

# The Last Great Nomadic Challenges: From Chinggis Khan to Timur

# 15

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

What can the struggles Chinggis Khan faced in his youth and early career tell us about the organization and values of Mongol society? p. 333

15.1

What were the key components that made for the remarkable success of the Mongol war machine? p. 339

15.2

Compare the impact of Mongol conquest and rule in the Muslim Middle East, Russia, and China: On which area was there a greater impact, to what extent did the Mongol interlude alter the historical trajectory of each of these major culture areas, and what were the similarities and differences in terms of the nature of and effects of Mongol invasions and rule? p. 343

15.3

**The Mongol retribution came so swiftly** and was so ferocious that it completely demoralized Muhammad Shah, the ruler of Khwarazm, whose arrogance brought death and destruction to his kingdom on an appalling scale. Muhammad Shah had scoffed at Chinggis Khan's demand for retribution for the plunder and slaughter of a Mongol caravan that had entered Khwarazm in 1218 (Map 15.1). Chinggis Khan had personally dispatched the caravan as a signal that he wished to establish political and commercial relations with Khwarazm. Having in effect declared war on the Mongols by ignoring their demands for just recompense, Muhammad Shah compounded his folly by quarreling with the caliph of Baghdad, who consequently had little inclination to come to his rescue.



**FIGURE 15.1** A 14th-century miniature painting from Rashid al-Din's *History of the World* depicts Mongol cavalry charging into battle against retreating Persians. The speed and endurance of Mongol cavalry made it difficult for routed foes to retreat and live to fight another day. As the painting suggests, surrender or death were often the only options for those overrun by Mongol units.

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Caught off guard by the Mongol assault that drove deep into his empire from several directions, Muhammad Shah was at first immobilized with fear, and then in full flight, leaving his hapless subjects to fend for themselves. Columns of battle-hardened Mongol cavalry besieged, then stormed, one after another of the legendary cities that were the glory of Khwarazm. Bukhara was taken in early 1220 after its Turkish garrison was eliminated; several months later, most of the inhabitants of Samarkand, who had initially attempted to resist the invaders, were massacred. The Mongols inundated Gurganj, the former capital of Khwarazm, by opening the flood gates of a nearby river. And the ancient citadel of Bamian, where Chinggis Khan's much-loved grandson was killed by a defender's arrow, was obliterated and given the name "accursed city."

Over time the mass slaughters (often dramatized by references to pyramids of skulls) and the destruction of Khwarazm's ancient cities became defining features in accounts of the sudden emergence of the nomadic Mongols as conquerors of much of Eurasia. Until quite recently, most histories have depicted these and similar Mongol conquests as savage assaults by backward and barbaric peoples on ancient and highly developed centers of human civilization. But even the Khwarazm campaign, which was certainly one of the most violent launched by Mongol forces, provides ample illustration of another side to the Mongol imperium. Traditionally, the Mongols' contributions to cross-cultural exchange and human advance have been neglected by historians. But in many of the cities of Khwarazm, where the population resisted and was killed wholesale, skilled artisans were spared in the thousands. Some of these were sent to the Mongol capital at Karakorum. Others carried their skills throughout the empire, and both manufacturing and commerce soon thrived under the aegis of Mongol rule.

The century and a half of Mongol dominance also saw a revitalization of commerce and urban life in places like Bukara and Samarkand, along the Silk Road—the great trading network that had, for millennia, linked China and East Asia with the Middle East, India, and Europe (see the Visualizing the Past feature). Without question, the price of Muhammad Shah's treachery and the resistance that opened the way to this renewal was high—perhaps intolerably so—but it is important to take fully into account the constructive aftermath of Mongol expansionism in Khwarazm and other regions. ■

As we shall see in this chapter, the Mongols very often exhibited great curiosity and openness toward the peoples and cultures that they conquered. And perhaps none of them exemplified these qualities more than the founder of the Mongol empire, Chinggis Khan himself, who sought to attract philosophers and religious scholars from throughout Eurasia to his capital at Karakorum. He delighted in questioning them and debating the merits and drawbacks of different belief systems. In Samarkand and other cities where Muslim scholars and



**MAP 15.1 The Transcontinental Empire of Chinggis Khan** Easily the largest empire built before the Industrial Revolution, the Mongol imperium linked most of the great Eurasian centers of civilization.



900 C.E.	1100 C.E.	1200 C.E.	1250 C.E.	1300 C.E.
<b>907–1118</b> Khitan conquest of north China <b>1037–1194</b> Seljuk Turks dominate the Middle East	<b>1115–1234</b> Jurchens (Jin dynasty) rule north China <b>1126</b> Song dynasty flees to south China <b>1130–c. 1250</b> Almohads rule north Africa and Spain	<b>1206</b> Temujin takes the name of Chinggis Khan; Mongol state founded <b>1215</b> First Mongol attacks on north China; Beijing captured <b>1219–1223</b> First Mongol invasions of Russia and Islamic world <b>1227</b> Death of Chinggis Khan; Ogedei named successor <b>1234</b> Mongols take all of north China; end of Jin dynasty <b>1235–1279</b> Mongol conquest of south China; end of southern Song dynasty <b>1236–1240</b> Mongol conquest of Russia <b>1240–1241</b> Mongol invasion of western Europe	<b>1253</b> Mongol victory over Seljuk Turks; rise of Ottoman Turks in Middle East <b>1258</b> Mongol destruction of Baghdad <b>1260</b> Mamluk (slave) rulers of Egypt defeat Mongols at Ain Jalut; end of drive west <b>1260–1294</b> Reign of Kubilai Khan in China <b>1271–1295</b> Journey of Marco Polo to central Asia, China, and southeast Asia <b>1271–1368</b> Reign of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty in China <b>1274–1280</b> Failed Mongol invasions of Japan <b>1290s</b> First true guns used in China	<b>1336–1405</b> Life of Timur <b>mid-14th century</b> Spread of Black Death in Eurasia

mosque attendants refused to encourage resistance, they were usually left unharmed and permitted to attend to the spiritual and physical needs of the survivors. In the aftermath of the Mongol invasions, this privileging of religious leaders was reflected in a broader tolerance on the part of these nomadic overlords for the diverse faiths and ethnic groups that had come under their rule.

As we will argue in this chapter, although the Mongols were indeed fierce fighters and capable of terrible acts of retribution against those who dared to defy them, their conquests brought much more than death and devastation. At the peak of their power, the domains of the Mongol *khans* made up a vast realm in which once-hostile peoples lived together in peace and most religions were tolerated. From the khanate of Persia in the west to the empire of the fabled Kubilai Khan in the east, the law code promulgated by Chinggis Khan gave order to human interaction. Like the far less warlike Islamic expansion that preceded it, the Mongol explosion laid the foundations for human interaction on a global scale, extending and intensifying the world network that had been building since the classical age.

## THE TRANSCONTINENTAL EMPIRE OF CHINGGIS KHAN

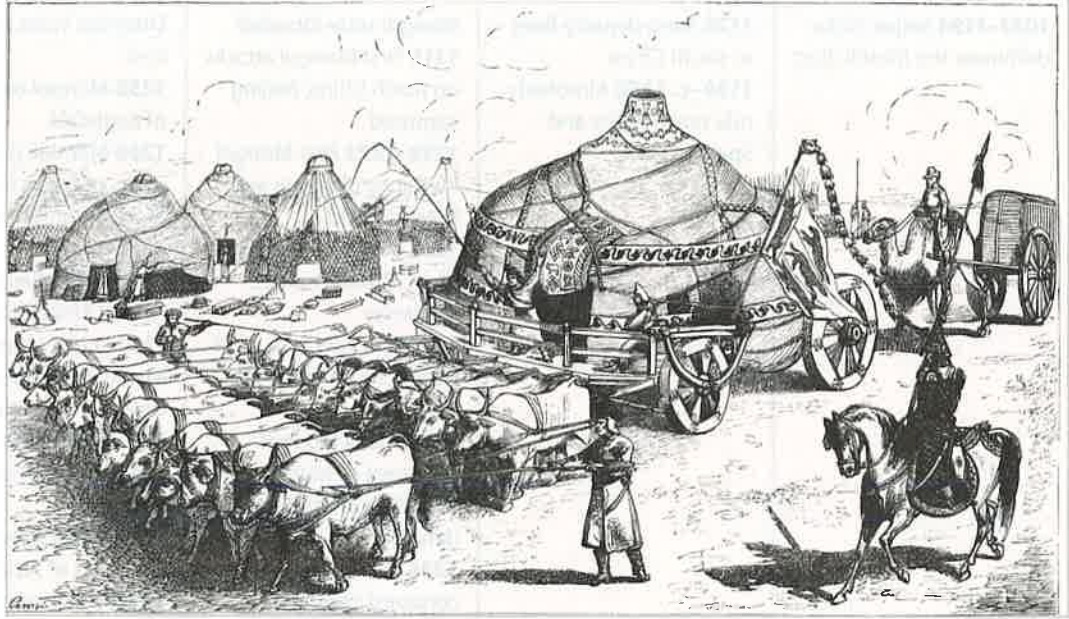
**15.1** What can the struggles Chinggis Khan faced in his youth and early career tell us about the organization and values of Mongol society?

In most ways, the Mongols epitomized nomadic society and culture. Their survival depended on the well-being of the herds of goats and sheep they drove from one pasture area to another according to the cycle of the seasons. Their staple foods were the meat and milk products provided by their herds, supplemented in most cases by grain and vegetables gained through trade with sedentary farming peoples. They also traded hides and dairy products for jewelry, weapons, and cloth made in urban centers. They dressed in sheepskins, made boots from tanned sheep hides, and lived in round felt tents made of wool sheared from their animals (Figure 15.2). The tough little ponies they rode to round up their herds, hunt wild animals, and make war were equally essential to their way of life. Mongol

In the early 13th century, long-standing obstacles to Mongol expansion were overcome, primarily because of the leadership of Chinggis Khan. The Mongols and allied nomadic groups built an empire that stretched from the Middle East to the China Sea.



Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Excerpt from William of Rubruck's Account of the Mongols



**FIGURE 15.2** This sketch shows a Mongol household on the move. The Mongols depended on sheep for food, clothing, and shelter, and they rode both horses and camels. As the drawing shows, they also used oxen to transport their housing for seasonal or longer-term migrations. The Mongols mounted their tents and other goods on enormous wagons so heavy that large teams of oxen were required to pull them. This combination of animal transport and comfortable but movable shelters made the Mongols one of the most mobile preindustrial societies.

boys and girls could ride as soon as they were able to walk. Mongol warriors could ride for days on end, sleeping and eating in the saddle.

Like the early Arabs and other nomadic peoples we have encountered, the basic unit of Mongol society was the tribe, which was divided into kin-related clans whose members camped and herded together on a regular basis. When threatened by external enemies or preparing for raids on other nomads or invasions of sedentary areas, clans and tribes could be combined in great confederations. Depending on the skills of their leaders, these confederations could be held together for months or even years. But when the threat had passed or the raiding was done, clans and tribes drifted back to their own pasturelands and campsites. At all organizational levels, leaders were elected by the free men of the group. Although women exercised influence within the family and had the right to be heard in tribal councils, men dominated leadership positions.

Courage in battle, usually evidenced by bravery in the hunt, and the ability to forge alliances and attract dependents were vital leadership skills. A strong leader could quickly build up a large following of chiefs from other clans and tribal groups. If the leader grew old and feeble or suffered severe reverses, his subordinates would quickly abandon him. He expected this to happen, and the subordinates felt no remorse. Their survival and that of their dependents hinged on attaching themselves to a strong tribal leader.

## The Making of a Great Warrior: The Early Career of Chinggis Khan

Since the early millennia of recorded history, nomadic peoples speaking Mongolian languages had enjoyed moments of power and had actually carved out regional kingdoms in north China in the 4th and 10th centuries c.e. In the early 12th century, Chinggis Khan's (JEHNG-gih's kahn) great-grandfather, Kabul Khan, led a Mongol alliance that had won glory by defeating an army sent against them by the Jin kingdom of north China. Soon after this victory, Kabul Khan became ill and died. His successors could neither defeat their nomadic enemies nor hold the Mongol alliance together. Divided and beaten, the Mongols fell on hard times.



Chinggis Khan, who as a youth was named Temujin, was born in the 1170s into one of the splinter clans that fought for survival in the decades after the death of Kabul Khan. Temujin's father was an able leader who built up a decent following and negotiated a promise of marriage between his eldest son and the daughter of a stronger Mongol chief. According to Mongol accounts, just when the family fortunes seemed to be on the upswing, Temujin's father was poisoned by the agents of a rival nomadic group. Suddenly, Temujin, who was still a teenager, was thrust into a position of leadership. But most of the chiefs who had attached themselves to his father refused to follow a mere boy, whose prospects of survival appeared to be slim.

In the months that followed, Temujin's much-reduced encampment was threatened and finally attacked by a rival tribe. He was taken prisoner in 1182, locked into a wooden collar, and led in humiliation to the camp of his enemies. After a daring midnight escape, Temujin rejoined his mother and brothers and found refuge for his tiny band of followers deep in the mountains. Facing extermination, Temujin did what any sensible nomad leader would have done: He and his people joined the camp of a more powerful Mongol chieftain who had once been aided by Temujin's father. With the support of this powerful leader, Temujin avenged the insults of the clan that had enslaved him and another that had taken advantage of his weakness to raid his camp for horses and women.

These successes and Temujin's growing reputation as a warrior and military commander soon won him allies and clan chiefs eager to attach themselves to a leader with a promising future (Figure 15.3). Within a decade, the youthful Temujin had defeated his Mongol rivals and routed the forces sent to crush him by other nomadic peoples. In 1206, at a **kuriltai**, or meeting of all of the Mongol chieftains, Temujin—renamed Chinggis Khan—was elected the **khagan**, or supreme ruler, of the Mongol tribes. United under a strong leader, the Mongols prepared to launch a massive assault on an unsuspecting world.

## Building the Mongol War Machine

The men of the Mongol tribes that had elevated Chinggis Khan to leadership were natural warriors. Trained from youth not only to ride but also to hunt and fight, they were physically tough, mobile, and accustomed to killing and death. They wielded a variety of weapons, including lances, hatchets, and iron maces. None of their weapons was as devastating as their powerful short bows. A Mongol warrior could fire a quiver of arrows with stunning accuracy without breaking the stride of his horse. He could hit enemy soldiers as distant as 350 yards (the range for the roughly contemporary English longbow was 250 yards) while ducking under the belly of his pony, or leaning over the horse's rump. The fact that the Mongol armies were entirely cavalry meant that they moved so rapidly that their advances alone could be demoralizing to enemy forces.

To a people whose very lifestyle bred mobility, physical courage, and a love of combat, Chinggis Khan and his many able subordinate commanders brought organization, discipline, and unity of command. The old quarrels and vendettas between clans and tribes were overridden by loyalty to the khagan. Thus, energies once devoted to infighting were now directed toward conquest and the forcible exaction of tribute, both in areas controlled by other nomadic groups and in the civilized centers that fringed the steppes on all sides. The Mongol forces were divided into armies made up of basic fighting units called **tumens**, each consisting of 10,000 warriors. Each **tumen** was further divided into units of 1000, 100, and 10 warriors. Commanders at each level were responsible for training, arming, and disciplining the cavalymen under their charge. The **tumens** were also divided into heavy cavalry, which carried lances and wore some metal armor, and light cavalry, which relied primarily on the bow and arrow and leather helmets and body covering. Even more lightly armed were the scouting parties that rode ahead of Mongol armies and, using flags and special signal fires, kept the main force informed of the enemy's movements.

**kuriltai** [KURL-tuh] Meeting of all Mongol chieftains at which the supreme ruler of all tribes was selected.

**khagan** [KAH-gahn] Title of the supreme ruler of the Mongol tribes.

**tumens** Basic fighting units of the Mongol forces; consisted of 10,000 cavalymen; each unit was further divided into units of 1000, 100, and 10.



**FIGURE 15.3** In this miniature from a Persian history, Chinggis Khan is shown acknowledging the submission of a rival prince. Although he conquered a vast empire, Chinggis Khan did not live long enough to build a regular bureaucracy to govern it. His rule was dependent on vassal chieftains such as the one shown in the painting, whose loyalty in turn depended on the maintenance of Mongol military might. When the military strength of the Mongol empire began to decline, subject princes soon rose up to establish the independence of their domains.

Chinggis Khan also created a separate messenger force whose bodies were tightly bandaged to allow them to remain in the saddle for days, switching from horse to horse to carry urgent messages between the khagan and his commanders. Military discipline had long been secured by personal ties between commanders and ordinary soldiers. Mongol values, which made courage in battle a prerequisite for male self-esteem, were buttressed by a formal code that dictated the immediate execution of a warrior who deserted his unit. Chinggis Khan's swift executions left little doubt about the fate of traitors to his own cause or turncoats who abandoned enemy commanders in his favor. His generosity to brave foes was also legendary. The most famous of the latter, a man named Jebe, nicknamed the Arrow, won the khagan's affection and high posts in the Mongol armies by standing his ground after his troops had been routed and fearlessly shooting Chinggis Khan's horse out from under him.

A special unit supplied Mongol armies with excellent maps of the areas they were to invade. These were drawn largely according to the information supplied by Chinggis Khan's extensive network of spies and informers. New weapons, including a variety of flaming and exploding arrows, gunpowder projectiles, and later bronze cannons, were also devised for the Mongol forces. By the time Chinggis Khan's armies rode east and west in search of plunder and conquest in the second decade of the 13th century, they were among the best armed and trained and the most experienced, disciplined, and mobile soldiers in the world.

## Conquest: The Mongol Empire Under Chinggis Khan

When he was proclaimed the khagan in 1206, Temujin probably was not yet 40 years old. At that point, he was the supreme ruler of nearly one-half million Mongols and the overlord of 1 to 2 million more nomads who had been defeated by his armies or had allied themselves with this promising young commander. But Chinggis Khan had much greater ambitions. He once said that his greatest pleasure in life was making war, defeating enemies, forcing "their beloved [to] weep, riding on their horses, embracing their wives and daughters." He came to see himself and his sons as men marked for a special destiny: warriors born to conquer the known world. In 1207, he set out to fulfill this ambition. His first campaigns humbled the Tangut (TANG-uh) kingdom of Xi Xia (shee-shyah) in northwest China (Map 15.1), whose ruler was forced to declare himself a vassal of the khagan and pay a hefty tribute. Next, the Mongol armies attacked the much more powerful Jin empire, which the Manchu-related Jurchens (YUHR-chehns) had established a century earlier in north China.

In these campaigns, the Mongol armies were confronted for the first time with large, fortified cities whose inhabitants assumed that they could easily withstand the assaults of these uncouth nomads from the steppes. Indeed, the Mongol invaders were thwarted at first by the intricate defensive works that the Chinese had perfected over the centuries to deter nomadic incursions. But the adaptive Mongols, with the help of captured Chinese artisans and military commanders, soon devised a whole arsenal of siege weapons. These included battering rams, catapults that hurled rocks and explosive balls, and bamboo rockets that spread fire and fear in besieged towns.

Chinggis Khan and the early Mongol commanders had little regard for these towns, whose inhabitants they saw as soft. Therefore, when they met resistance, the Mongols adopted a policy of terrifying retribution. Although the Mongols often spared the lives of famous scholars, whom they employed as advisors, and artisans with particularly useful skills, towns that fought back were usually sacked once they had been taken. The townspeople were slaughtered or sold into slavery; their homes, palaces, mosques, and temples were reduced to rubble. Towns that surrendered without a fight were usually spared this fate, although they were required to pay tribute to their Mongol conquerors as the price of their deliverance.

## The First Assault on the Islamic World

Once they had established a foothold in north China and solidified their empire in the steppes, the Mongol armies moved westward against the Kara Khitai (KAH-rah KIHT-uh) empire, which had been established by a Mongolian-speaking people a century earlier (Map 15.1). Having overwhelmed and annexed the Kara Khitai by 1219, and, as we have seen, provoked by Muhammad Shah, Chinggis Khan led his armies in the conquest of the Khwarazm (kwahr-ahzm) empire further west. Again and again, the Mongols used their favorite battle tactic in these encounters. Cavalry were sent to attack the enemy's main force. Feigning defeat, the cavalry retreated, drawing the opposing forces out of formation in the hope of a chance to slaughter the fleeing Mongols. Once the enemy's pursuing horsemen

## DOCUMENT

## A European Assessment of the Virtues and Vices of the Mongols

AS WE HAVE SEEN, MUCH OF what we know about the history of nomadic peoples is based on the records and reactions of observers from sedentary cultures that were often their mortal enemies. Some of the most famous observers were those, including Marco Polo, who visited the vast Mongol domains at the height of the khans' power in the 12th and 13th centuries. Many tried to assess the strengths and weaknesses of these people, who were suddenly having such a great impact on the history of much of the known world. One of the most insightful of these observers was a Franciscan friar named Giovanni de Piano Carpini. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent Piano Carpini as an envoy to the "Great Khan" to protest the recent assaults by his Mongol forces on Christian Europe. The pope's protest had little effect on the Mongol decision to strike elsewhere in the following years. But Piano Carpini's extensive travels produced one of the most detailed accounts of Mongol society and culture to be written in the mid-13th century. As the following passages suggest, like other visitors from sedentary areas, he gave the Mongols a very mixed review:

The aforesaid men (namely the Tartars) obey their lords more than anyone else in the world, whether clergymen or laymen, and they respect them greatly and do not easily lie to them. The Tartars seldom argue to the point of insult, and there are no wars, quarrels, injuries or murders among them.

Each man respects his fellow and they are friendly to each other, and though food is scarce among them, there is still enough to share . . . . When riding horses they tolerate great cold and heat. Nor are the men touchy; they do not appear jealous of their neighbors, and it seems that none are envious. No man

turns another away, but instead helps him and supports him as much as possible.

The Tartars are prouder than other men and despise everyone else; indeed it is as though they held outsiders for nothing whether noble or base born . . . . The Tartars become quite angry with other men, are indignant by nature and lie to all outsiders; almost no truth is found among them. At first they are very mild, but in the end they sting like a scorpion. The Tartars are subtle and treacherous and, if they can, they get around everything by cunning.

The men are filthy with regard to their clothing, food and other things . . . . Drunkenness is honorable among the Tartars . . . . They are very jealous and greedy, demanding of favors, tenacious of what they have and stingy givers, and they think nothing of killing foreigners. In short, because their evil habits are so numerous they can hardly be set down.

### QUESTIONS

- What might the qualities of the Mongols that Piano Carpini emphasizes tell us about his own society and its values or shortcomings?
- In what respects are the Mongol virtues he extols linked to the achievements of Chinggis Khan and the stunning Mongol wars of conquest?
- To what extent would they be typical of nomadic societies more generally?
- Why might his account of Mongol vices be simply dismissed as sour grapes resulting from European defeats?

had spread themselves over the countryside, the main force of Mongol heavy cavalry, until then concealed, attacked them in a devastating pincer formation. And the great cities of adversary powers fell to the new siege weapons and tactics the Mongols had perfected in their north China campaigns.

Within two years, his once flourishing cities in ruin and his kingdom in Mongol hands, Muhammad Shah, having retreated across his empire, died on a desolate island in the Caspian Sea. In addition to greatly enlarging his domains, Chinggis Khan's victories meant that he could bring tens of thousands of Turkic horsemen into his armies. By 1227, the year of his death, the Mongols ruled an empire that stretched from eastern Persia to the North China Sea.

### Long Distance Trade and Cross-Cultural Exchange: Life under the Mongol Imperium

Despite their aggressiveness as warriors and the destruction they could unleash on those who resisted their demands for submission and tribute, the Mongols were remarkably astute and tolerant rulers. Chinggis Khan himself set the standard. He was a complex man, capable of gloating over the ruin of



**Karakorum** Capital of the Mongol empire under Chinggis Khan, 1162 to 1227.

his enemies but also open to new ideas and committed to building a world where the diverse peoples of his empire could live together in peace. Although illiterate, Chinggis Khan was neither the ignorant savage nor the cultureless vandal often depicted in the accounts of civilized writers—usually those who had never met him. Once the conquered peoples had been subdued, he took a keen interest in their arts and learning, although he refused to live in their cities. Instead, he established a new capital at **Karakorum** on the steppes and summoned the wise and clever from all parts of the empire to the lavish palace of tents with gilded pillars where he lived with his wives and closest advisors.

At Karakorum, Chinggis Khan consulted with Confucian scholars about how to rule China, with Muslim engineers about how to build siege weapons and improve trade with the lands farther west, and with Daoist holy men, whom he hoped could give him an elixir that would make him immortal. Although he himself followed the *shamanistic* (focused on nature spirits) beliefs of his ancestors, all religions were tolerated in his empire. An administrative framework that drew on the advice and talents of both Muslim and Chinese bureaucrats was created. A script was devised for the Mongolian language to facilitate recordkeeping and the standardization of laws. Chinggis Khan's legal code was enforced by specially designated policemen. Much of the code was aimed at ending the divisions and quarrels that had so long plagued the Mongols and other nomadic peoples. Grazing lands were allotted to specific tribes, and harsh penalties were established for rustling livestock or stealing horses.

The Mongol conquests brought peace to much of Asia that in some areas persisted for generations. In the towns of the empire, handicraft production and scholarship flourished and artistic creativity was allowed free expression. Secure trade routes made for prosperous merchants and wealthy, cosmopolitan cities. One Muslim historian wrote of the peoples within the Mongol empire that they “enjoyed such a peace that a man might have journeyed from the land of sunrise to the land of sunset with a golden platter upon his head without suffering the least violence from anyone.” Paradoxically, Mongol expansion, which sedentary chroniclers condemned as a “barbarian” orgy of violence and destruction, also became a major force for economic and social development and the enhancement of civilized life. But there was also a downside, the movement of merchants and commercial goods also facilitated the spread of disease. In fact, some historians believe that the infamous intercontinental wave of bubonic plague that came to be known as the Black Death was carried from China by the fleas on rats nesting in the saddle bags of Mongol cavalymen across central Asia to the Black Sea and from there by ships to the Mediterranean and Europe.

## The Death of Chinggis Khan and the Division of the Empire

In 1226, his wars to the west won, Chinggis Khan turned east with an army of 180,000 warriors to complete the conquest of China that he regretted having left unfinished more than a decade earlier. After routing a much larger Tangut (TANG-uht) army in a battle fought on the frozen waters of the Yellow River, the Mongol armies overran the kingdom of Xi Xia, plundering, burning, and mercilessly hunting down Tangut survivors. As his forces closed in on the Tangut capital and last refuge, Chinggis Khan, who had been injured in a skirmish some months earlier, fell grievously ill. After lecturing his sons on the dangers of quarreling among themselves for the spoils of the empire, the khagan died in August 1227.

With one last outburst of wrath, this time directed against death itself, the Mongols carried his body back to Mongolia for burial. The Mongol forces escorting the funeral procession hunted down and killed every human and animal in its path. The vast pasturelands the Mongols now controlled were divided between Chinggis Khan's three remaining sons and **Batu**, a grandson and heir of the khagan's recently deceased son, Jochi. Towns and cultivated areas such as those in north China and parts of Persia were considered the common property of the Mongol ruling family. A kuriltai was convened at Karakorum, the Mongol capital, to select a successor to the great conqueror. In accordance with Chinggis Khan's preference, **Ogedei**, his third son, was elected khagan. Although not as capable a military leader as his brothers or nephews, Ogedei was a crafty diplomat and deft manipulator. As it turned out, these skills were much needed to keep the ambitious heads of the vast provinces of the empire from each other's throats.

For nearly a decade, Ogedei directed Mongol energies into further campaigns and conquests. The areas targeted by this new round of Mongol expansion paid the price for peace within the Mongol empire. The fate of the most important victims—Russia and Eastern Europe, the Islamic heartlands, and China—will be the focus of most of the rest of this chapter.

**Batu** [BAH-too] Ruler of Golden Horde; one of Chinggis Khan's grandsons; responsible for invasion of Russia beginning in 1236.

**Ogedei** [OHGD-dih] (1186–1241) Third son of Chinggis Khan; succeeded Chinggis Khan as khagan of the Mongols following his father's death.



## THE MONGOL DRIVE TO THE WEST

### 15.2 What were the key components that made for the remarkable success of the Mongol war machine?

Russia and Europe were added to the Mongols' agenda for world conquest. Subjugating these regions became the project of the armies of the **Golden Horde**, named after the golden tent of the early khans of the western sector of the Mongol Empire. The territories of the Golden Horde made up one of the four great **khanates** into which the Mongol Empire was divided at the time of Chinggis Khan's death (Map 15.2). Under the rule of Chinggis Khan's grandson Batu, Mongol armies began an invasion of Russia in 1236. In a very real sense, the assault on Russia was a side campaign, a chance to fine-tune the war machine and win a little booty on the way to Western Europe.

As we saw in Chapter 10, in the first half of the 13th century when the Mongol warriors first descended, Russia had been divided into numerous petty kingdoms, centered on trading cities such as Novgorod and Kiev (see Map 10.3). By this time, Kiev, which originally dominated much of central Russia, had been in decline for some time. As a result, there was no paramount power to rally Russian forces against the invaders. Despite the warnings of those who had witnessed the crushing defeats suffered by the Georgians in the early 1220s, the princes of Russia refused to cooperate. They preferred to fight alone, and they were routed individually.

In 1236, Batu led a Mongol force of more than 120,000 cavalymen into the Russian heartlands. From 1237 to 1238 and later in 1240, these Tatars, or Tartars (meaning people from hell), as the Russians called them, carried out the only successful winter invasions in Russian history. In fact, the Mongols preferred to fight in the winter. The frozen earth provided good footing for their horses, and frozen rivers gave them access to their enemies. One after another, the Mongol armies defeated the often much larger forces of local nomadic groups and Russian princes. Cities such as Ryazan, Moscow, and Vladimir, which resisted the Mongol command to surrender, were destroyed; their inhabitants were slaughtered or led into slavery. As a contemporary Russian chronicler observed, "No eye remained to weep for the dead." Just as it seemed that all of Russia would be ravaged by the Mongols, whom the Russians compared to locusts, Batu's armies withdrew. The largest cities, Novgorod and Kiev, appeared to have been spared. Russian priests thanked God; the Mongol commanders blamed the spring thaw, which slowed the Mongol horsemen and raised the risk of defeat in the treacherous mud.

The Mongols returned in force in the winter of 1240. In this second campaign, even the great walled city of Kiev, which had reached a population of more than 100,000 by the end of the 12th century, fell. Enraged by Kievan resistance—its ruler had ordered the Mongol envoys thrown from the city walls—the Mongols reduced the greatest city in Russia to a smoldering ruin. The cathedral of Saint Sophia was spared, but the rest of the city was looted and destroyed, and its inhabitants were smoked out and slaughtered. Novgorod braced itself for the Mongol onslaught. Again, according to the Russian chroniclers, it was "miraculously" spared. In fact, it was saved largely because of the willingness of its prince, Alexander Nevsky, to submit, at least temporarily, to Mongol demands. In addition, the Mongol armies were eager to move on to the main event: the invasion of Western Europe, which they perceived as a far richer but equally vulnerable region.

### Russia in Bondage

The crushing victories of Batu's armies initiated nearly two and a half centuries of Mongol dominance in Russia. Russian princes were forced to submit as vassals of the khan of the Golden Horde and to pay tribute. Mongol demands fell particularly heavily on the Russian peasantry, who had to give their crops and labor to both their own princes and the Mongol overlords. Impoverished and ever fearful of the lightning raids of Mongol marauders, the peasants fled to remote areas or became, in effect, the serfs (see Chapter 10) of the Russian ruling class in return for protection. Some Russian towns made profits on the increased trade made possible by the Mongol links. Sometimes the gains exceeded the tribute they paid to the Golden Horde. No town benefited from the Mongol presence more than Moscow. Badly plundered and partially burned in the early Mongol assaults, the city was gradually rebuilt, and its ruling princes steadily swallowed up nearby towns and surrounding villages. After 1328, Moscow also profited from its status as the tribute collector for the Mongol khans. Its princes

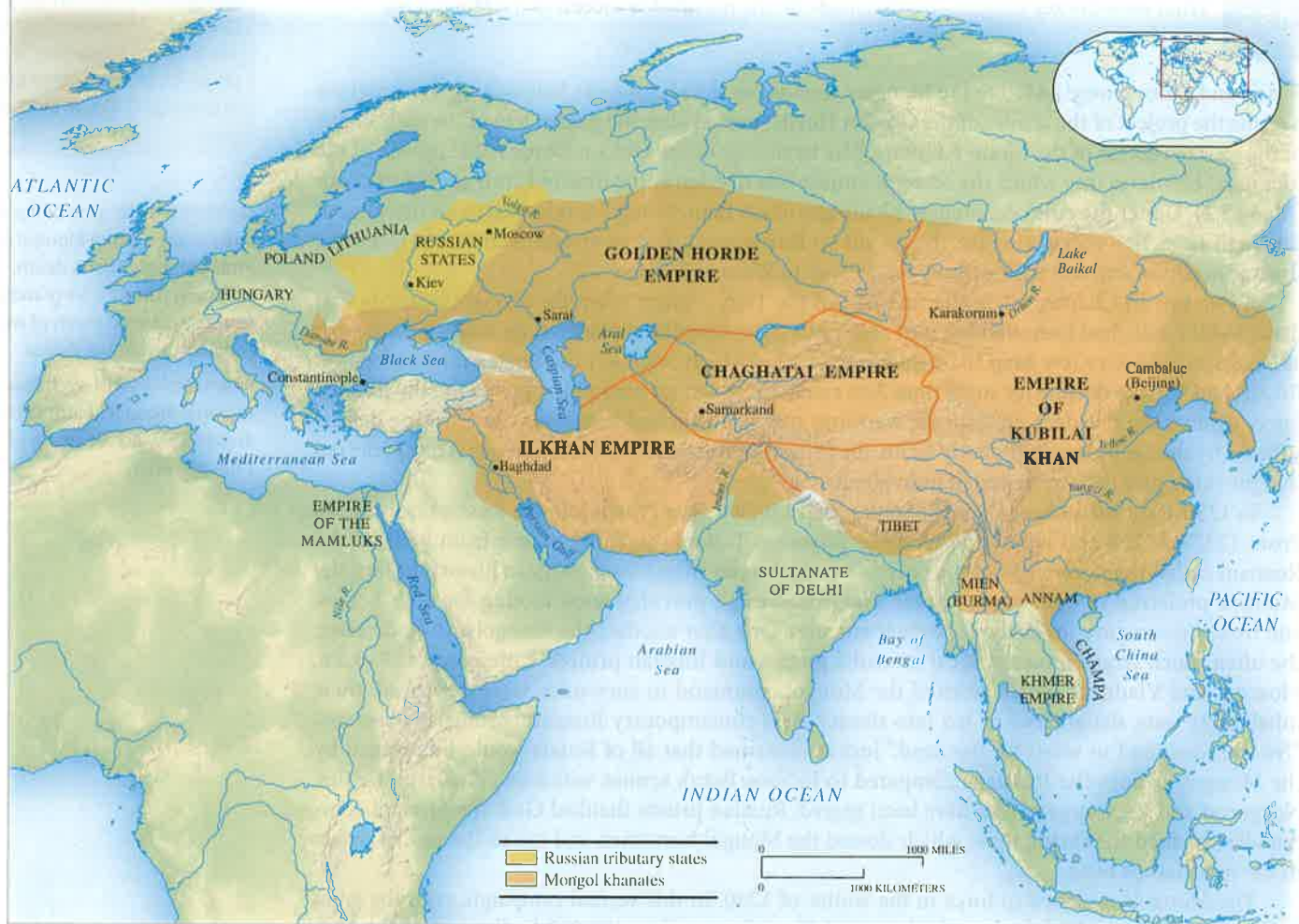
Mongol commanders launched raids into Georgia and across the Russian steppe that set the stage for their conquest of the vulnerable Christian lands to the west.

**Golden Horde** One of the four subdivisions of the Mongol empire after Chinggis Khan's death, originally ruled by his grandson Batu; territory covered much of what is today south central Russia.

**khanates** [KAHN-ayts] Four regional Mongol kingdoms that arose following the death of Chinggis Khan.



Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: The Mongols: An Excerpt from the Novgorod Chronicle, 1315



**MAP 15.2 The Four Khanates of the Divided Mongol Empire** Sheer distances and slow-moving modes of transportation made it difficult to hold together the vast domains conquered by Chinggis Khan and his immediate successors.

not only used their position to fill their own coffers but also annexed other towns as punishment for falling behind on tribute payments.

As Moscow grew in strength, the power of the Golden Horde declined. Mongol religious toleration benefited both the Orthodox Church and Moscow. The choice of Moscow as the seat of the Orthodox leaders brought new sources of wealth to its princes and buttressed its claims to be Russia's leading city. In 1380, those claims got an additional boost when the princes of Moscow shifted from being tribute collectors to being the defenders of Russia. In alliance with other Russian vassals, they raised an army that defeated the forces of the Golden Horde at the **Battle of Kulikova**. Their victory and the devastating blows Timur's attacks dealt the Golden Horde two decades later effectively broke the Mongol hold over Russia.

**Battle of Kulikova** Russian army victory over the forces of the Golden Horde; helped break Mongol hold over Russia.

Although much of the Mongols' impact was negative, their conquest was a turning point in Russian history in several ways. In addition to their importance to Moscow and the Orthodox Church, Mongol contacts led to changes in Russian military organization and tactics and in the political style of Russian rulers. Claims that the Tatars were responsible for Russian despotism, either tsarist or Stalinist, are clearly overstated. Still, the Mongol example may have influenced the desire of Russian princes to centralize their control and reduce the limitations placed on their power by the landed nobility, clergy, and wealthy merchants. By far the greatest effects of Mongol rule were those resulting

from Russia's isolation from Christian lands farther west. On one hand, the Mongols protected a divided and weak Russia from the attacks of much more powerful kingdoms such as Poland, Lithuania, and Hungary (Map 15.2). On the other hand, in the period of Mongol rule, Russia was cut off from key transformations in western Europe that were inspired by the Renaissance and led ultimately to the Reformation.

## Mongol Incursions and the Retreat from Europe

Until news of the Mongol campaigns in Russia reached European peoples such as the Germans, Poles, and Hungarians farther west, Christian leaders had been quite pleased by the rise of a new military power in central Asia. Rumors and reports from Christians living in the area, chafing under what they saw as persecution by their Muslim overlords, convinced many in western Europe that the Mongol khan was none other than **Prester John**. Prester John was the name given to a mythical rich and powerful Christian monarch whose kingdom had supposedly been cut off from Europe by the Muslim conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries. Sometimes located in Africa, sometimes in central Asia, Prester John loomed large in the European imagination as a potential ally who could strike the Muslim enemy from the rear and join up with European Christians to destroy their common adversary. The Mongol assault on the Muslim Khwarazm empire appeared to confirm the speculation that Chinggis Khan was indeed Prester John.

The assault on Christian, although Orthodox, Russia made it clear that the Mongol armies were neither the legions of Prester John nor more partial to Christians than to any other people who stood in their way. The rulers of Europe were nevertheless slow to realize the magnitude of the threat the Mongols posed to western Christendom. When Mongol envoys, one of whom was an Englishman, arrived at the court of King Bela of Hungary demanding that he surrender a group of nomads who had fled to his domains after being beaten by the Mongols in Russia, the king contemptuously dismissed them. King Bela also rebuffed Batu's demand that he submit to Mongol rule. The Hungarian monarch reasoned that he was the ruler of a powerful kingdom, whereas the Mongols were just another ragtag band of nomads in search of easy plunder. His refusal to negotiate provided the Mongols with a pretext to invade. Their ambition remained the conquest and pillage of all western Europe. That this goal was clearly attainable was demonstrated by the sound drubbing they gave to the Hungarians in 1240 and later to a mixed force of Christian knights led by the Polish ruler, King Henry of Silesia.

These victories left the Mongols free to raid and pillage from the Adriatic Sea region in the south to Poland and the German states of the north. It also left the rest of Europe open to Mongol conquest. Just as the kings and clergy of the western portions of Christendom were beginning to fear the worst, the Mongol forces disappeared. The death of the khagan Ogedei, in the distant Mongol capital at Karakorum, forced Batu to withdraw in preparation for the struggle for succession. The campaign for the conquest of Europe was never resumed. Perhaps Batu was satisfied with the huge empire of the Golden Horde that he ruled from his splendid new capital at Sarai on the Volga River in what is southern Russia today. Most certainly the Mongols had found richer lands to plunder in the following decades in the Muslim empires of the Middle East. Whatever the reason, Europe was spared the full fury of the Mongol assault. Of the civilizations that fringed the steppe homelands of the Mongols, only India was as fortunate.

## The Mongol Assault on the Islamic Heartland

After the Mongol conquest of the Khwarazm empire, it was only a matter of time before they struck westward against the far wealthier Muslim empires of Mesopotamia and North Africa (see Map 8.2 and Map 15.2). The conquest of these areas became the main project of Hulegu, another grandson of Chinggis Khan and the ruler of the Ilkhan portions of the Mongol empire. As we saw in Chapter 8, one of the key results of Hulegu's assaults on the Muslim heartlands was the capture and destruction of Baghdad in 1258 (Figure 15.4). The murder of the Abbasid caliph, one of some 800,000 people who were reported to have been killed in Mongol retribution for the city's resistance, ended the dynasty that had ruled the core regions of the Islamic world since the mid-8th century. A major Mongol victory over the Seljuk Turks in 1243 also proved critical to the subsequent history of the region. It opened up Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) to conquest by a different Turkic-speaking people, the Ottomans, who would eventually become the next great power in the Islamic heartlands.

**Prester John** In legends popular from 12th to 17th century, a mythical Christian monarch whose kingdom was cut off from Europe by Muslim conquests; Chinggis Khan was originally believed to be this mythical ruler.



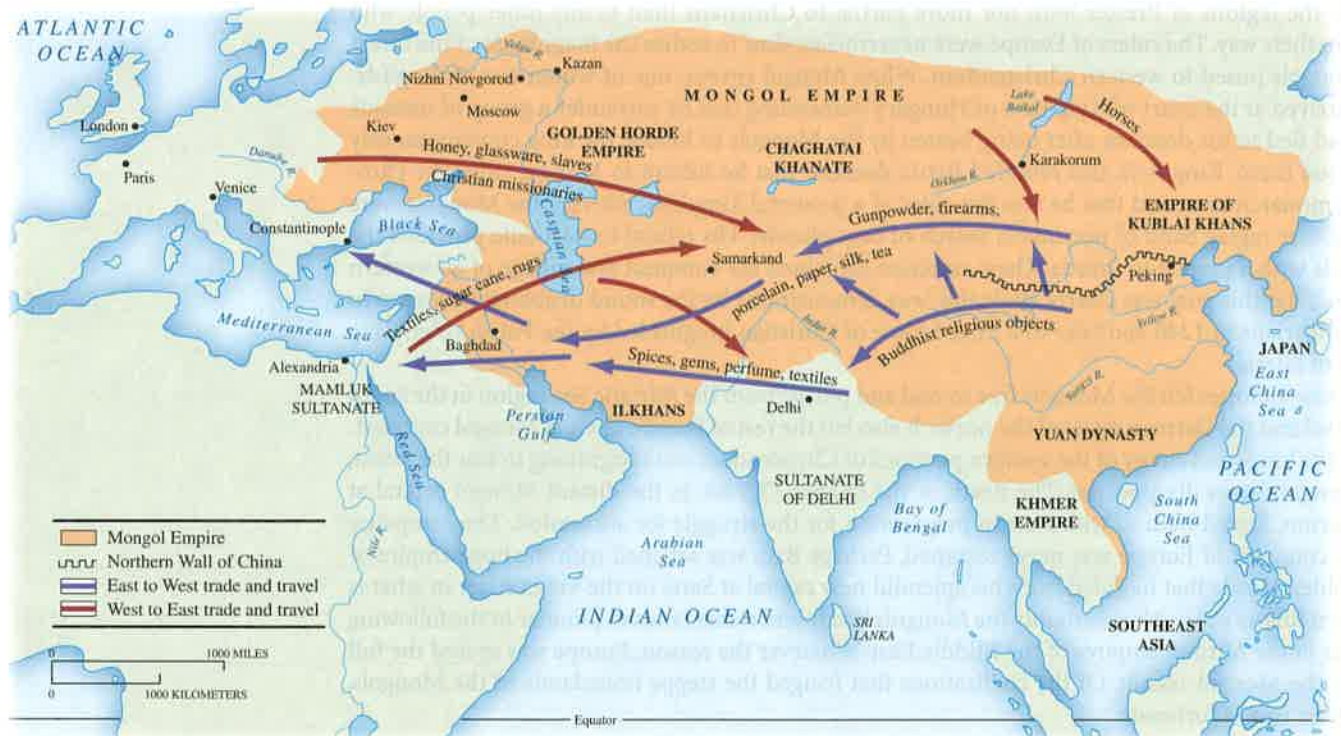
## VISUALIZING THE PAST

# The Mongol Empire as a Bridge Between Civilizations

CHINGGIS KHAN AND HIS SUCCESSORS ACTIVELY promoted the growth of trade and travelers by protecting the caravans that made their way across the ancient Asian silk routes. The Mongols also established rest stations for weary merchants and fortified outposts for those harassed by bandits. These measures transformed the Mongol imperium into a massive conduit between the civilizations of Europe, the Middle East, and the rest of Asia. The map illustrates a wide variety of marketable goods and inventions, as well as the agents and objects of several religions, between areas within the empire and along its lengthy borders. Study these patterns and then answer the questions that follow.

### QUESTIONS

- Discuss some of the major ways in which the Mongol empire facilitated exchanges and interaction between civilizations and culture areas. What were the main centers of different kinds of products?
- What were the main directions in which ideas, goods, and new inventions flowed?
- Based on the discussions in the preceding chapters, who were some of the key agents of these exchanges?
- Why were the networks of exchange established by the Mongols so short-lived?



MAP 15.3 The Mongol Empire and the Global Exchange Network

**Baibars** [bl bars] (1223–1277) Commander of Mamluk forces at Ain Jalut in 1260; originally enslaved by Mongols and sold to Egyptians.

**Berke** [ber kuh] (r. 1257–1266) A ruler of the Golden Horde; converted to Islam; his threat to Hulegu combined with the growing power of Mamluks in Egypt forestalled further Mongol conquests in the Middle East.

Given the fate of Baghdad, it is understandable that Muslim historians treated the coming of the Mongols as one of the great catastrophes in the history of Islam. The murder of the caliph and his family left the faithful without a central authority. The sack of Baghdad and many other cities from central Asia to the shores of the Mediterranean devastated the focal points of Islamic civilization. One contemporary Muslim chronicler, Ibn al-Athir, found the violence the Mongols had done to his people so horrific that he apologized to his readers for recounting it and wished that he had not been born to see it. He lamented,

In just one year they seized the most populous, the most beautiful, and the best cultivated part of the earth whose inhabitants excelled in character and urbanity. In the countries that have not yet been



overrun by them, everyone spends the night afraid that they may yet appear there, too. . . . Thus, Islam and the Muslims were struck, at that time by a disaster such as no people had experienced before.

Given these reverses, one can imagine the relief the peoples of the Muslim world felt when the Mongols were finally defeated in 1260 by the armies of the Mamluk, or slave, dynasty of Egypt. Ironically, **Baibars**, the commander of the Egyptian forces, and many of his lieutenants had been enslaved by the Mongols some years earlier and sold in Egypt, where they rose to power through military service. The Muslim victory was won with the rare cooperation of the Christians, who allowed Baibars's forces to cross unopposed through their much diminished crusader territories in Palestine. Christian support demonstrated how far the former crusader states had gone in accommodating their more powerful Muslim neighbors.

Hulegu was in central Asia, engaged in yet another succession struggle, when the battle occurred. Upon his return, he was forced to reconsider his plans for conquest of the entire Muslim world. The Mamluks were deeply entrenched and growing stronger; Hulegu was threatened by his cousin **Berke**, the new khan of the Golden Horde to the north, who had converted to Islam. After openly clashing with Berke and learning of Baibars's overtures for an alliance with the Golden Horde, Hulegu decided to settle for the kingdom he already ruled, which stretched from the frontiers of Byzantium to the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in central Asia (Map 15.2).

## THE MONGOL INTERLUDE IN CHINESE HISTORY

### 15.3

Compare the impact of Mongol conquest and rule in the Muslim Middle East, Russia, and China: On which area was there a greater impact, to what extent did the Mongol interlude alter the historical trajectory of each these major culture areas, and what were the similarities and differences in terms of the nature of and effects of Mongol invasions and rule?

Soon after Ogedei was elected as the great khan, the Mongol advance into China was resumed. Having conquered the Xi Xia and Jin empires, the Mongol commanders turned to what remained of the Song Empire in south China (Maps 15.1 and 15.2). In the campaigns against the Song, the Mongol forces were directed by **Kublai Khan** (Figure 15.5). Kubilai was one of the grandsons of Chinggis Khan, and he would play a pivotal role in Chinese history for the next half century. Even under a decadent dynasty that had long neglected its defenses, south China was one of the toughest areas for the Mongols to conquer. From 1235 to 1279, the Mongols were constantly on the march; they fought battle after battle and besieged seemingly innumerable, well-fortified Chinese cities. In 1260, Kubilai assumed the title of the great khan, much to the chagrin of his cousins who ruled other parts of the empire. A decade later, in 1271, on the recommendation of Chinese advisors, he changed the name of his Mongol regime to a Chinese-language dynastic title, the **Yuan**. Although he was still nearly a decade away from fully defeating the last-ditch efforts of Confucian bureaucrats and Chinese generals to save the Song dynasty, Kubilai ruled most of China. He now set about the task of establishing more permanent Mongol control.

As the different regions of China came under Mongol rule, Kubilai passed many laws to preserve the distinction between Mongol and Chinese. He forbade Chinese scholars to learn the Mongol script, which was used for records and correspondence at the upper levels of the imperial government. Mongols were forbidden to marry ethnic Chinese, and only women from nomadic families were selected for the imperial harem. Even friendships between the two peoples were discouraged, and Mongol



View the **Closer Look** on **MyHistoryLab**: A Mongol Passport



**FIGURE 15.4** The Abbasid capital at Baghdad had long been in decline when the Mongols besieged it in 1258. The Mongols' sack of the city put an end to all pretenses that Baghdad was still the center of the Muslim world. The Mongol assault on Baghdad also revealed how vulnerable even cities with high and extensive walls were to the artillery and other siege weapons that the Mongols and Chinese had pioneered. In the centuries that followed, major innovations in fortifications, many introduced first in Europe, were made to counter the introduction of gunpowder and the new siege cannons.

(The Mongols under their chief Hülegü conquering Baghdad in 1258. From Rashid al-Din's "Jami' al-Tawarikh" (Compendium of Chronicles). Illuminated manuscript page, 14th c.e. Inv. Diez A Fol.70, image 7. Bildarchiv Preussischer/Art Resource, NY. Photo: Ruth Schacht, Oriental Division.)

After decades of hard campaigning in the mid-13th century, the Mongols gained control of the greatest prize of all, China, which they ruled for a century. Although the Chinese capacity to assimilate nomadic conquerors was evident from the outset, the Mongols managed to retain a distinct culture and social separateness.





Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Marco Polo on Chinese Society under the Mongol Rule (1270s)



**FIGURE 15.5** This portrait of Kubilai Khan, by far the most important Mongol ruler of China, emphasizes his Mongol physical features, beard and hair styles, and dress. But Kubilai was determined to “civilize” his Mongol followers according to Chinese standards. Not only did he himself adopt a Chinese lifestyle, but he had his son educated by the best Confucian scholars to be a proper Chinese emperor. Kubilai also became a major patron of the Chinese arts and a promoter of Chinese culture.

**Kubilai Khan** [KOO-bluh KAHN] (1215–1294) Grandson of Chinggis Khan; commander of Mongol forces responsible for conquest of China; became khagan in 1260; established Sinicized Mongol Yuan dynasty in China in 1271.

**Dadu** Present-day Beijing; so-called when Kubilai Khan ruled China.

**Chabi** [CHAH-bee] Influential wife of Kubilai Khan; promoted interests of Buddhists in China; indicative of refusal of Mongol women to adopt restrictive social conventions of Chinese; died c. 1281.

military forces remained separate from the Chinese. Mongol religious ceremonies and customs were retained, and a tent encampment in the traditional Mongol style was set up in the imperial city even though Kubilai usually lived in a Chinese-style palace.

Despite his measures to ensure that the conquering Mongol minority was not completely absorbed by the culture of the defeated, Kubilai Khan had long been fascinated by Chinese civilization. Even before beginning the conquest of the Song Empire, he had surrounded himself with Chinese advisors, some Buddhist, others Daoist or Confucian. His capital at **Dadu** in the north (present-day Beijing) was built on the site occupied by earlier dynasties, and he introduced Chinese rituals and classical music into his own court. Kubilai also put the empire on the Chinese calendar and offered sacrifices to his ancestors at a special temple in the imperial city. But he rebuffed the pleas of his Confucian advisors to reestablish the civil service exams, which had been discontinued by the Jin rulers.

In the Yuan era, a new social structure was established in China, with the Mongols on top and their central Asian nomadic and Muslim allies right below them in the hierarchy. These two groups occupied most offices at the highest levels of the bureaucracy. Beneath them came the ethnic Chinese and then the minority peoples of the south. Thus, ethnic Chinese from both north and south ran the Yuan bureaucracy at the regional and local levels, but they could exercise power at the top only as advisors to the Mongols or other nomadic officials. At all levels, their activities were scrutinized by Mongol functionaries from an enlarged and much strengthened censors’ bureau.

## Gender Roles and the Convergence of Mongol and Chinese Culture

Mongol women remained aloof from Chinese culture—at least Chinese culture in its Confucian guise. They refused to adopt the practice of footbinding, which so limited the activities of Chinese women. They retained their rights to property and control within the household as well as the freedom to move about the town and countryside. No more striking evidence of their independence can be found than contemporary accounts of Mongol women riding to the hunt, both with their husbands and at the head of their own hunting parties. The daughter of one of Kubilai’s cousins went to war, and she refused to marry until one of her many suitors was able to throw her in a wrestling match.

The persisting influence of Mongol women after the Mongols settled down in China is exemplified by **Chabi**, the wife of Kubilai Khan (Figure 15.6). She was one of Kubilai’s most important confidants on political and diplomatic matters, and she promoted Buddhist interests in the highest circles of government. Chabi played a critical role in fostering policies aimed at reconciling the majority ethnic Chinese population of the empire to Mongol rule. She convinced Kubilai that the harsh treatment of the survivors of the defeated Song imperial family would only anger the peoples of north China and make them more difficult to rule. On another occasion, she demonstrated that she shared Kubilai’s respect for Chinese culture by frustrating a plan to turn cultivated lands near the capital into pasturelands for the Mongols’ ponies. Thus, the imperial couple was a good match of astute political skills and cosmopolitanism, tempered by respect for their own traditions and a determination to preserve those they found the most valuable.

The Mongol era was too brief and the number of influential Mongol women far too small to reverse the trends that for centuries had been lowering the position of women in Chinese society. As neo-Confucianism gained ground under Kubilai’s successors, the arguments for confining women multiplied. Ultimately, even women of the Mongol ruling class saw their freedom and power reduced.



## Mongol Tolerance and Foreign Cultural Influence

Like Chinggis Khan and other Mongol overlords, Kubilai and Chabi had unbounded curiosity and very cosmopolitan tastes. Their generous patronage drew scholars, artists, artisans, and office-seekers from many lands to the splendid Yuan court. Some of the most favored came from Muslim kingdoms to the east that had come under Mongol rule. Muslims were included in the second highest social grouping, just beneath the Mongols themselves. Persians and Turks were admitted to the inner circle of Kubilai's administrators and advisors. Muslims designed and supervised the building of his Chinese-style imperial city and proposed new systems for more efficient tax collection. Persian astronomers imported more advanced Middle Eastern instruments for celestial observations, corrected the Chinese calendar, and made some of the most accurate maps the Chinese had ever seen. Muslim doctors ran the imperial hospitals and added translations of 36 volumes on Muslim medicine to the imperial library.

In addition to the Muslims, Kubilai welcomed travelers and emissaries from many foreign lands to his court. Like his grandfather, Kubilai had a strong interest in all religions and insisted on toleration in his domains. Buddhists, Nestorian Christians, Daoists, and Latin Christians made their way to his court. The most renowned of the latter were members of the Polo family from Venice in northern Italy, who traveled extensively in the Mongol empire in the middle of the 13th century. Marco Polo's account of Kubilai Khan's court and empire, where Polo lived and served as an administrator for 17 years, is perhaps the most famous travel account written by a European (Figure 15.7). Polo accepted fantastic tales of grotesque and strange customs, and he may have taken parts of his account from other sources. Still, his descriptions of the palaces, cities, and wealth of Kubilai's empire enhanced European interest in Asia and helped to inspire efforts by navigators, such as Columbus, to find a sea route to these fabled lands.

## Social Policies and Scholar-Gentry Resistance

Kubilai's efforts to promote Mongol adaptation to Chinese culture were overshadowed in the long run by measures to preserve Mongol separateness. The ethnic Chinese who made up the vast majority of his subjects, particularly in the south, were never really reconciled to Mongol rule. Despite Kubilai's cultivation of Confucian rituals and his extensive employment of Chinese bureaucrats, most of the scholar-gentry saw the Mongol overlord and his successors as uncouth barbarians whose policies endangered Chinese traditions. As it was intended to do, Kubilai's refusal to reinstate the examination route to administrative office prevented Confucian scholars from dominating politics. The favoritism he showed Mongol and other foreign officials further alienated the scholar-gentry.

To add insult to injury, Kubilai went to great lengths to bolster the position of the artisan classes, who had never enjoyed high standing, and the merchants, whom the Confucian thinkers had long dismissed as parasites. From the outset the Mongols had shown great regard for artisans and because of their useful skills had often spared them while killing their fellow city dwellers. During the Yuan period in China, merchants also prospered and commerce boomed, partly because of Mongol efforts to improve transportation and expand the supply of paper money. With amazing speed for a people who had no prior experience with seafaring, the Mongols developed a substantial navy, which played a major role in the conquest of the Song empire. After the conquest of China was completed, the great Mongol war fleets were used to put down pirates, who threatened river and overseas commerce. Toward the end of Kubilai's reign, the navy also launched a number of overseas expeditions of exploration and conquest, which led to attacks on Japan and a brief reoccupation of Vietnam.



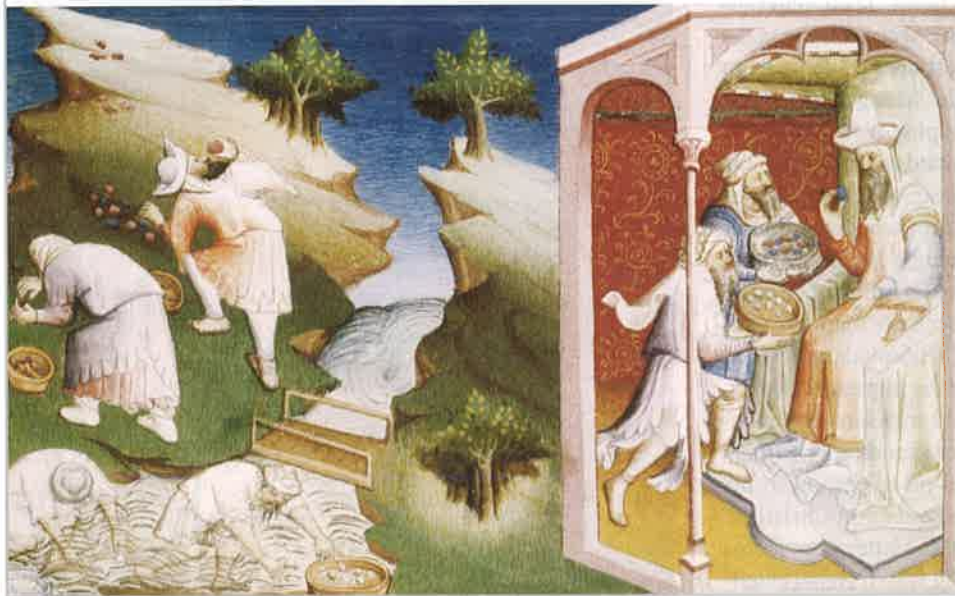
**FIGURE 15.6** A portrait of Chabi, the energetic and influential wife of Kubilai Khan. Kubilai's determination to adopt Chinese culture without being overwhelmed by it was bolstered by the advice and example of Chabi. Displaying the independent-mindedness and political savvy of many Mongol women, Chabi gave Kubilai critical advice on how to counter the schemes of his ambitious brother and how to handle the potentially hostile scholar-gentry elite and peasantry that came to be ruled by Mongol overlords.



Read the Document on  
MyHistoryLab: Marco Polo at  
the Court of Kublai Khan, c. 1300



Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Mongols and Trade on the Silk Roads



**FIGURE 15.7** This 15th-century manuscript illumination depicts Marco Polo and his uncle offering homage to the Great Khan. The Polos were Venetian merchants, and Marco's elders had already traveled extensively in Asia in the decade before they set off with Marco. Marco had a great facility with languages, which served him well in his journeys through Asia by land and sea. On his way home in the mid-1290s, he related his many adventures to a writer of romances while both were prisoners of the Genoese, who were fierce rivals of the Venetians. Eventually published under the title *Description of the World*, Polo's account became one of a handful of definitive sources on the world beyond Europe for the explorers of the coming age of overseas expansion.

(Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, Ms. 2810.)

### **Romance of the West Chamber**

Chinese drama written during the Yuan period; indicative of the continued literary vitality of China during Mongol rule.

peasant tax and forced-labor burdens, partly by redirecting peasant payments from local nonofficial tax farmers directly to government officials. He and his advisors also developed a revolutionary plan to establish elementary education in the villages. Although the level of learning they envisioned was rudimentary, such a project, if it had been enacted, would have been a major challenge to the educational system centered on the elite that long had dominated Chinese civilization.

## The Fall of the House of Yuan

Historians often remark on the seeming contradiction between the military prowess of the Mongol conquerors and the short life of the dynasty they established in China. Kubilai Khan's long reign encompassed a good portion of the nine decades in which the Mongols ruled all of China. Already by the end of his reign, the dynasty was showing signs of weakening. Song loyalists raised revolts in the south, and popular hostility toward the foreign overlords was expressed more and more openly. The Mongol aura of military invincibility was badly tarnished by Kubilai's rebuffs at the hands of the military lords of Japan and the failure of the expeditions that he sent to punish them, first in 1274 and again in a much larger effort in 1280. The defeats suffered by Mongol forces engaged in similar expeditions to Vietnam and Java during this same period further undermined the Mongols' standing.

Kubilai's dissolute lifestyle in his later years, partly brought on by the death of his most beloved wife, Chabi, and five years later the death of his favorite son, led to a general softening of the Mongol ruling class as a whole. Kubilai's successors lacked his capacity for leadership and cared little for the tedium of day-to-day administrative tasks. Many of the Muslim and Chinese functionaries to whom they entrusted the imperial finances enriched themselves through graft and corruption. This greatly angered the hard-pressed peasantry, who bore the burden of rising taxes and demands for forced

Ironically, despite the Mongols' suspicion of cities and sedentary lifestyles, both flourished in the Yuan era. The urban expansion begun under the Tang and Song dynasties continued, and the Mongol elite soon became addicted to the diversions of urban life. Traditional Chinese artistic endeavors, such as poetry and essay writing, languished under the Mongols in comparison with their flowering in the Tang and Song eras. But popular entertainments, particularly musical dramas, flourished. Perhaps the most famous Chinese dramatic work, *Romance of the West Chamber*, was written in the Yuan period. Dozens of major playwrights wrote for the court, the rising merchant classes, and the Mongol elite. Actors and actresses, who had long been relegated by the Confucian scholars to the despised status of "mean people," achieved celebrity and social esteem. All of this rankled the scholar-gentry, who waited for the chance to restore Confucian decorum and what they believed to be the proper social hierarchy for a civilized people.

Initially, at least, Kubilai Khan pursued policies toward one social group, the peasants that the scholarly class would have heartily approved. He forbade Mongol cavalrymen from turning croplands into pasture and restored the granary system for famine relief that had been badly neglected in the late Song. Kubilai also sought to reduce



## THINKING HISTORICALLY

# The Global Eclipse of the Nomadic Warrior Culture

AS THE SHOCK WAVES OF THE Mongol and Timurid explosions amply demonstrate, nomadic incursions into the civilized cores have had an impact on global history that far exceeds what one would expect, given the small numbers of nomadic peoples and the limited resources of the regions they inhabited. From the time of the great Indo-European migrations in the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C.E. through the classical and postclassical eras, nomadic peoples periodically emerged from their steppe, prairie, and desert fringe homelands to invade, often build empires, and settle in the sedentary zones of Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas. Their intrusions have significantly changed political history by destroying existing polities and even, as in the case of Assyria, whole civilizations. They have also generated major population movements, sparked social upheavals, and facilitated critical cultural and economic exchanges across civilizations. As the Mongols' stunning successes in the 13th century illustrate, the ability of nomadic peoples to break through the defenses of the much more populous civilized zones and to establish control over much richer and more sophisticated peoples arose primarily from the nomads' advantages in waging war.

A reservoir of battle-ready warriors and mobility have proved to be the keys to success for expansion-minded nomads. Harsh environments and ongoing intertribal and interclan conflicts for survival within them produced tough, resourceful fighters who could live off the land on the march and who saw combat as an integral part of their lives. The horses and camels on which pastoral peoples in Eurasia and Sudanic Africa relied gave them a degree of mobility that confounded the sedentary peoples who tried to ward off their incursions. The mounted warriors of nomadic armies had the advantages of speed, surprise, and superior intelligence, gathered by mounted patrols. The most successful nomadic invaders, such as the Mongols, also were willing to experiment with and adapt to technological innovations. Some of these, such as the stirrup and various sorts of harnesses, were devised by the nomads themselves. Others, such as gunpowder and the siege engines—both Muslim and Chinese—that the Mongols used to smash the defenses of walled towns were borrowed from sedentary peoples and adapted to the nomads' fighting styles.

Aside from the military advantages of the nomads' lifestyles and social organization, their successes in war owed much to the weaknesses of their adversaries in the sedentary, civilized zones. Even in the best circumstances, the great empires that provided the main defense for agricultural peoples against nomadic

incursions were diverse and overextended polities. Imperial control and protection diminished steadily as one moved away from the capital and core provinces. Imperial boundaries were usually fluid, and the outer provinces were vulnerable to nomadic raids and conquest.

Classical and postclassical empires, such as the Egyptian and Han and the Abbasid, Byzantine, and Song, enjoyed great advantages over the nomads in terms of the populations and resources they controlled. But their armies, almost without exception, were too slow, too low on firepower, and too poorly trained to resist large and well-organized forces of nomadic intruders. In times of dynastic strength in the sedentary zones, well-defended fortress systems and ingenious weapons—such as the crossbow, which

the peasant conscripts could master fairly easily—were quite effective against nomadic incursions. Nonetheless, even the strongest dynasties depended heavily on protection payments to nomad leaders and the divisions between the nomadic peoples on their borders for their security. Even the strongest sedentary empires were shaken periodically by nomadic raids into the outer provinces. When

the empires weakened or when large numbers of nomads were united under able leaders, such as the prophet Muhammad and his successors or Chinggis Khan, nomadic assaults made a shambles of sedentary armies and fortifications.

In many ways, the Mongol and Timurid explosions represented the apex of nomadic power and influence on world history. After these remarkable interludes, age-old patterns of interaction between nomads and town-dwelling peoples were transformed. These transformations resulted in the growing ability of sedentary peoples to first resist and then dominate nomadic peoples, and they mark a watershed in the history of the human community. Some of the causes of the shift were immediate and specific. The most critical of these was the devastation wrought by the Black Death on the nomads of central Asia in the 14th century. Although the epidemic was catastrophic for large portions of the civilized zones as well, it dealt the sparse nomadic populations a blow from which they took centuries to recover.

In the centuries after the Mongol conquests, the rulers of sedentary states found increasingly effective ways to centralize their political power and mobilize the labor and resources of their domains for war. The rulers of China and the empires of the Islamic belt made some improvements, but the sovereigns of the emerging states of western Europe surpassed all others in this regard. Stronger control and better organization allowed a

***With the introduction early in the 17th century of light, mobile field artillery into the armies of the warring states of central and western Europe, the nomads' retreat began.***

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growing share of steadily increasing national wealth to be channeled toward military ends. The competing rulers of Europe also invested heavily in technological innovations with military applications, from improved metalworking techniques and radical innovations in fortress construction to more potent gunpowder and firearms. From the 15th and 16th centuries, the discipline and training of European armies also improved. With pikes, muskets, exacting drill in the use of firearms, and trained commanders, European armies were more than a match for the massed nomad cavalry that had so long terrorized sedentary peoples.

With the introduction early in the 17th century of light, mobile field artillery into the armies of the warring states of central and western Europe, the nomads' retreat began. States such as Russia, which had centralized power on the western European model, as well as the Ottoman Empire in the eastern Mediterranean and the Qing in China, which had shared many of the armament advances of the Europeans, moved steadily into the steppe and desert heartlands of the horse and camel nomads. Each followed a conscious policy of settling part of its rapidly growing peasant population in the areas taken from the nomads. Thus, nomadic populations not only were brought under the direct rule of sedentary empires but saw their pasturelands plowed and planted wherever the soil and water supply permitted.

These trends suggest that the nomadic war machine had been in decline long before the new wave of innovation that ushered in the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. But that process sealed its fate. Railways and repeating rifles allowed sedentary peoples to penetrate even the most wild and remote nomadic refuges and subdue even the most determined and fierce nomadic warriors, from the Plains Indians of North America to the bedouin of the Sahara and Arabia. The periodic nomadic incursions into the sedentary zones, which had recurred for millennia, had come to an end.

#### QUESTIONS

- What are some of the major ways in which nomadic peoples and their periodic expansions have affected global history?
- Which of their movements and conquests do you think were the most important?
- Why were the Mongols able to build a much greater empire than any previous nomadic contender?
- Why did the Mongol Empire collapse so rapidly, and what does its fall tell us about the underlying weaknesses of the nomadic war machine?

**White Lotus Society** Secret religious society dedicated to overthrow of Yuan dynasty in China; typical of peasant resistance to Mongol rule.

**Zhu Yuanzhang** The given name of the Hongwu emperor, the founder of the Ming dynasty.

**Ming dynasty** Succeeded Mongol Yuan dynasty in China in 1368; lasted until 1644; initially mounted huge trade expeditions to southern Asia and elsewhere, but later concentrated efforts on internal development within China.

**Timur-i Lang** Also known as Tamerlane; leader of Turkic nomads; beginning in 1360s from base at Samarkand, launched series of attacks in Persia, the Fertile Crescent, India, and southern Russia; empire disintegrated after his death in 1405.

labor. The scholar-gentry played on this discontent by calling on the people to rise up and overthrow the “barbarian” usurpers.

By the 1350s, the signs of dynastic decline were apparent. Banditry and piracy were widespread, and the government's forces were too weak to curb them. Famine hit many regions and spawned local uprisings, which engulfed large portions of the empire. Secret religious sects, such as the **White Lotus Society**, were dedicated to overthrowing the dynasty. Their leaders' claims that they had magical powers to heal their followers and confound their enemies helped encourage further peasant resistance against the Mongols. As in the past, rebel leaders quarreled and fought with each other. For a time, chaos reigned as the Yuan regime dissolved, and the Mongols who could escape the fury of the mob retreated into central Asia. The restoration of peace and order came from an unexpected quarter. Rather than a regional military commander or an aristocratic lord, a man from a poor peasant family, **Zhu Yuanzhang**, emerged to found the **Ming dynasty**, which ruled China for most of the next three centuries.

### AfterShock: The Brief Ride of Timur, the Last of the Great Nomadic Conquerors

Just as the peoples of Europe and Asia had begun to recover from the upheavals caused by Mongol expansion, a second nomadic outburst from central Asia plunged them again into fear and despair. This time the nomads in question were Turks, not Mongols, and their leader, **Timur-i Lang** (Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane) was from a noble land-owning clan, not a tribal, herding background. Timur's personality was complex. On one hand, he was a highly cultured person who delighted in the fine arts, lush gardens, and splendid architecture and who could spend days conversing with great scholars, such as Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (see the Document feature in Chapter 8). On the other, he was a ruthless conqueror, apparently indifferent to human suffering and capable of commanding his troops to commit atrocities on a scale that would not be matched in the human experience until the 20th century. Beginning in the 1360s, his armies moved out from his base at Samarkand to conquests in Persia, the Fertile Crescent, India, and southern Russia.

Although his empire did not begin to compare with that of the Mongols in size, he outdid them in the ferocity of his campaigns. In fact, Timur is remembered for little more than barbaric destruction:



Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: A Contemporary Describes Timur

His armies built pyramids of skulls with the heads of those they killed. Tens of thousands of people were slaughtered after they took the city of Aleppo in Asia Minor, and thousands of prisoners were massacred as a warning to the citizens of Delhi, in north India, not to resist his armies. In the face of this wanton slaughter, the fact that he spared artisans and scientists to embellish his capital city at Samarkand counts for little. Unlike that of the Mongols, his rule brought neither increased trade and cross-cultural exchanges nor internal peace. Fortunately, his reign was as brief as it was violent. After his death in 1405, his empire was pulled apart by his warring commanders and old enemies anxious for revenge. With his passing, the last great challenge of the steppe nomads to the civilizations of Eurasia came to an end.

## Global Connections and Critical Themes

### THE MONGOL LINKAGES

From the first explosion of Mongol military might from the steppes of central Asia in the early 13th century to the death of Timur in 1405, the nomads of central Asia made a stunning return to center stage in world history. Mongol invasions ended or interrupted many of the great empires of the postclassical period and also extended the world network that had increasingly defined the period. Under Chinggis Khan, the Mongols and their many nomadic neighbors were forged into the mightiest war machine the world had ever seen. With stunning rapidity the Mongols conquered central Asia, northern China, and eastern Persia (Map 15.1). Under Chinggis Khan's sons and grandsons, the rest of China, Tibet, Persia, Iraq, much of Asia Minor, and all of southern Russia were added to the vast Mongol imperium.

Although much of what the Mongols did was destructive, their forays into Europe, China, and the Muslim heartlands brought some lasting changes that were often transformative and at times beneficial. They taught new ways of making war and impressed on their Turkic and European enemies the effectiveness of gunpowder. Mongol conquests facilitated trade between the civilizations at each end of Eurasia, making possible the exchange of foods, tools, and ideas on an unprecedented scale. The revived routes brought great wealth to traders, such as those from north Italy, who set up outposts in the eastern Mediterranean, along the Black Sea coast, and as far east as the Caspian Sea.

The Mongol framework for Asian-European interactions, although short-lived, also facilitated other exchanges. It opened China to influences from Arab and Persian lands, and even to contacts with Europe. These connections came to full fruition in

the centuries of indigenous Chinese revival that followed under the Ming dynasty. Europeans gained new knowledge of Chinese products and technologies that they would soon adapt back home. Explosive powder and printing were the most important examples. Regions more remote from the Mongols, such as Africa, lacked this kind of stimulus. Even the collapse of the Mongol network had an impact. Many societies had an interest in maintaining contacts, although China grew more wary of outsiders. But the Mongol decline made land-based travel more dangerous, which quickly turned attention toward sea routes. Thus, the legacy of the Mongol period was both complex and durable.

Perhaps the greatest long-term impact of the Mongol drive to the west was indirect and unintended. In recent years, a growing number of historians have become convinced that the Mongol conquests played a key role in transmitting the fleas that carried bubonic plague from south China and central Asia to Europe and the Middle East. The fleas may have hitched a ride on the livestock the Mongols drove into the new pasturelands won by their conquests or on the rats that nibbled the grain transported by merchants along the trading routes the Mongol rulers had reestablished between east and west. Whatever the exact connection, the Mongol armies unknowingly paved the way for the spread of the dreaded Black Death across the steppes to much of China, to the Islamic heartlands, and from there to most of Europe in the mid-14th century. In so doing, they unleashed possibly the most fatal epidemic in all human history. It led to mortality rates higher than 50 percent in some areas of Europe and the Middle East, and forced economic and social adjustments wherever it spread. This accidental but devastating side effect of the Mongol conquests influenced the course of civilized development in Europe, Asia, and north Africa for centuries.

## Further Readings

A substantial literature has developed on the Mongol interlude in global history. The most readable and reliable biography of Chinggis Khan is René Grousset, *Conqueror of the World* (1966). Grousset has also written a broader history of central Asia, *The Empire of the Steppes* (1970). Peter Brent's more recent *The Mongol Empire* (1976) provides an updated overview and wonderful illustrations. Berthold Spuler, *History of the Mongols* (1968), supplies a wide

variety of firsthand accounts of the Mongols. Timothy May's *The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Military System* (2000) shows that the Mongol armies had much in common with modern forces.

For the Mongols' impact on global history, see David Morgan, *The Mongols* (2006); Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West* (2005); and especially Thomas Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2001). Robert S. Marshall, *Storm from the East: From Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (1993), and Charles J. Halperin,

*Russia and the Golden Horde: The Mongol Impact on Medieval Russian History* (1985), examine the Mongol impact on Russia. While George Vernadsky, *The Mongols in Russia* (1953), remains the standard work on that subject, some of its views are now contested. Morris Rossabi, *Kublai Khan: His Life and Times* (1988), is by far the best work on the Mongols in China. George James Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen* (1979), and Denis Sinor, *History of Hungary* (1957), contain good accounts of the Mongol incursions into eastern and central Europe. T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism* (1987), is the best account of the rise and structure of the empires built by Chinggis Khan and his successors. The fullest and most accessible

summary of the links between Mongol expansion and the spread of the Black Death can be found in William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (1976).

Recent works examining the broader interactions between agricultural and pastoral societies in Eurasia include Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (1992); Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589* (1998); Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, *The Role of Migration in the History of the Eurasian Steppe* (2000); and Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (2004).

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### Critical Thinking Questions

1. Discuss the ways in which the Mongol imperium enhanced contacts, particularly between China and the Islamic world. Which areas received the most benefit from these exchanges?
2. Why was the era of Mongol dominance so short-lived and what were some of the consequences of its disintegration?
3. What were the main effects of the Mongol period on world history? What are some of the ways that recent historical studies have forced us to rethink the nature and impact of the Mongol interlude in world history, and the roles played by nomadic peoples more generally?