In the year 1206, at the great assembly of the Mongol clans by the Onan river, the clan chieftain Temujin was proclaimed Genghis Khan, universal ruler. It was an event that Temujin had been preparing for more than twenty-five years.

Temujin had been born, probably in 1162, the son of a royal Mongol clan leader who died while Temujin was still a boy. Largely on the basis of his promise and the force of his personality Temujin was given support by the Mongol leaders and put in command of a formidable army. With this force he attacked rival Mongol clans, and his success led other clan leaders to gather around him. He systematically eliminated all his rivals and consolidated the Mongols into a single people. Temujin had created a unified and powerful nation as a personal instrument of world conquest.
The Secret History of the Mongols: The Young Genghis Khan

In the lifetime of Genghis Khan the Mongols were still a preliterate people who kept their tribal traditions alive in oral sagas. The Secret History of the Mongols is such a saga. It was probably written down in the thirteenth century within a few years of Genghis Khan’s death as the official account of the ruling clan of the Mongols and the life history of its late, great leader. The original Mongol version is no longer extant. The text exists in a Chinese version dating from the Ming Dynasty, after the Mongols had been driven out of China, from which the present translation into English by Francis W. Cleaves is made.

The excerpt begins with an account of the battles against the Tatars, fought by Temujin’s father.

It was during one of these battles that Yesugei captured a Tatar chief named Temujin Uge. Yesugei's people were camped at Deligun Hill on the Onan then, and Hogelun Ujin was about to give birth to her first child. It was here that Chingis Khan was born. As he was born he emerged clutching a blood clot the size of a knucklebone die in his right hand. They gave him the name Temujin, saying: “He was born when his father had captured the Tatar, Temujin Uge.”

[The] year, when Temujin was nine, Yesugei decided to take him to visit his mother’s tribe, saying: “I'll ask for a girl from his mother’s tribe to marry him.” On their way to the Olkhunugud tribe they met an Ungirad man, Deli the Wise, camped between Mount Chegcher and Mount Chikhurkhu. Deli the Wise addressed Yesugei as if they were related by marriage: “My friend Yesugei, travelling so far, who are you going to see?”
“I’m on my way to the Olkhunugud, the tribe of this son of mine’s mother, to find a girl for him there,” he replied.

Dei the Wise said to him:

“I look at your son and I see his eyes contain fire, his face fills with light.

My friend Yesugei, I had a dream last night. A white falcon holding the Sun and the Moon in its claws flew down from the sky and lit on my hand.

I told my family this, saying: ‘Whenever I saw the Sun or the Moon in my dreams before it was always from a distance. Now this falcon, taking them in his claws, has brought them both into my hand. The bird was all white and it brought them to me.’ ”

The next morning Yesugei asked Dei for his daughter. . . .

The narrative then moves to the history of the mature Temujin. Temujin’s wife, Borte, has been captured by a rival clan.

As Temujin moved out his people Toghoril Khan, commanding ten thousand men, and Jakha Gambu, Toghoril’s younger brother, commanding ten thousand, had nearly reached Burgi cliff. The two camps moved together and united their forces. Temujin, Toghoril Khan, and Jakha Gambu brought their forces to Botoghan Bogorji, at the head of the Onan as they’d been instructed. Jamugha was already there with his army and had been waiting three days. Jamugha stood at the head of his army of twenty thousand men and Temujin, Toghoril Khan, and Jakha Gambu rode up at the head of their army.

As the leaders recognized each other Jamugha spoke first, saying: “Didn’t we say to each other, ‘Even if there’s a blizzard, even if there’s a rainstorm, we won’t arrive late’? Aren’t the Mongol a people whose word is sacred? Haven’t we said to each other,
‘Let's get rid of anyone who can't live up to his word’?

Toghoril Khan answered Jamugha's criticism by saying:

“We've arrived three days late, you're correct.

Let Younger Brother Jamugha decide who he'll punish and who he'll blame.”

Having settled this score
they moved their forces from Botoghan Bogorjin to the Kilgho River
where they built rafts to cross over to the Bugura Steppe, into Toghtoga Beki's land.

They came down on him as if through the smoke-hole of his tent, beating down the frame of his tent and leaving it flat, capturing and killing his wives and his sons.

They struck at his door-frame where his guardian spirit lived and broke it to pieces.

They completely destroyed all his people until in their place there was nothing but emptiness.

But while Toghtoga Beki lay sleeping before the attack fishermen, trappers, and hunters who lived by the Kilgho River came to warn him.

Running through the night they brought news that the army was coming.

“Our enemies have thrown themselves across the river!” they cried. And hearing this Toghtoga and Dayir Usun gathered a few followers, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and escaped down the Selenge River to the Barghujin region.

As the Merkid people tried to flee from our army running down the Selenge with what they could gather in the darkness, as our soldiers rode out of the night capturing and killing the Merkid,

Temujin rode through the retreating camp shouting out: “Borte! Borte!”

Borte Ujin was among the Merkid who ran in the darkness and when she heard his voice, when she recognized Temujin's voice, Borte leaped from her cart.

Borte Ujin and Old Woman Khogaghchin saw Temujin charge through the crowd and they ran to him, finally seizing the reins of his horse.

All about them was moonlight.

As Temujin looked down to see who had stopped him
he recognized Borte Ujin.
In a moment he was down from his horse
and they were in each other's arms, embracing.
There and then Temujin sent off a messenger
to find Toghoril Khan and Anda Jamughha, saying:
"I've found what I came for.
Let's go no further and make our camp here."
When the Merkid who ran from us in the night saw our army had
halted
they halted as well and spent the night where they'd stopped.
This is how Temujin found Borte Ujin,
saving her from the Merkid.

Temujin thanked Toghoril Khan and Jamughha for their help,
saying:
"Because I was joined by my father the Khan and Anda Jamughha
my strength was increased by Heaven and Earth.
In the name of Eternal Blue Heaven
with the aid of Our Mother the Earth
we've torn out the hearts of the Merkid warriors,
we've emptied their beds and killed all their sons,
we've captured all the rest of their women.
Now that we've scattered the Merkid we should go back."

So the forces of Temujin, Toghoril Kahn, and Jamughha,
who'd united to attack the Merkid clans,
who'd thrown open the Merkid's locked tents,
who'd reduced the Merkid's noblest women to slaves,
withdrew from Talkhun Island where the Orkhon joins the Selenge.
Temujin and Jamughha kept their forces together
riding back to the Khorkhonagh Valley to camp.
Toghoril Khan's army rode to the far side of Burkhan Khaldun
down the Hokortu Valley.
They rode on through Khachaguratu and Huliyatu Subchid
hunting as they went,
and finally returned to their camp
near the Black Forest on the Tula River.
After travelling all that night
they halted at dawn to see who had followed them.
Camping circles from nearly all of the clans had chosen to follow
Temujin.

Then in came Khorchi of the Bagarin.
When Khorchi arrived he spoke with Temujin, saying:
“My people are descended from the woman Holy Ancestor Bodonchar captured and took for his wife. Because of this, we’re such close kin to Jamugha that we’re just like people who share the same mother’s belly, like people who come from the waters of the same mother’s womb. We’d never have left Jamugha’s camp. But a sign from Heaven came to me in a dream and told me that Temujin was meant to be our leader.”

Once Chingis had been elected Ogele Cherbi, Bogorchu’s young kinsman, was named as his archer. Soyiketu Cherbi promised him: \"I’ll see to it you’ll never miss your morning drink, you’ll never miss your evening meal,\" and he became head cook. Degei promised him: \"I’ll see to it that a lamb is brought in for the morning broth, that another’s brought in for the evening. I’ll herd the speckled sheep and see that your carts are filled with their wool. I’ll herd the yellow sheep and see that your flocks are filled with their number,\" and he became head shepherd. Then his younger brother, Guchugur, promised: \"I’ll see to it that the lynch-pins are always tight on the wheels of your carts, that the axletree doesn’t break when the carts are on the road. I’ll be in charge of the tent carts.\" Dodai Cherbi promised: \"I’ll be in charge of the men and women who serve in your tents.\" Then Chingis appointed three men, along with his brother Khasar, to be his personal swordsmen, saying: Anyone who thinks they are stronger, you’ll strike off their heads. Anyone who thinks they’re more courageous, you’ll cut them in two. My brother Belgutei will bring the geldings in from the pasture. He will be in charge of the horses.
Mulkhalkhu will be in charge of the cattle. Arkhai Khasar, Taghai, Sukegei, and Chakhurkhan, these four warriors will be like my arrows, like the arrows I shoot near and far.”

Then Subetai the Brave promised him:
“T’ll be like a rat and gather up others, I’ll be like a black crow and gather great flocks. Like the felt blanket that covers a horse, I’ll gather up soldiers to cover you. Like the felt blanket that guards a tent from the wind, I’ll assemble great armies to shelter your tent.”

Then Chingis Khan turned to Bogorcu and Jelme, and said:
“You two, from the time when there was no one to fight beside me but my own shadow, you were my shadow and gave my mind rest. That will always be in my thoughts. From the time when there was nothing to whip my horses with but their own tails, you were their tails and gave my heart peace. That will always be in my heart. Since you were the first two who came to my side you’ll be chiefs over all the rest of the people.”

Then Chingis Khan spoke to the people, saying:
“If Heaven and Earth grant me their protection so that my powers increase, then each of you elders of the clans who’ve chosen to leave Anda Jamugha and follow me will be happy with the choice that you’ve made. I’ll give you each your position and office.” . . .

Just then a messenger arrived, saying:
“When the Tatar chief, Megujin, disobeyed the commands of the Golden King of Cathay, the Golden King sent his general, Prince Hsiang, with an army against them. Prince Hsiang and his army are driving the Tatar up along the Ulja River. They are coming this way with all their herds and possessions.”

Chingis Khan spoke to the people, saying:
“The Tatar have been our enemies since the days when they killed our grandfathers and fathers. Now is our chance to attack them.”

He sent a messenger off to Toghoril Khan at once, saying:
“I’ve just heard that Prince Hsiang is marching up the Ulja River with a great army, driving the Tatar this way. Let’s attack these Tatar together, since they’re the ones who killed our grandfathers and fathers. Let my father Toghoril Khan send his troops quickly.”

Toghoril Khan agreed, saying: “My son, Temujin, speaks wisely. We’ll attack them together.”

Chingis and Toghoril ordered their armies to attack, and overrunning the Tatar defense, they captured Megujin and killed him. Chingis took the Tatar chief’s silver cradle and a blanket covered with pearls. When Prince Hsiang found out that Chingis Khan and Toghoril Khan had defeated the Tatar, killing Megujin, he was ecstatic. As a reward he honored his new allies with Chinese titles. To Chingis he gave the title Ja’ud Khuri, meaning Pacifier. To Toghoril he gave the title Ong, meaning Prince. So it’s because Prince Hsiang gave Toghoril this name that he was known from that time as Ong Khan.

Chingis Khan gathered all the people back in the camp and pitched his tents there for the night. At the evening meal he had Khadagan sit beside him and the following day Sorkhan Shira and Jebe, both men who had served the leaders of the Tayichigud clan, came to offer themselves to Chingis. When Chingis saw Sorkhan Shira he said:

“You and your sons took the wood from my neck, took the cangue from my collar. Why have you taken so long to come join me?”

Sorkhan Shira answered him: “I often thought about the situation I was in and said to myself, ‘Don’t be too quick. If I go off to join Temujin the Tayichigud will kill all my family, make them blow away like the ashes of an abandoned fire.

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1This is a reference to a large wooden collar Genghis was forced to wear when he was a prisoner of these people.—Ed.
They'll take my wife and my sons, everything I leave behind.'
So I was patient
and now that the right moment's here we've come to join our khan.”
When he'd finished this speech Chingis Khan nodded and said:
“You've done the right thing.” . . .

At the end of that winter
in the autumn of the Year of the Dog,
Chingis Khan assembled his army at Seventy Felt Cloaks
to go to war with the four Tatar clans.
Before the battle began
Chingis Khan spoke with his soldiers and set down these rules:
“If we overcome their soldiers
no one will stop to gather their spoils.
When they're beaten and the fighting is over
then there'll be time for that.
We'll divide their possessions equally among us.
If we're forced to retreat by their charge
every man will ride back to the place where we started our attack.
Any man who doesn't return to his place for a counterattack will be
killed.”
Chingis Khan met the Tatar at Seventy Felt Cloaks
and made them retreat. . . .

During that same Dog Year that Chingis Khan defeated the Tatar,
Ong Khan went to war with the Merkid.
He followed Toghtoga Beki all the way to the lowlands of Barghujin
and in the battle there Ong Khan killed the Merkid chief’s eldest
son,
captured his two daughters as well as his wives,
and took for himself Toghtoga’s younger sons, Khudu and
Chilagun,
as well as all of their possessions and people.
But Ong Khan offered none of his spoils to Chingis.

Then together Chingis Khan and Ong Khan
went to war with the Naiman led by Buyirugh Khan.
When they came on his forces at Ulugh Tagh,
Buyirugh Khan had no time to gather his army for a fight,
so he retreated back through a pass in the Altai mountains.
Chingis and Ong Khan followed him through the Altai,
riding down the Urunggu River valley.
Yedi Tublugh, a Naiman chief, hung back to spy on us,
but when he tried to escape our men by riding over the mountain
his saddle-strap broke and we captured him.  
So without warning,  
Chingis Khan and Ong Khan overtook the Naiman at Lake Kishil Bashı  
and they destroyed Buyirugh Khan’s army....

In the fall of that same Year of the Rat  
Chingis Khan led his armies against the remaining followers of  
Toghtoga Beki,  
who had fled to the Kharadal Forest.  
He forced Toghtoga to retreat,  
driving his people out onto the Donkey-back Steppe,  
capturing all his herds and possessions.  
Toghtoga, along with his sons Khudu and Chilagun,  
with a few followers and nothing but the clothes on their backs,  
escaped from the battle and got away....

And so in the Year of the Tiger,  
having set in order the lives  
of all the people whose tents are protected by skirts of felt,  
the Mongol clans assembled at the head of the Onan.  
They raised a white standard of nine tails  
and proclaimed Chingis Khan the Great Khan.

A Russian Near-Contemporary  

BERTOLD SPULER

The proclamation of Temujin as Genghis Khan in 1206—“the Year of the Tiger”—was the most significant division point in his career. The wars for the securing of Mongolia were over: All the native tribes of fellow Asiatic nomads had come under the horsetail banner of the Great Khan. He now turned to the outer world. This was probably not a new goal for Genghis Khan. But prior to this time he could not risk leaving potential enemies at his back to march to distant frontiers. The events of 1206 changed all that and the building of a Mongol world empire began.

Under Genghis Khan and his generals Mongol armies spread out east and west. In the east, by 1215, the Chinese Chin Empire was
defeated and in that year Peking fell to the Mongols. The westward expansion brought the Mongols across the borders of the emerging states of eastern Europe. As a result, a more or less permanent relationship was established with those states. And this meant envoys appointed to the Mongol court, envoys who would make regular reports to their governments, keep notes and records, and write memoirs.

The following selection, from Bertold Spuler’s History of the Mongols, is probably taken from the reminiscences of such an envoy, in this case from the Duchy of Moscovy, whose name is not recorded. His lifetime, or at least his diplomatic career, seems to have carried a generation or two beyond Genghis Khan himself. But he was well enough informed about the Great Khan to leave us an instructive account of the government and society Genghis had set in place. His account begins with the completion of Genghis Khan’s outer conquests, within a year or so of his death.

Then Chinggiz Khan returned to his own country. Here he enacted his laws and promulgated orders to which the Tatars strictly adhere. Only two of them shall be mentioned here. The first order says: Anybody who puffed by pride and on his own authority without election by the princes aspires to Imperial dignity, shall be executed without grace or pardon. Consequently, before the present Emperor Goyük Khan was elected, one of the princes, an actual grandson of Chinggiz Khan, was executed for this crime, since he wanted to make himself Emperor without election by the princes.

The other order says they must subjugate the whole world, and must not live in peace with any people who has not first surrendered to them; and this will apply until the time when they themselves are annihilated. For they had already made war for forty-two years and have still to rule for another eighteen [before their destruction]; then, so they say, according to some prophesy made to them, they are to be conquered by another nation; but they do not know themselves which nation that will be. And those who are able to escape will, so they say, have to observe that law which their future conquerors will also observe. (That means: Both the victors and the defeated will have to observe the commandments of Chinggiz Khan.)

Further he ordered that there should be commanders for every thousand men, for every hundred, for every ten men, and for the

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2This author uses the term Tatar as synonymous with Mongol.—Ed.
darknesses, that is, for ten thousand men, and on this pattern he built the whole army organization. He gave many other orders, but it would take us too far beyond the scope of our subject to list them all here; moreover, they are not known to us. After he had completed giving his laws and orders, he was struck by lightning and died.

The Great Khan of the Tatars has extraordinary power over all his subjects; nobody dares to settle in any part of his empire without his express direction. In fact he determines the places of residence for the dukes, the dukes in their turn those of the commanders of a thousand, they in turn those of the commanders of a hundred, and the last those of the commanders of ten. If, moreover, at any time or any place he gives them an order, be it for war [or for peace], be it for life or for death, they obey without question.

Even when he demands somebody's unmarried daughter or sister for a wife, she is given to him [instantly] without argument. Actually, every year, or at any rate every few years, he orders the maidens from everywhere throughout the Tatar lands to be assembled, so that he may choose and keep those he likes; the others he gives to those around him as he sees fit.

If he sends any envoys, however great their number may be, to any place, his subjects must provide them with post horses without delay and supply them with the necessary provisions; and if there come to him from anywhere people bringing tribute or envoys, they have equally to be provided with horses, carts, and provisions. If, on the other hand, envoys come to them from elsewhere, they have to suffer great deprivations and shortage of food and clothing, for their provisions are poor and scanty, especially if they come to see princes [rather than the Khan], and if their stay here is drawn out; in that case what is provided for ten people is hardly enough for two. Both at the courts of the princes and on the journey they are given food only once a day, and then very little. Even so, they have little opportunity to make even a modest complaint, if they are wronged; they just have to bear it patiently.

And as if this were not enough, everyone, including princes and noblemen, and even people of a more lowly status, continually demand presents from the envoys, and if they do not get what they want, they look down on them with disdain, and in fact treat them as though they were not there. If, in fact, the envoys should have been sent by a powerful lord, they are not satisfied with an ordinary gift, but say: 'You come from such a powerful lord, why then, do you offer such trifling gifts?' And they refuse to accept [such a meager gift]. If,
therefore, the envoys hope to succeed with their business they are forced to give more. In this way we ourselves could not avoid using for presents a large portion of the donations given to us by the faithful to defray our expenses.

Further, it is important one should know that all property is in the hands of the Great Khan so that nobody dares to say: 'This belongs to me and that belongs to the other.' But everything, household chattels, cattle and people, is the property of the Khan. Only recently he issued an express order to this effect.

The dukes, in their turn, enjoy the same absolute power over their [subordinate] people. In fact, men and women, Tatars as well as others, are distributed among the dukes [as their property]. If a duke sends his envoys anywhere, the people, the Khan's men just as all the other people, are equally obliged to provide without argument post horses, the necessary provisions and servants, both to look after the horses and to wait on the envoys personally. The dukes [beys], like everyone else, are under an obligation to provide the Great Khan with mares as dues, for one, two, or three years, as he may see fit, so that he may have the benefit of their milk. The subjects of the dukes have to provide precisely the same for their lords; for nobody is free among them. In short, the Khans and the dukes take from the property of the subjects whatever and however much they like, and also have unlimited rights to dispose of their persons as they wish.

The Conduct of War: The Organization of the Army

Of this we can report as follows: Chinggiz Khan laid down that there should be one man in charge of every ten soldiers, called a commander of ten [corporal]; in charge of ten such units there should be a commander of a hundred, in charge of ten of these a commander of a thousand, and finally in charge of ten of these a high commander. In their language, this latter number [ten thousand] is called darkness. At the head of the whole army are then two or three dukes (duces or holders of a tugh, i.e., of a commander's standard), but again, one of them has the supreme command.

In the event of war, should one or two or three or more of these ten men flee, they [those who fled] are all punished by death. Moreover, should all of these ten flee, unless all the other men belonging to their unit of a hundred flee, then they are all punished by death. In short, unless there is a general retreat, all those fleeing are punished by death. If, on the other hand, one or two or three throw themselves boldly into battle and the rest of the ten they belong to do not follow, the latter must pay for it with their lives, and if one or more of the ten
soldiers are taken prisoner, then unless their other comrades free them, they equally must pay with their lives... 

The Tyranny of the Tatars over Their Vassals

In those countries whose princes they allow to return home, they install their own basqaqs or governors, to whose beck and call the princes and the common people are all equally subject. If the inhabitants of a city or a country do not do what they require, these basqaqs brand them as disloyal toward the Tatars, and as a result the city or region in question is laid waste and the inhabitants killed. For, at the order of the prince to whom that country is subject, the Tatars arrive in strength and completely without warning, and pounce upon the unsuspecting people, as happened recently while we were still in the land of the Tatars, to a city that they themselves had founded in the land of the Cumans and had populated with Ruthenes. And not only the Tatar prince who has possessed himself of the land, or his governor, but any Tatar passing through this town or region gives himself, as it were, the airs of a lord there, and above all those among them who have a somewhat higher rank. Furthermore, they demand and receive without more ado, gold and silver and anything they want, at any time and in any amount they like.

If quarrels break out between the vassal princes they have to go to the Great Khan to present their case there, as happened recently with the two sons of the King of Georgia. One of them, called Melik, was the son of a legal union; the other, called David, an illegitimate son. Now the dying father had bequeathed part of his kingdom to the bastard. Upon this, the other one who was younger set out with his mother for the court of the Great Khan, since the previously mentioned David had also gone there. In the course of the journey Melik’s mother died. She had been the real queen of Georgia, and her husband had ascended the throne only on marriage to her, since in that country succession along the female line is also valid.

When the two rivals arrived, they presented magnificent gifts, particularly the legitimate son who laid claim to the land which his father had bequeathed to his son David, who as a bastard had no right to it. The other argued against this: Although I am the son of a concubine, I still demand to be given my right according to the traditional law of the Tatars who do not distinguish between the son of the legitimate wife and the son of the servant. As a consequence, judgment was given against the son of the legitimate marriage. David, as the elder

4Melik in Arabic (and Persian) means “King.”—Ed.
brother, was set even above the legitimate son, and he was allowed to retain the land given to him by his father peacefully and without further challenge. In this way, the other son lost both the gifts which he had made in vain, and his case against his brother David.

They also exact tribute from those nations who live at some distance from them, and who are in alliance with other nations whom they still somehow fear and who have not yet been conquered by them. They treat them gently, as it were, so as not to incur the wrath of the army [of the nation whom they fear], and also so that others should not be afraid of submitting to them.

That was the case with the Obesians or Georgians from whom, as was mentioned before, they receive a tribute of fifty thousand or forty thousand hyperpera. Yet other nations are at present left in peace by them; but as we gathered from them, they do intend to make war against them.

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A Modern Assessment of Genghis Khan

LEO DE HARTOG

Genghis Khan died in mid-autumn of the year 1227. By his own orders his death was to be kept secret. The entire court was dispersed save only for his faithful old guard numbering about a thousand men. They were to accompany the body, which was placed on a wagon. The procession began toward Inner Mongolia. As they traveled every living thing they encountered was killed. On the Mongolian frontier they were met by his five wives and their children, his 500 concubines, and other members of the royal clan. The procession then proceeded into the mountain fastness not far from the source of the Onan river, where the Great Khan had once rested beneath a spreading tree and said, "This place is fit for my last rest. Let it be noted." It had been noted and his body was buried under that tree, but with no markers. Its exact location is still unknown.

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5 The Byzantine unit of currency. - Ed.
In the years following the death of Genghis Khan the imperial expansion was continued under his son Ogedei as Great Khan and subsequently under his grandsons. But within two centuries the decline and decentralization of the Mongol Empire had begun. In 1368 the Mongols were driven out of China by the Ming Dynasty. In 1380 the Russian Prince Dmitri Donskoi defeated the last significant Mongol force in the west, the Khanate of the Golden Horde.

Nevertheless, the memory of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol Empire, remained alive. And it remains alive today. Much work of historical scholarship has been done on Genghis Khan and his Mongols in the last generation. And, while no definitive consensus has emerged, various scholars have begun to present their own summary judgments. Such a one is the Dutch Orientalist Leo de Hartog in his book *Genghis Khan, Conqueror of the World*. David Morgan, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, calls it "the most commendable biography . . . at present available in English."

There are only sporadic references to be found to Genghis Khan’s personal appearance. The most detailed information on this subject was obtained from people who saw Genghis Khan during the war in Khwarazm. The world conqueror was then about sixty. He was remarkable for his distinguished figure and his strong constitution. He had cat’s eyes and his hair was only partially grey.

A judgment about Genghis Khan can only be made if he is seen in the context of his times and surroundings. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Mongols were far more barbarous than their neighbouring tribes. For this reason Genghis Khan, as the cultivated Chinese put it, was nothing more nor less than a barbarian. However, this barbarian possessed a number of qualities that enabled him to become one of the greatest conquerors in the history of the world.

His unusual self-control and his ability to keep his temper were striking. Although he never permitted himself to behave treacherously in his private life and in his personal relationships, he was certainly cunning and calculating. In his conduct of warfare he was even deceitful. He hated traitors: servants of opponents who betrayed their masters to win his favour were immediately ordered to be executed. We may assume that this attitude was adopted only partly for reasons of idealism. In those times it was not unusual to desert to the strongest. Genghis Khan must have believed that such opportunists would abandon him also if fortune turned. To make clear what a

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raitor in his army might expect if he were to fall again into his hands, 
he showed no mercy to deserters from the enemy. Supporters who 
remained loyal to him in difficult circumstances were richly re-
warded; while those who served their leaders faithfully to the last in a 
defeated army he often spared, even giving them the opportunity of 
entering his service.

Another characteristic was his suspicious nature. . . . This suspicion 
resulted in Genghis Khan's refusal to allow anyone but himself to 
wield any authority. As his power increased he became more and 
more anxious to protect his own position.

As was the case with all his contemporaries, Genghis Khan worked 
exclusively for himself, his descendants and his closest companions. 
There is no evidence that he entertained any ideas about the welfare of 
the whole nation, not even in the form that such ideas were expressed 
in the Yasa. Nor did Genghis Khan see himself as the head of a people: 
he was the head of the Mongol aristocracy, to which he had given first 
unity and then power and wealth. It is characteristic of Genghis Khan 
that, although he won submission from a great part of the world and in 
other countries aroused fear and alarm, his giddy success never went to 
his head. Each such a cultured people as the Chinese were astonished 
at the noble bearing of this so-called barbarian.

Like his fellow countrymen, Genghis Khan was fond of a drink; 
and hunting was his favourite sport. Although this world conqueror 
was undoubtedly drunk at certain times, he was not guilty of excessive 
use of alcohol. Ögödei and Toluı, who were both the slaves of drink, 
had to be regularly rebuked for their weakness. Drunkenness was 
regarded by the Mongols as a manly virtue. . . . It was therefore diffi-
cult to prohibit this widespread vice in the Yasa.

Women played a great part in his private life. The four most im-
portant wives of Genghis Khan were Börte, Qulan, Yesii and Yesügen. 
He kept an ordu for each of them. In addition to these women there 
were a few others, such as the daughter of the Chin emperor, the 
daughter of the king of Hsi-Hsia, and Gübersü, the former wife of the 
conquered tayang of the Naiman. He also had a number of concu-
bines. Whenever he rested, Genghis Khan loved to have attractive 
women around him and always liked to see girls who were busy at all 
kinds of work. During long campaigns he took one of his chief wives 
with him. He enjoyed being entertained by an orchestra consisting of 
17 or 18 beautiful girl performers.

Although Genghis Khan in his youth showed that he possessed 
courage and daring and often took risks, he never distinguished him-

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8The Mongol law codified by Genghis Khan.—Ed.
self later as a military commander by personal bravery. In his eyes the leader of the battle was always more important than the fighter; all forms of romantic heroism were foreign to his nature. In this respect he differs greatly from the later Asiatic conqueror Timur Lenk (Tamerlan). Genghis Khan directed military operations personally; but he did not think fighting in the front ranks of the cavalry was the job of the supreme commander.

In his later years, however, he cannot be accused of any lack of daring. From the way in which he progressed from a simple tribal chief to one of the mightiest overlords in world history, he did indeed show a great measure of personal courage. He never forced a decision but bided his time, realizing that he ran the danger of losing the opportunities among his supporters. Although he always approached a task with great circumspection, Genghis Khan took great risks when he and his small army attacked the powerful Chin empire and afterwards the vast Khwarazm sultanate. His successful conduct of these wars clearly reveals his military genius.

Genghis Khan did not use any original techniques of warfare. He simply perfected the methods of his predecessors in the steppes. Discipline guaranteed that his orders were strictly carried out. Not even the basic organization of the Mongol army was originated by the world conqueror. There is no doubt, however, that he played a unique role in making this organization faultless.

His profound knowledge of men enabled Genghis Khan to select efficient subordinate commanders. Usually origin and age played no part in his choice. The generals he picked were often given tasks they had to carry out independently, far removed from the Mongol main forces. Not one of the generals, entrusted with the confidence of the world conqueror, ever let him down.

This was the result of his absolute authority and the respect that he inspired everywhere. His choice of civil advisers also shows his gifts for shrewd assessment of human character. They were, without exception, able intelligent and loyal servants. He had, moreover, the good sense to listen carefully to what these ministers had to say. In this connection it is typical that, although he was illiterate and could only speak the Mongol language, he recognized the need for and value of introducing the Uighur script as the official alphabet of the Mongols, who themselves had no alphabet.

Before the rule of Genghis Khan, Mongol society was dominated by complete licence. To obtain law and order in his state, rules of conduct were necessary. By his compilation of the Yasa and his demand for unquestioning obedience, Genghis Khan exerted a tremendous influence upon the morals of the Mongol people, who hitherto had lived in utter anarchy. It is significant that the Franciscan monk John
of Plano Carpini, who visited Mongolia 19 years after the death of Genghis Khan, noticed that the Mongols followed the Yasa much more closely than European priests observed their regimen.

Naturally, the genius of Genghis Khan had limitations. The attempt to reconcile two opposing cultures—nomad and urban—was the weakest link in his system, and later it was one of the chief causes of the disintegration of the Mongol Empire. But the organization he imposed upon his dominions was such that it remained in operation for 40 years after his death. This is a remarkable achievement; the more so because not one of his sons or grandsons inherited his genius. That the Genghisids were able to maintain their rule over the member states after the partition of the Mongol Empire derived partly from Genghis Khan's enormous authority, which remained operative long after his death. During his lifetime this indisputable authority was the force that bound together the various camps in his world empire. The religious basis, which was the fundamental strength of his authority, was an important factor particularly in Central Asia.

Genghis Khan has often been portrayed as a monster whose progress was marked by bloody deeds; in the places through which he passed, it is said, rose piles of corpses of murdered peace-loving people and the ruins of towns which, before his arrival, had been prosperous and busy centres. In Islam especially, he was thought to be an odious killer, spreading the silence of the grave over half the world.

It is true that various sources speak of bloodthirsty deeds committed by the Mongol conqueror. The present-day impartial investigator, however, must reach the conclusion that neither as Temüjin, nor later as khan of the Mongols, did he exceed his contemporaries in cruelty or destructiveness. However considerable his genius may have been, Genghis Khan was a child of his times and his country. The outrages must be viewed in the context of the times and the prevailing social conditions; it would be unfair to judge such events by different criteria. That the names of many other rulers, whose brutality was not much less than that of Genghis Khan, are hardly known, is because they are of no historical significance. During the Mongol conquest inconceivable numbers of people died and destruction was enormous, but this was the consequence of the extent of Genghis Khan's campaigns which covered vast areas of Eurasia. Numerically Genghis Khan's army was always smaller than those of his opponents. As all tribes had done in the steppes, the Mongols controlled subjected countries not with occupation troops but by terror. Genghis Khan's Mongols had hardly outgrown their primitive origins and this affected their methods of warfare. These nomads and forest-hunters had no idea how a sedentary people functioned. Nor did they recognize the importance of agriculture.
Genghis Khan was never guilty, during his great campaigns, of barbarities over and above those which were accepted in his day as normal features of war. But like conquerors of any period, Genghis Khan was able (if it was necessary to reach his goal) coldly to do whatever was necessary, to sacrifice countless human lives and to order widespread devastation.

The Mongol conquests were not only the most far-reaching in world history; they also had the most radical consequences. At Genghis Khan's death the Mongol Empire embraced approximately half of the then known world. The slaughter of people and the destruction of towns were not, however, the only features of Genghis Khan's operations. In the huge areas that he united under his rule, close contacts occurred between countries that had hitherto hardly known of each other's existence, on account of their geographical situation and the unsafe conditions that had formerly prevailed. The empire included two old cultural centres, China and Persia, which now associated more intensively as member states. The whole of Asia was opened up; trade in particular benefited from the new order. This was possible because after the conquests the disciplines embodied in the Yasa were introduced in the subjected countries. These rules were undoubtedly harsh, but they brought about a large measure of security and peace, named the Pax Mongolica. A contemporary Persian historian wrote that in the region between Persia and Turfan public safety was so widespread that a traveller could journey without interference from the Levant to Central Asia with a gold plate on his head.

The commander of a large military unit was also responsible for the protection of the mounted courier service (Yam). This benefited not only efficient military and governmental communications, trade also profited with the Yam. Along the protected routes flowed an exchange of products, information, discoveries and ideas. After the violence and their defeat, came the activity of travellers dedicated to the spirit of enterprises or to peaceful undertakings. Multicoloured throngs of messengers, merchants and missionaries during the coming years would move along the opened communication routes between Southwest Asia and China. Thanks to the Pax Mongolica, commerce especially was able to develop vigorously.

Although the Mongol conqueror was well aware of the value of this international trade, the Mongols themselves did not participate in it. For centuries their activities had been limited to barter with China; in exchange for furs and skins they obtained clothing, food and metal goods from the vast neighbouring country. There was particularly busy commerce between the Mediterranean countries and China. The profits from this trade remained long one of the chief financial pillars of the Mongol Empire.
The opinion that the Mongols wished to convert all conquered territories into steppes is not borne out by the facts. The account of the travels of the Chinese philosopher Ch’ang-ch’un relates that the Mongols strove to restore the prosperity of the defeated countries very soon after the battles were over. Influenced by his advisers Tā-ta-T’ong-a, Yeh-lü Ch’u-tsai and the two Yalavachs, Genghis Khan was convinced that he could obtain more income from a prosperous country, run on a municipal and agricultural basis, than from nomads. In order to govern his enormous empire, with its various nationalities and religions, Genghis Khan relied upon the knowledge and experience of the more sophisticated countries. The Mongols had the upper hand, but they were not really the ruling class. For most of their administrative work they had to rely on foreign co-operators recruited from the conquered populations. As nomads they were not well adapted to regular work. The number of Mongols engaged in the higher governmental departments was therefore very small. For such functions it was usually the Uighurs, the Khitans, the Chinese and Persians who were appointed.

Until the end of his life Genghis Khan remained convinced that the Uighur civilization was the one that was best suited to his empire. Nor was this conviction shaken after the world conqueror had gained some experience of the Chinese and Persian cultures. Even his close association with Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai failed to change his ideas. The Chinese and Persian civilizations naturally exerted an influence upon Mongol society, but Genghis Khan wanted the ruling Genghisids to adhere to their nomad life and the teachings of the Yasa, even after his death. For this purpose the Uighur culture was the most acceptable. Genghis Khan, who assumed that his clan would remain overlords for ever, demanded that his descendants and the Mongol aristocracy should not abandon the life of the steppes. It was a simple life and was not restricted by a fixed location. The Yasa, which he thought should be followed for all eternity, was attuned to this way of life. By so doing, the imperial clan could continue to dominate the settled peoples.

Even after gaining control of the territories of the more developed countries, Genghis Khan applied the policies used when uniting all tribes of Central Asia. Whatever the real social and economic causes of the Mongol conquests were, Genghis Khan himself motivated his wars of conquest in terms of an order received from Tengri (Eternal Heaven). His successors followed his example and further elaborated on this scheme. In their eyes the Mongol Empire was not merely a state among states but a ‘world empire in the making.’ The building of it was the will of Tengri. According to this conception, the right to rule over the world was conferred by the Eternal Heaven on Genghis Khan and his successors. Orders of submission were therefore sent
out to inform other states that they had to conform with the orders of the representative of the god of the Mongols. Refusal to surrender was regarded as rebellion.

Genghis Khan regarded the state as a possession belonging to his clan. His empire's constitution was formulated in such a way that he, his family and his loyal associates could derive from it as large an income as possible, with a view to guaranteeing for themselves a grand life-style. In Genghis Khan's time no moral justification of rule seems to have been current. To rule over others was a pleasure and therefore the Genghisids called the throne the seat of joy. Dwellers in the civilized countries were to Genghis Khan the permanent slaves of his empire, whose job it was to see to it that their nomad masters lived an agreeable life.

Genghis Khan's wishes were eventually forgotten. His empire collapsed and the Mongols, who had been compelled by the military and administrative genius of their greatest son to enter the world arena, were unable to maintain their position. They were absorbed or driven back by the countless educated peoples among whom they lived. Later, many of them relapsed into the circumstances in which they had lived at the time of the birth of their brilliant leader. The hope that his clan would remain intact and would for ever continue to rule his empire proved vain. The Yasa, which was to exert the rule of law for all time, was not influential enough to preserve the solidarity of the Genghisids.

Review and Study Questions

1. How does the saga-like *Secret History of the Mongols* differ from more modern historical writing?

2. In your opinion is the account of the anonymous Russian envoy to the Mongol court a hostile or a sympathetic account? Explain.

3. How do you account for the traditional negative assessment Genghis Khan and his Mongols have received, especially in the West?

4. Is Genghis Khan truly a "maker" of world history? Have his contributions endured? Discuss.

Suggestions for Further Reading

There are several collections of sources tangential to the history of the Mongols in the age of Genghis Khan, such as Mouradja d'Ohsson's compilation of Persian and Arabic sources dating from mid-thirteenth
century or Etienne Quatremère’s translation of Rashid ad-Din’s History of the Reign of Hülegü, from Persian sources; but almost nothing in the way of Mongol sources existed until very recently. The most important such source is The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan, excerpted for this chapter. But this work had to await the translation of Francis Woodman Cleaves in the 1950s. The only other important Mongol source is the Yasa, the compilation of Mongol law ordered by Genghis Khan, which does not exist in a comprehensive collection, but only in later citations.

For this reason definitive narrative works on Genghis Khan and his age have had to wait for the painstaking work of scholarship in anthropology, archaeology, and linguistic studies, largely in the twentieth century. Thus the older general histories such as Jeremiah Curtin, The Mongols: A History (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1908) or Jacob Abbot, History of Genghis Khan (New York: Harper and Bros., 1860) are almost useless.

