

UNIT 115 – UPSC - Mongol Invasion : Genghis Khan

India's History : Medieval India : Mongol invasion under Genghis Khan

The Mongols

From out of the wastes of central Asia they had swept, a savage force for which the world was utterly unprepared. They swept like a wildly wielded scythe, hacking, slashing, obliterating all that lay in their path, and calling it conquest.

Genghis Khan



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Genghis Khan was born in the early 1160's (it has been argued between 1162 and 1167, but recently agreement has been made for 1167), the son of the Kiyat-Borjigid chieftain Yisugei. He was named Temujen because, at the time of his birth, his father had captured a Tatar chieftain of the same name. Legend says that the newborn Temujen had a bloodclot in the palm of his hand, an omen that he was destined to be a hero.

When Temujen was a boy, his father was poisoned by a group of Tatars, and the Kiyat tribe broke up and scattered, abandoning their chief's family and leaving Temujen's mother, Ho'elun, to raise her children alone. Accounts of Temujen glorify him as intelligent, brave, and an adept fighter, even from an early age, and as such a potential threat to the leaders of other tribes of the steppe. As a young man, despite extreme hardships, he repeatedly met perils and endured crises through force of character and willpower.

In 1189, after he was elected the new leader of the Kiyat, he embarked on a series of military campaigns to unify the peoples of the steppe. In 1206, after a series of skilful victories, Temujen was acknowledged as supreme leader of the steppe at a khuriltai, a traditional meeting of tribal leaders to decide upon the future military and state matters. He was given the title of Genghis Khan meaning "emperor of all emperors" or "oceanic ruler". Genghis Khan's campaigns and those of his descendants led to the creation of an immense empire that stretched from Hungary to Korea.

According to legend, Genghis Khan passed through the Ordos area during his final battle campaign and was so taken with the beautiful grasslands that he dropped his horsewhip. When attendants went to fetch it, Genghis told them to let it be and

expressed a desire to be buried in the Ordos grasslands. The attendants buried the horsewhip on the spot and erected a ceremonial stone mount over it. Since the early Qing dynasty (1614-1911), there has been a shrine to Genghis Khan's memory located at the site where this event is purported to have occurred.

Conquests



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Temuchin's first major patron was Toghrul, of the Keraits, who he saw as an adopted father. Toghrul was probably the strongest leader amongst the Mongolian tribes at that point, although he was constantly under threat both externally and from family infighting. When Temuchin's wife Borte was abducted by the Merkits, Toghrul and Jamuka (Temuchin's blood brother, his "anda", and eventually his enemy) helped rescue her (1183/84).

But not everything went Temuchin's way, with a major defeat in 1187 leading to almost a ten year gap in his life history, until 1196. That year Temuchin successfully attacked the Tartars. He then rescued Toghrul from exile, who was given the Chin title "Wang Khan". Jamuka declared against Temuchin in 1201, when he was elected "Gurkhan". In 1202 Temuchin exterminated the Tartars, and that year Wang Khan broke with Temuchin. Thus, and perhaps inevitably, Genghis was at war with the Keraits.

In 1203 Wang Khan died, and Genghis assumed his title of King of the Keraits. Jamuka was betrayed to Temuchin, and died in 1205. Thus the stage was set for Temuchin to be elected "Genghis Khan", over all of the Mongolian tribes, in 1206. In 1209, the Uighurs submitted to Genghis, leaving him free to concentrate on the Chin and to refuse to pay tribute to them. Eventually, after many battles and even a withdrawal to Mongolia, Genghis destroyed Zongdu in 1215. This was the Chin capital (later to become Beijing), so the Chin capital moved south to Nanking (Kaifeng).

Treacherously, and somewhat stupidly, soldiers of Sultan Muhammad of Khwarazm killed ambassadors from Genghis, forcing him to declare war on that Islamic empire in 1219. Genghis won in 1221. His Empire stretched from the Korean peninsular almost to Kiev, and south to the Indus. It was the largest land empire ever seen. Genghis was thus now able to focus his time on establishing an effective administration of the Mongol Empire, whilst keeping internal strife under check and setting his succession in place.

He died in August 1227 (the cause is not certain), having named one of his sons Ogodei Kha'an his principal successor. Ogodei is remembered by history as probably the most principled of the sons, explaining Genghis' choice.

Legacy to Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan has become a symbol of a Mongolia trying to regain its identity after many long years of Communism. Genghis Khan's face appears on Mongolian banknotes and vodka labels.