Chapter 14

The Last Great Nomadic Challenges: From Chinggis Khan to Timur

(A.D. 500 – A.D. 1450)
The Steppe

How would you characterize this region? Where is this?
Steppe Culture

- Loyalty to kin/clan
- Courage culture
- Horsemanship
- Mobile (pastoralists & hunters)
- Animists
- Raiding between tribes
- Traded with sedentary peoples for manufactured goods
- Invented stirrups
Mongols

- Declared themselves to be descendents of Huns who founded the 1st steppe empire in late Classical era.

- Called “Tartars” especially by Westerners (“people from hell”), though a misnomer: Mongols conquered steppe tribe Tartars, but because so many Tartars rose to prominence in the Mongol Empire, the name became synonymous with Mongols.
The Mongols

- The Mongols were well known for their ability to ride horses well and wage war.
- Skilled in shooting short composite bows and arrows from horseback.
- Organized troops effectively and readily adopted new technologies, like gunpowder from China.
At a meeting of Mongol leaders in 1206, a man named Temujin was elected **Genghis Khan**, which means strong ruler.

He united Mongol tribes and conquered a vast empire that stretched from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe.

Genghis Khan imposed strict military discipline and demanded absolute loyalty. His highly trained armies contained some of the most skilled horsemen in the world.

In their conquest of China, the Mongol armies faced the problem of attacking walled cities. Mongol and Chinese armies used missile weapons against each other.
Genghis Khan

- Valued individual merit & loyalty
- Fighting wasn’t honorable; winning was. So, used any means necessary to win (trickery, etc.)
- Conscripted peasants: Mongols just didn’t understand peasants who seemed like grazing animals rather than *real humans* who ate meat. “They used same terms, precision, & emotion in rounding up yaks as peasants.” --ouch!
- Refugees preceded Mongol attack as people from outlying areas fled to cities for protection but overwhelmed the cities & spread fear
- LOVED negative PR: allowed & encouraged true or false stories to be circulated in order instill fear.
- Fought on the move: didn’t care if chased or fled (unlike sedentary soldier-farmer), just wanted to kill the enemy.
It took 150 years for the Mongols to complete their conquest of China.
Genghis Khan -- Innovations

- Relied on speed & surprise and perfected siege warfare (not relied on defensive fortifications)
- Used resources of land instead of relying on supply train
- Allocated fallen soldiers’ share of loot to go to widow/children (ensured support)
- Reorganized army so each unit had a mix of tribal/ethnic peoples and they had to live & fight together ---transcend kinship, ethnicity, & religion.
- Religious tolerance
- Instituted postal system for communication
- Ordered writing system created
- Abolished torture & insisted on rule of law (to which even the khan was accountable)
Genghis Khan -- Legacy

- In 25 years, subjugated more land & people than the Romans did in 400 years.
- Destroyed LOTS of ‘less important’ cities often along less accessible trade routes to funnel commerce into routes that his army could more easily supervise and control.
Death of Genghis Khan

- Even prior to his death, lots of fighting among his sons.
- He kept pursuing new lands because he worried that factionalism within his family would tear apart the empire & also because his peoples had grown dependent on a steady flow of goods --and his empire depended upon constant conquest.
- Died in 1227 without conquering China.
- His son established Karakorum as a focal point for merchants, pilgrims, & craftsmen.
Division of the Mongol Empire

- After several decades of power struggles among Genghis Khan’s sons, nephews, daughters-in-law, & grandsons, Kublai Khan (Genghis’ grandson) became leader of the eastern portion of the Mongol Empire which ruled China as the Yuan Dynasty & declared himself as the grand khan.

- Around 1300, the empire would be split into four sections (*khanates*) with each ruled by various descendents of Genghis Khan:
  - **Kublai Khan** ruled China (Yuan Dynasty), Tibet, Manchuria, Korea, & eastern Mongolia
  - The **Golden Horde** ruled the Slavic countries of eastern Europe
  - The **Ilkhanate** (‘vassal empire) ruled Afghanistan to Turkey
  - The **Moghulistan** ruled the central steppe including Kazakhstan, Siberia & Turkmenistan.
Mongol Empire 13th c. --the khanates

Not part of Mongol empire
Mongol Invasions

- In 1216, Genghiz Khan led the Mongols out of central Asia across Persia and Mesopotamia.
- In 1258, Hulagu, grandson of Genghiz, burned and looted Baghdad, killing the last Abbassid caliph.
- In 1260, Kublai Khan became emperor of the Mongol empire and conquered China.
- In the late 1300s, the Muslim Mongol leader, Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane, led his troops into the Middle East to conquer Muslim and non-Muslim lands, overrunning Persia, Mesopotamia, Russia, and India.
Mongols Attack Baghdad

(Hulagu Khan's army attacks Baghdad, 1258. From Bibliothèque nationale de France.)
The Mongol ruler Hulagu in Baghdad interns the Caliph of Baghdad among his treasures.

Hulagu (left) imprisons Caliph Al-Musta'sim among his treasures to starve him to death. Medieval depiction from "Le livre des merveilles", 15th century.
Mongols in China

- **Kublai Khan** was Genghis Khan’s grandson.
- He became the Mongol emperor in 1260.
- Kublai Kahn moved the capital of the empire from Karakorum in Mongolia to Khanbaliq in China.
- Today, the city of Beijing stands where Khanbaliq was.
- Under Kublai Khan, the Mongols conquered China and ended the Song dynasty.
- He founded the Yuan dynasty, which ruled for about 100 years.
Kublai Khan

- Well-educated
- Preferred buildings & cities -- not yurts
- Infatuated with Chinese civilization. He wanted to appear more Chinese than the Chinese, so he sought to sinicize his image.
- Has lots of Chinese & foreign advisors, including Marco Polo at his court; but the military was all under Mongol control
- ...while in private, he & his family continued to act as Mongols in speech, dress, food, entertainment, etc.
Yuan Dynasty — what was the extent of its influence geographically?
China Under Mongol Rule

- Kublai Khan, decreed that only Mongols could serve in military and highest government offices, but too few Mongols.
- Chinese officials were allowed to rule in the provinces.
- The Chinese despised their foreign conquerors.
- A mix of Chinese and foreign customs developed.
- Foreigners were welcomed into China and a number of Chinese products, such as gunpowder and porcelain, were introduced in Europe.
- Arab architects designed his palace.
- He rebuilt and extended the Grand Canal at the cost of many lives.

Kublai Khan was Genghis Khan’s grandson
Kublai’s Yuan Dynasty

- Defeated Song dynasty
- Encouraged the movement of paper money (and not just goods) so a standardized unit of account could be used throughout empire
- Promotion of commerce raised merchants’ status
- Kept lots of lower level Chinese officials, but eliminated the civil service exams until 1315.
- Distrusted Confucian scholar-officials who weren’t eligible for some top government positions
- Supported the peasants & peasant economy, believing that the success of the peasant economy would ultimately benefit the Mongols themselves.
Cultural Changes under the Yuan

- The Mongols created relief measures like reducing some taxes & increasing granaries. BUT, the Mongols used forced labor without pay on public works projects, like rebuilding Grand Canal.

- To protect Mongol identity, they were forbidden to marry Chinese. Chinese were forbidden to learn the Mongol language.

- The Mongols classified the population into a hierarchy of 4 groups — with the native Chinese at the bottom. The Mongols, of course, were at the top; then came the non-Han, mostly Islamic population; and last the northern & then southern Chinese.

- Though the Chinese were discriminated against & forbidden to possess arms, but Mongol rule of China was SLOWLY & ultimately very much sinicized.
Cultural Changes under the Yuan

- Fostered closer relations with Christian Europe & many leaders were Christian; however, Mongols ultimately abandoned Christianity in favor of **Buddhism & Islam**.
  - Supported Islam & built mosques. Also recruited & employed Islamic financial administrators.
  - Particularly liked the Tibetan form of Buddhism & recruited a number of Tibetan monks to help them rule China and promote the interests of Buddhism.

- **Mongol women** looked REALLY strange to the Chinese:
  - They rode horses, shot arrows from their bows and commanded both men and women. They **rejected foot binding**, yet, quickly after settling down in their newly conquered lands, Mongol women lost public power. Only in Mongolia did they continue to rule & to fight.
By the mid 13th c, the family of Genghis Khan controls Asia from China to the Black Sea creating a period of stability during which trade flourishes to new heights along the Silk Routes. Before lots of fighting in East Asia and fighting between Muslims & Christians in the SW Asia, but now stability brings trade in more volume & people who now travel the entire distance.

Encouraged great commercial, religious, intellectual exchange between the East & West.

“The Mongols made culture portable: it was not enough to merely exchange goods, because whole systems of knowledge had to also be transported in order to use many of the new products” (e.g. drugs weren’t profitable trade items unless possessed medical knowledge for their use, so moved Arab doctors to China & vice versa)
Pax Mongolica: look at all these routes!
But..

- No technological breakthroughs
- No new religion
- Wrote few books
- No new crops or methods of agriculture
- No permanent structures (under Genghis) other than bridges; no architectural achievements
- ....but as their army conquered culture after culture, they collected and passed all these skills from one civilization to the next. --a conduit [not a creator] of civilization
Mongol Rule in China

- Because China belonged to the large Mongol empire, trade in China increased.
- China’s empire grew during this time.
- The Mongols conquered northern Korea and then used Korean-made ships to invade Japan.

Genghis Khan's son and successor, Ögedei Khaghan.
In 1269, Marco Polo’s father, Niccolò, and his uncle, Maffeo, returned to Venice after travelling through Asia and having met Kublai Khan.

In 1271, they returned with Marco, who was now a teenager.

Marco spent 24 years in Asia (17 in the service of Kublai Khan).

Kahn sent Polo on fact-finding adventures.
Marco Polo travelling, Miniature from the Book "The Travels of Marco Polo" ("Il milione"), originally published during Polos lifetime (c. 1254 - January 8, 1324), but frequently reprinted and translated.
Niccolò and Maffeo Polo remitting a letter from Kublai Khan to Pope Gregory X in 1271.
Marco Polo (cont.)

- Upon returning to Venice, his cargo was stolen and he was imprisoned, where he dictated stories to his cellmate. He was released in 1299.
- His stories introduced Europeans to Asia.
- Eventually he married and had three children. He died in 1324.