks from the top of his fortress. The victors leveled the citadel and the city walls. Utrar's artisans would now ply their skills for Mongol benefit.

The Silk Road took me from Samarkand to Bukhara. This part of the route is a paved highway traveled by trucks carrying shoes and T-shirts from China or soda pop and snacks from Turkey. Here and there you see the arch of a caravansary, where for centuries traders stopped to refresh their animals.

But along this segment of the Silk Road cotton is king today. In fields that spread to the horizon the crop had been picked, and men and women were gathering the stalks, fuel for the winter.

Though the highway is busy, Bukhara, which Juvaini called the “cupola of Islam,” is a shrunken shell. Under Soviet rule many of Bukhara's mosques and religious schools—dating from the 15th century, when the city enjoyed a post-Genghis renaissance—were demolished. I gaze across a plaza once filled with scholars and merchants. A few men sit there, looking as old and gnarled as the nearby mulberry trees girding the rim of a disused cistern. But over the narrow, winding streets a few domes still appear, and Genghis would recognize the 150-foot-high minaret of the Friday Mosque.

Legend credits Genghis with crossing the supposedly uncrossable Kyzyl Kum desert, 300 miles wide, as he swung southwest to Bukhara. In legend Genghis usually accomplishes the impossible. In truth, historians say, he sensibly followed roads that skirted the wasteland.

As at Samarkand, the city fathers opened the gates. Reaching the Friday Mosque—so big that he thought it was a noble's palace—Genghis rode into its courtyard. “He had all the musicians of the city summoned,” said Bahadur Kozakov, who is curator of Bukhara's museum. We sat in his small office, which was made warm and mellow by the slanting autumn sun. A kettle bubbled with water for tea. “Genghis listened to the music,” Bahadur continued, “and started to drink wine and his koumiss [fermented mare's milk]. But he wasn't just having a party. He ordered the nobility brought to him with their riches. When their gold and stones were at his feet, he gave the city to his troops to rob. The nomads loved to rob cities. They took everything. They raped the women. The mosque was burned, and the fire probably spread. It was complete disorder.”

The Mongol hordes rampaged on, toppling Urgench, a great Silk Road city on the Amu Darya south of the Aral Sea, after a fierce battle; 100,000 defenders were said to have been slain. The Mongols diverted the river to flood the city's remains.

They moved south to the city of Merv, in present-day Turk-menistan. In its rubble a Muslim holy man and his helpers spent 13 days counting corpses, according to Juvaini, who says they tallied 1.3 million—”taking into account only those that were plain to see.” Balkh, in Afghanistan, fabled “Mother of Cities,” surrendered. Its citizens were massacred anyway—”divided up according to the usual custom into hundreds and thousands to be put to the sword.”

Several Muslims wrote accounts of the butchery in these Islamic cities, and their reputed tolls are invariably enormous. In Nishapur, one said, the Mongols killed even the dogs and cats. Perhaps the chroniclers' fealty to their boastful Mongol employers led to exaggeration. Large though these cities were, no one today thinks they had populations of such magnitude. And did the Mongols really line up and slaughter civilians? “I can't believe they would have wasted time doing that,” Larry Moses told me. “The Mongols pretty much annihilated the armies they came against, and a lot of civilians were marched in front of the army as cannon fodder, but I don't think civilians were simply wiped out. The Mongols needed people to move their packtrains and siege weapons.”

According to Morris Rossabi: “There's no question that there was a great deal of destruction. Not all the cities were butchered, but some became examples to sow terror in others. It was psychological warfare.”

By one theory, Genghis determined to leave no city intact that could succor his enemies. Both Shah Muhammad of Khwarizm and his son, Jalal ad-Din, were still at large, and Jalal, a formidable leader, had gathered thousands of men to his banner.

Indeed there were uprisings—a serious one, for example, in Herat in western Afghanistan. I remember Herat as Afghanistan's jewel, with rich traditions in the arts and religious scholarship. Almost three decades had passed since I, a dazzled Peace



Corps bureaucrat, had stood in the shadow of its mighty citadel, first built by Alexander the Great in 330 b.c.

I returned to Herat thanks to the United Nations, which provides food and other assistance to Afghanistan, torn asunder by the civil war that began in 1978 and continuing conflict between groups of mujahidin, or freedom fighters. More than a million Afghans are believed to have died. Twice a week a small UN plane takes off from Islamabad, Pakistan, to supply the Herat mission. Crossing Afghanistan, the pilot flew at 21,000 feet, high enough, I prayed, to avoid a missile fired by some trigger-happy *mujahid*.

It cheered me to find that in Herat's bazaar metal workers still banged iron and brass into pots and urns. That's the Herat I remember. But many houses had been reduced to rubble, and outside the city I saw human skulls. Mass graves there have been roofed with glass for public viewing. The Heratis say these are some of the 25,000 people massacred by the communists after a protest demonstration in 1979.

“The communists were like Genghis,” a teacher said. “They killed and destroyed.” The Mongols reached Herat in 1221 and at first spared the city. But after the army left, the city rose against the small garrison that remained. The army then returned, with predictable consequences.

Of all the enemies that Genghis faced, only Jalal ad-Din won his admiration. While Jalal's father, Shah Muhammad, fled ignominiously, Jalal rode south into Afghanistan and gathered troops.

Genghis sent one of his lieutenants after him. Suddenly Jalal turned and dealt his pursuers a stinging defeat. Now the great khan took charge, pinning the Khwarizm heir against the Indus River in what is now Pakistan. Jalal led charge after fearless charge.

Unable to break the Mongol grasp, he at last leaped into the river and swam away. Genghis forbade his archers to shoot. "Such a son," he exclaimed, "must a father have!"

As for Muhammad, Jebe and another Mongol general, Subedei, chased him through Iran to the Caspian Sea, where, exhausted, he died of pleurisy. All the finery of his rule had been lost; he was buried in the rags of a servant.

The Mongols always benefited from superior generalship. Commanders were audacious, knowing they could depend on their well-disciplined troops. Among those entrusted with command were Genghis's sons Jochi, Chaghatai, Ogodei, and Tolui, all born to his first wife, Borte. But the most important leaders were Genghis's comrades from the tribal wars, and among these Jebe and Subedei were peerless.

Reaching the Caspian, this intrepid pair wondered what lay beyond. Europe was as unknown to them as Mongolia to Europeans. With 20,000 men, they embarked on a reconnaissance in force. They vanquished two armies in Georgia and, crossing the Caucasus Mountains in winter, defeated a coalition of Turkic tribes on the Russian steppe. As they plundered the countryside, alarm spread through the Russian principalities—not yet united—of Kiev, Chernigov, Galicia, Rostov, and Suzdal. The princes assembled an army of 80,000 that challenged the Mongols on the Kalka River in 1223.

Mongol archers rode before the enemy, filling the air with arrows. Some of the princes charged hastily, only to see the archers vanish into smoke as the Mongols lit fires of dung and naphtha. They blundered on to discover that the smoke hid not lightly armored archers but cavalymen brandishing lance and sword and mace. Parts of the Russian force turned in confusion, colliding with other units, and then a rout began.

In the flush of victory Jebe and Subedei dined atop a large wooden box. Inside it three captured Russian princes were suffocating, a means of death apparently chosen because

in Mongol tradition the blood of a respected warrior should not be spilled on the ground in execution. It is doubtful that the princes appreciated the courtesy.

Jebe and Subedei swept east to the Volga, fought two more battles, and finally rejoined Genghis on the Central Asian steppe. Living off the land, acquiring fresh horses by conquest, vanquishing every opposing army, they rode 8,000 miles, circling the Caspian in one of the greatest cavalry exploits of all time.

Behind, they left a populace fearful and confused. "Unknown tribes came, whom no one exactly knows ... nor whence they came out, nor what their language is, nor of what race they are," wrote a monk in the principality of Novgorod. To their sorrow, the Russians would soon learn all.

Turning for home at last, the Mongols extracted incalculable wealth from Central Asia. Warriors blazed with gold chains and jewels, and their horses were laden with bolts of silk and bags of coins. Several of the ravaged cities never recovered their former glory. Some historians say that the Mongol depredations strangled development for centuries.

Genghis had not forgotten that the ruler of Xi Xia had refused to supply troops for the western Asia campaign. Moreover, while Genghis was away fighting, Xi Xia had tried to wriggle free of Mongol control. In 1226 the khan led his army south from Mongolia once more.

I went to Yinchuan, modern site of the Xi Xia capital, on a plane from Beijing. The east China landscape, crowded with cities, every dot of land cultivated, gave way to dun-colored semidesert with scattered towns. I peered down on village roofs that were yellow. As the plane descended, I realized I was seeing corn spread out to dry.

A few buildings in Yinchuan reach a dozen floors high and are joined in that modest eminence by a soaring pagoda, the occasional smokestack, and the minarets of several

mosques. Yinchuan has a large Muslim population. Chinese authorities are worried about their Muslim citizens. In the Xinjiang region, west of Yinchuan, Uygurs chafing under the dominance of Han, or ethnic Chinese, officials, attacked soldiers and bombed railways this year.

I heard nothing of unrest among the Muslims of Yinchuan, who are called Hui. But Islam is clearly gaining strength; at one mosque I visited, an Islamic school had recently opened. With pride a teacher told me that the students were learning Arabic, the language of the Koran.

Xi Xia was long referred to as the “mysterious kingdom.” In the past hundred years research has revealed that it had its own written language and produced fine silk scrolls and statuary.

Several versions exist of Genghis's second Xi Xia campaign. I heard one of these from Zhong Kan, emeritus director of the Yinchuan museum. A diminutive whirlwind, he flung his arms for emphasis while speaking, puffing cigarettes all the while.

We were walking on the bank of a wide canal running from the Yellow River, and with a windmill gesture toward the swiftly flowing water, he said, “It is very old. It was here before Genghis's time.

“And there”—he swung his arms away—”was the city wall. Just 500 yards away. When the Mongols could not get in the city, they came here”—the arms brought me back to the canal—”and broke the dike.” Zhong believes the flood undermined the wall, or threatened to, and compelled Xi Xia to surrender.

It may have been the Yellow River, not the canal, that the Mongols unleashed, although that seems unlikely to Zhong Kan: The river is 28 miles from the city. Or perhaps Xi Xia surrendered after its army was defeated in fierce battles outside the walls.

Whatever happened, Genghis Khan was dying.

The *Secret History* says that as the Xi Xia campaign began, Genghis went hunting for wild asses. When his mount shied, he fell, “his body being in great pain.” Another account says Genghis was ill—perhaps with typhus.

He already had chosen his successor, Ogodei, third son by his first wife. Juvaini says Genghis considered Ogodei wise and valorous; he was also a lover of strong drink and good times.

From his deathbed Genghis ordered the extermination of the Xi Xia people. His army is said to have killed “mothers and fathers down to the offspring of their offspring.” Some were merely enslaved instead; still, the destruction of kingdom and people was wholesale, which is why Xi Xia lapsed into a historical blur.

In August 1227, somewhere south of Yinchuan, Genghis died. He was probably 60. Accounts say his body was borne to Mongolia for burial near a mountain called Burkhan Khaldun. Forty “moonlike virgins” and 40 horses were killed and buried with him, as if for his pleasure in the next world. To discourage grave robbers, a thousand horsemen are said to have trampled the site until it could not be found. It eludes searchers still.

Genghis was, wrote one of the Persian historians, “possessed of great energy, discernment, genius, and understanding, awe-inspiring, a butcher, just, resolute, an overthrower of enemies, intrepid, sanguinary, and cruel.” A more comprehensive epitaph could not be written, except to add that he bequeathed to his clan a unified Mongolia and the most powerful army in the world.

His sons and grandsons would send that army surging anew into Russia and China, and even farther, while Mongolia creased the firmament of nations like a shooting star.

Awash in power and wealth, the Mongols would find they had only one dangerous foe:  
one another.

Source: *National Geographic*, December 1996.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Genghis: Lord of the Mongols," *Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.