



Written in the Stars: Secrets of the Mongol Empire

By Bennett Sherry

The Mongol Empire ruled most of Eurasia from 1206 to 1368. The lasting influence of its leaders, called khans, stretched far beyond Mongol borders.

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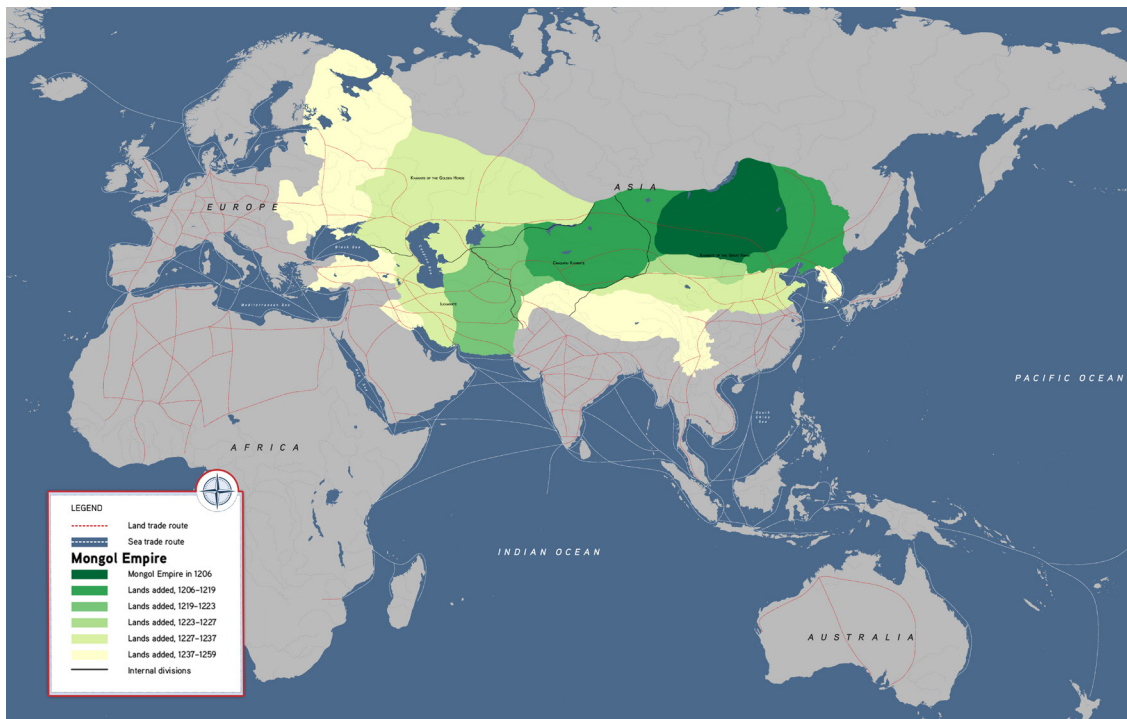
Driving their enemies before them

The Mongol Empire was a force that changed the world. Its armies were so effective that entire cities surrendered in fear. The Mongols' great conqueror, Genghis Khan, warned his victims, "I am the punishment of God." He believed that a god called Tengri wanted him to conquer the world. However, there is more to the Mongol Empire than its battles. It also produced some of the most important merchants, physicians, and astronomers of its time.

The world conqueror

To understand the Mongols' influence, we need to understand how they conquered so much land. The Mongol Empire was the largest empire in history. At its peak, it ruled one-quarter of the global population across 9 million square miles. That's almost 20 percent of the world's landmass. The empire's borders stretched from Korea to Hungary. Today, there are 28 countries on land once ruled by the Mongols.

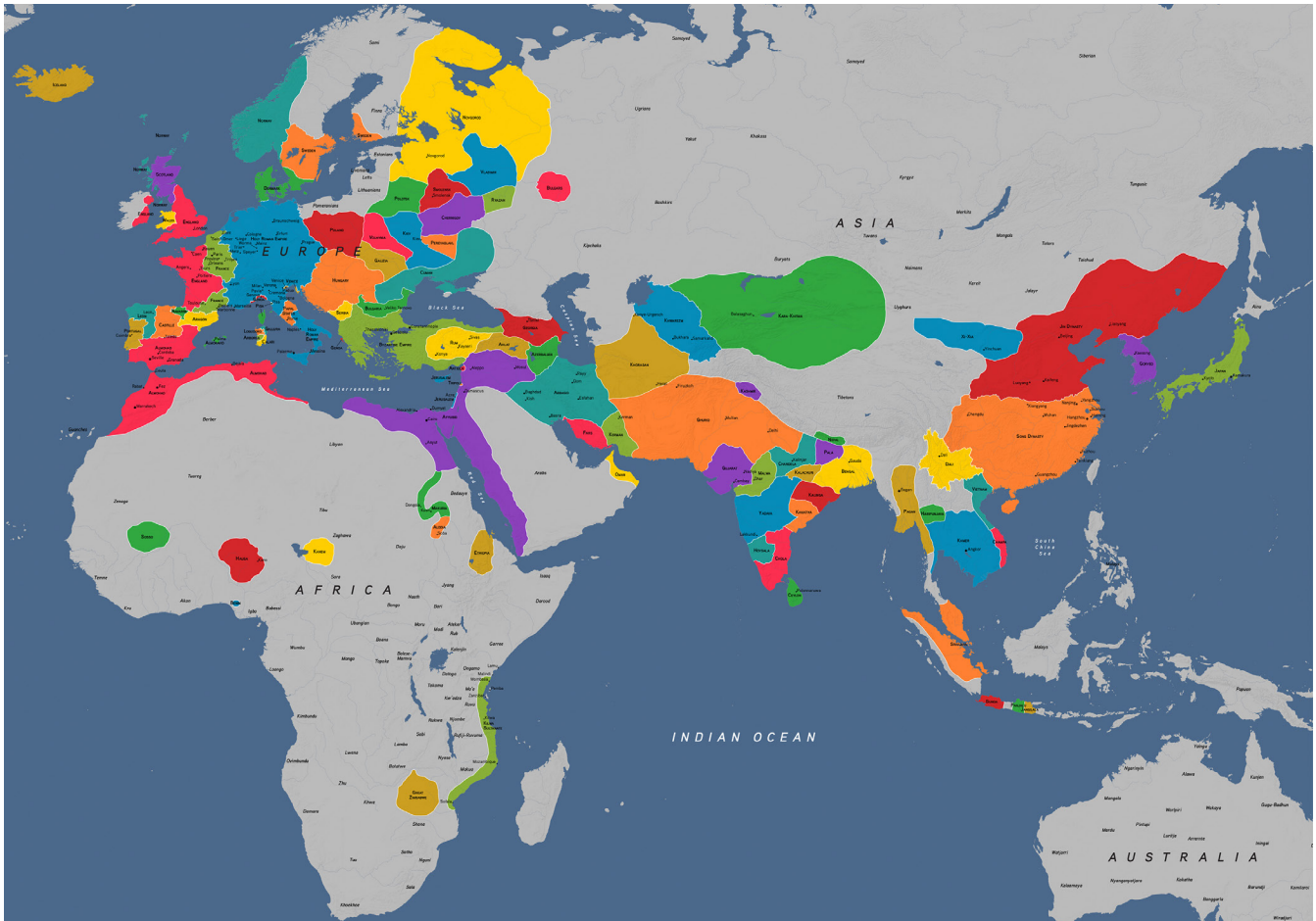
The empire could have been even bigger. The Mongols launched two failed attacks on Japan. Egypt prevented the Mongol Empire from moving farther west. This stopped them from conquering the Islamic world. The Delhi Sultanate held back Mongol attempts to take India. Other unsuccessful attacks on Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia also limited Mongol conquest.



Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

Mystery on the steppes

At the start of the thirteenth century, the Mongols were a loose collection of tribes on the steppes north of China. A steppe is a large area of dry grassland. They lived in semi-nomadic communities and raised animals. Their populations were low, and they did not have a central leader.



Map of Afro-Eurasia in 1200, just before Genghis Khan launched his conquests. Notice the many tribes in Mongolia, surrounded by larger states to the south. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

Though they valued trade, the Mongols lived far from Eurasia's major trade networks. Eurasia is the landmass of Asia and Europe together. They sold just a small number of goods to their neighbors. And yet, the Mongol Empire would reshape the world for 150 years. How did these divided tribes conquer and rule the world's largest empire?

Solving this question is like solving a murder mystery. We need a motive, a weapon, and an opportunity. The motive in this case is maybe a little surprising: climate change. Historians believe an extreme drought in the late twelfth century dried out Mongols' grasslands. The tribes moved farther south in an attempt to feed their herds. Here they raided farming societies. These attacks succeeded because the Mongol Empire had two important weapons. The first was their skill in horse warfare. Mongol men and women were excellent riders and preferred to fight on horseback.

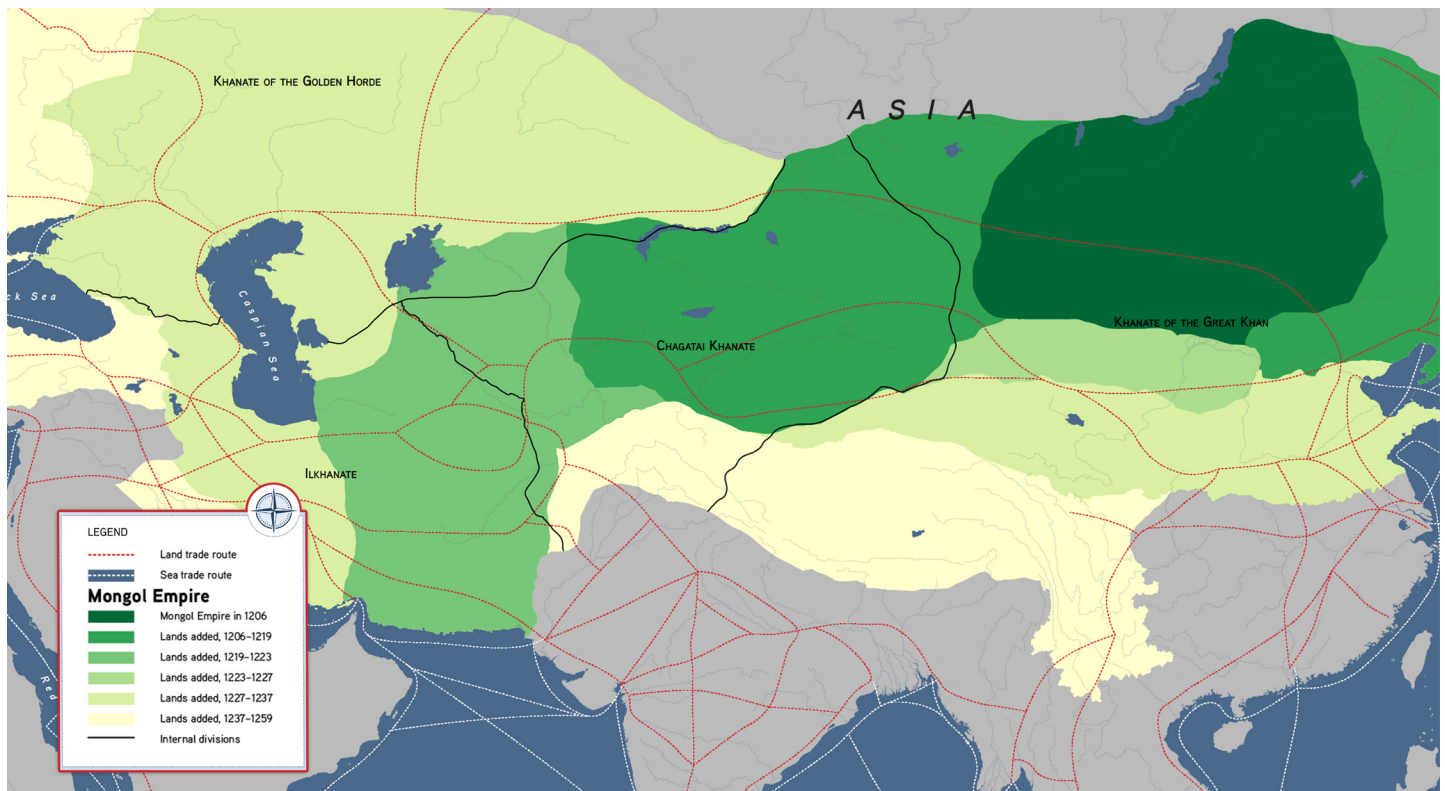
Their second weapon was a leader known as Genghis Khan.¹ Named *Temujin* at birth, he was still a boy when his father was killed. His tribe abandoned him, and he was seized by an enemy. However, Temujin managed to escape and win new followers to his side. His skill as a military leader won him victories and powerful friends. By 1206, he combined the many different tribes of the steppes into a united people. A council of chiefs renamed Temujin *Genghis Khan*. His name means "universal emperor."

¹ In English, alternative spellings of the name *Ghengis* include Chinggis, Chingis, Jenghiz, and Jinghis. "Khan" is a title meaning "ruler."

After uniting the tribes, Genghis Khan became very powerful. He and his successors launched one of the largest war operations the world has ever seen. The Mongol Empire soon became too big for one person to rule. Over the course of the thirteenth century, it was divided into four political states known as khanates. They were as follows:

1. The khanate of the Great Khan, centered in Mongolia and China (known as the Yuan dynasty after 1279)
2. The Chagatai khanate, in Central Asia
3. The Ilkhanate, in Persia in southwestern Asia (centered in what is now Iran)
4. The khanate of the Golden Horde, the western part of the Mongol Empire

For a time, the Great Khan ruled over the other khanates. Eventually, the various khans began to fight among themselves. This weakened the Mongols' power as a whole. Still, for more than 100 years after his death, the rulers who followed Genghis Khan controlled Eurasia.



Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

The networks of Mongol rule

The Mongols' remarkably open society helped them to maintain such a large empire. Trade was central to their hold on power. They successfully reduced the cost and danger of overland travel. This made the northern Silk Roads a popular choice for traders. The Silk Road was an ancient network of roads and trading posts that linked Asia and Europe. Merchants and traders thrived under Mongol rule. They also enjoyed a higher social position than they had in pre-Mongol China.

Genghis and his son, Ögedei Khan, conquered the northern Jin dynasty of China in 1234. Genghis' grandson, Kublai Khan, defeated the Song dynasty in 1279. This gave the Mongols full control of China. They became the rulers of the most important manufacturing hubs in the world. As a result, more goods traveled from the east to western Eurasia. Merchants sent silks and spices across expanding trade networks.

New ideas also traveled across the Silk Roads in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Islamic knowledge of mathematics and medicine made its way to Europe during this time. The Italian city-states adopted the Arabic numbering system. These are the 10 digits, 0 through 9, used today. The Mongol khans were generally tolerant of foreign religions. They offered respect and tax benefits to some religious leaders. For the most part, people were allowed to worship as they pleased. Under Mongol rule, Eurasia became an empire of many religions.

Merchants and priests were not the only people who moved across the land. Mongol administration drew on experts from across Eurasia. When Ögedei Khan decided to build a new capital at Karakorum, he imported thousands of architects and artisans. An artisan is a person skilled in making things by hand.

Mongol China favored people who practiced Islam. The khans did not trust the Chinese government officials. Instead, they brought in government officials from the Muslim world. They contracted Chinese tax collection to Muslim foreigners.

The Mongols quickly adopted the customs and technologies of conquered peoples. If an enemy used superior military technology, the Mongols learned to use it. The same was true of science and medicine. These two areas of study made advances under Mongol rule. Foreign scholars and doctors gained positions of power in the Mongol court.

The khans had high regard for astronomers. Astronomers are scientists who study stars and planets. The Mongols' religion worshiped a sky god. They believed it was possible to predict the future by reading the skies. Genghis Khan took many foreign astronomers into his service. Later Mongol rulers hired Muslim and Chinese astronomers and paid for new observatories. An observatory is a building that has equipment for studying the sun, moon, planets, and stars. Astronomers gave valuable advice on military and political matters. They also improved the science of astronomy by passing information between the Chinese and Muslim schools.

Experts were central to the Mongols' plans to rule the land. However, not all of them came willingly. After a conquest, Mongol rulers often kidnapped experts and claimed them as personal property. Many thousands were forced to follow the khans back to their capitals.



A French illustration of Kublai Khan's court. Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.

The verdict of history

So, were the Mongols good or bad? As with much of history, the answer depends on your point of view. Mongol armies acted with great force and killed millions of people. Entire cities and centers of learning were destroyed. If you were one of the many people enslaved by the Mongol khans, the Mongol conquests were certainly a bad thing.



The Mongol siege of Baghdad in 1258. Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.

On the other hand, there were many remarkable parts of Mongol rule. They created a 100-year-long period of peace that changed the world. This time is sometimes called the *Pax Mongolica*. The east and west ends of Afro-Eurasia were more connected than ever. New ideas and new goods traveled easily across the largest landmass on Earth.

A better connection to the east was good for Western Europe—especially as Western Europe was never conquered by the Mongol empire. An increase in overland trade improved European access to riches from the east. New technologies and navigational skills also made their way west. These technologies would eventually allow Europeans to build overseas empires. Some historians even say the Mongols might have brought gunpowder to Europe.

However, these new connections also brought disease. The expansion of trade under Mongol rule helped an outbreak of the bubonic plague sweep across the world. This disease was known as the Black Death, and it killed nearly everyone who caught it. In Europe, as many as 50 million people died from the illness. The terror of the Black Death combined with civil war began to weaken the Mongol khanates. In 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty fell to the Chinese Ming dynasty. In a dynasty, a single family rules a country. The other khanates began their decline and were replaced over time by non-Mongol leaders.

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Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

Image credits

Cover image: Horoscope of Prince Iskandar, grandson of Tamerlane, the Turkman Mongol conqueror. This horoscope shows the positions of the heavens at the moment of Iskandar's birth on 25th April 1384. This is a fly leaf from the personal horoscope of Iskandar Sultan (died 1415), grandson of Timur, who ruled the province of Farsin, Iran. He is best known for his early military career and his patronage of the arts and sciences. Apart from being a horoscope, this manuscript is an exquisite work of art and an exemplary production of the royal kitabkhana 'publishing house' or 'workshop'. The manuscript of 1411 is lavishly illustrated and reflects the efforts of a whole range of specialists: astronomers (among them Imad ad-Din Mahmud al-Kashi), illuminators, gilders, calligraphers and craftsmen, and specialists in paper-making. The manuscript was bought in Iran in 1794 by John H. Harrington, who had started his career as a clerk in the East India Company. In 1932, it was auctioned at Sotheby's and bought for £6/15d by Sir Henry Wellcome who added it to his collection of Oriental books and manuscripts. Wellcome MS Persian 474. Public domain. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ua87equq/images?id=ce8jsnzs>

Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1200-layer-2>

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The Mongol siege of Baghdad in 1258. Bibliothèque nationale de France. Public domain. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8427170s/f373.item>

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