

# Chinggis Khan

Chéngjísi Hàn 成吉思汗

c. 1162–1227 *Mongol leader and world conqueror*

**Chinggis Khan was a tribal leader in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. He first united Mongolia, then conquered northern China and much of central Asia. The Mongol empire eventually stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.**

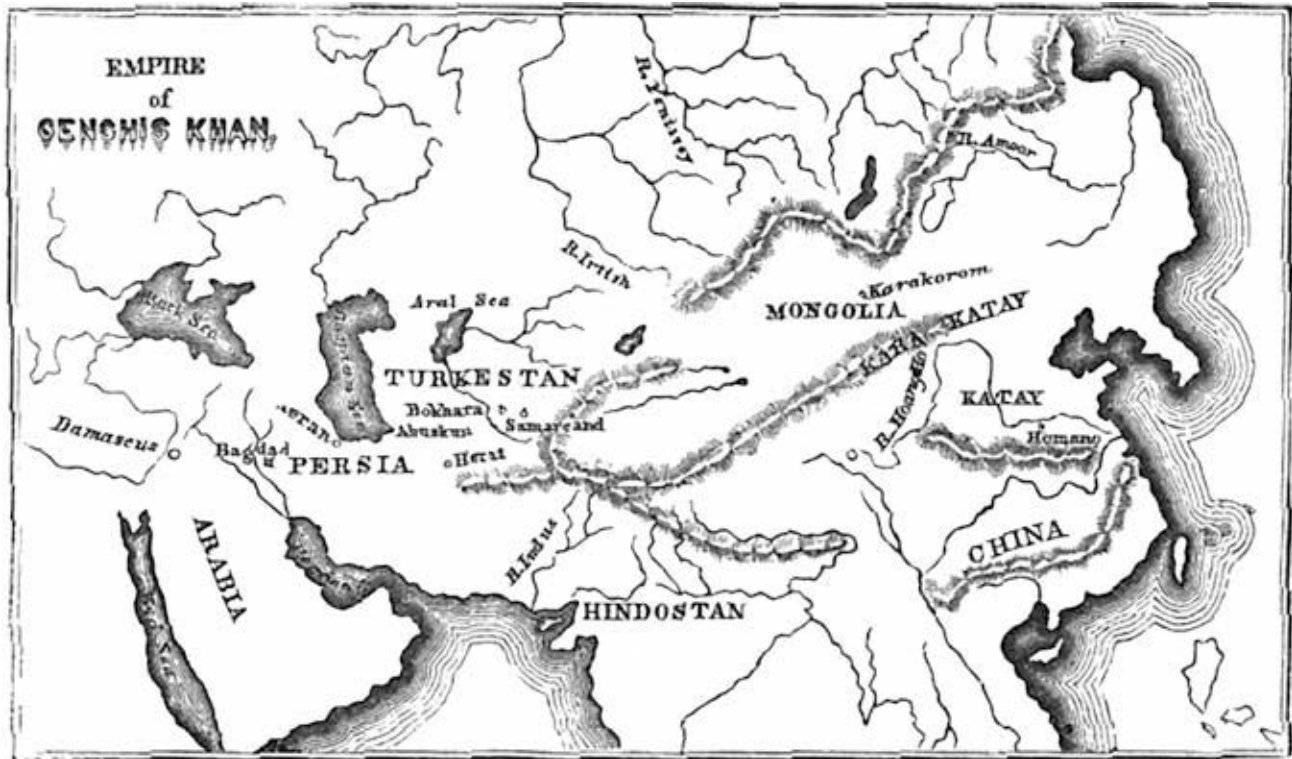
**C**hinggis Khan, meaning “resolute leader” (sometimes spelled “Genghis Khan”) was born with the name “Temujin.” Although scholars are not certain of his birth year, the country of Mongolia has accepted 1162, although 1165 and 1167 also have been viewed as reasonable. Temujin, after surviving tribal wars

in Mongolia after the death of his father, Yesugei, built a tribal confederation that radically restructured Mongolia. After gaining power in 1185 Temujin suffered numerous setbacks and eventually victories. Among these was the kidnapping of his wife, Borte, by the Merkit tribe. Although Temujin eventually got her back, almost a year had passed and Borte was pregnant. Although Temujin accepted Jochi (d. 1225), as the child was named, scholars have little doubt that Jochi was fathered by a Merkit. His ancestry later became an issue in determining a successor to Temujin.

Temujin was able to recapture Borte only with the help of Toghril Ong-Khan (d. 1204), ruler of the powerful Kereit confederation and the former blood brother of Yesugei. During his time with Toghril, Temujin also learned



**Historical illustration, “The Encampment of a Patriarch,” from *Ghengis Khan* by Jacob Abbott. Although he is known in the West most often as “Genghis Khan” (meaning “resolute leader”) he was born with the name “Temujin.”**



**Historical Old Map showing the kingdom of Chinggis Khan, from *Ghengis Khan* by Jacob Abbott. The wars of Chinggis Khan were motivated as often by retaliation as by greed for territory or riches. His strategic and organizational genius created one of the most highly disciplined and effective armies in history.**

the arts of war from Temujin's blood brother, Jamuqa (d. 1205–1206). However, Temujin's relationship with Toghril and Jamuqa eventually soured. Rivalry between Jamuqa and Temujin for leadership of the Mongols led to a clash. Although Jamuqa won the battle in 1187, Temujin won the war as more Mongols flocked to support him because of his charisma as a social revolutionary. Temujin increasingly implemented laws that, although not favoring the lower classes, made tribal life more egalitarian rather than simply favoring the aristocrats, as Jamuqa had. One example was a more equitable distribution of the plunder from battles.

Temujin returned as a major force in the steppe (one of the vast, usually level and treeless tracts in southeastern Europe or Asia) in 1195. After his return he slowly accumulated power in eastern Mongolia by defeating rival tribes. Although his relationship with Toghril seems to have protected him from further feuds with Jamuqa, Temujin eventually clashed with his overlord. Toghril,

who seems to have viewed Temujin as a potential successor, led his armies against Temujin at the urging of Jamuqa and Toghril's children, who feared that they would lose power after Toghril died. In 1203 Temujin defeated the Kereits, thus also gaining ascendancy over central Mongolia. In 1204 he defeated the Naiman and Merkit tribes in western Mongolia. By 1206 Temujin was the dominant power in Mongolia and received the title "Chinggis Khan." The years between 1185 and 1206 were the most difficult years for one of the most respected but feared men in history.

## The Desire for Stability

After uniting the tribes of Mongolia into the Mongol supratribes, Chinggis Khan conquered much of northern China and central Asia. He launched his invasions not to rule the world but rather to maintain stability in

Mongolia. His concerns stemmed from the fact that although he had unified Mongolia, many tribal rivalries continued. If other tribes were left to their own devices, warfare could easily break out. Thus, by sending them to raid in China, he reduced the threat to Mongolia. In addition, the sedentary states bordering Mongolia had a long history of intervening in Mongolia for their own motives, primarily to prevent one tribe from becoming too powerful. Chinggis Khan's rise to power in the early 1200s seems to have happened too quickly for any of the sedentary rulers to react to it. Nonetheless, because Chinggis Khan had lived in northern China after his defeat by Jamuqa, he probably understood Chinese policies toward the steppe tribes. The raids thus also prevented the Chinese states from meddling in the steppe because they now had to defend themselves.

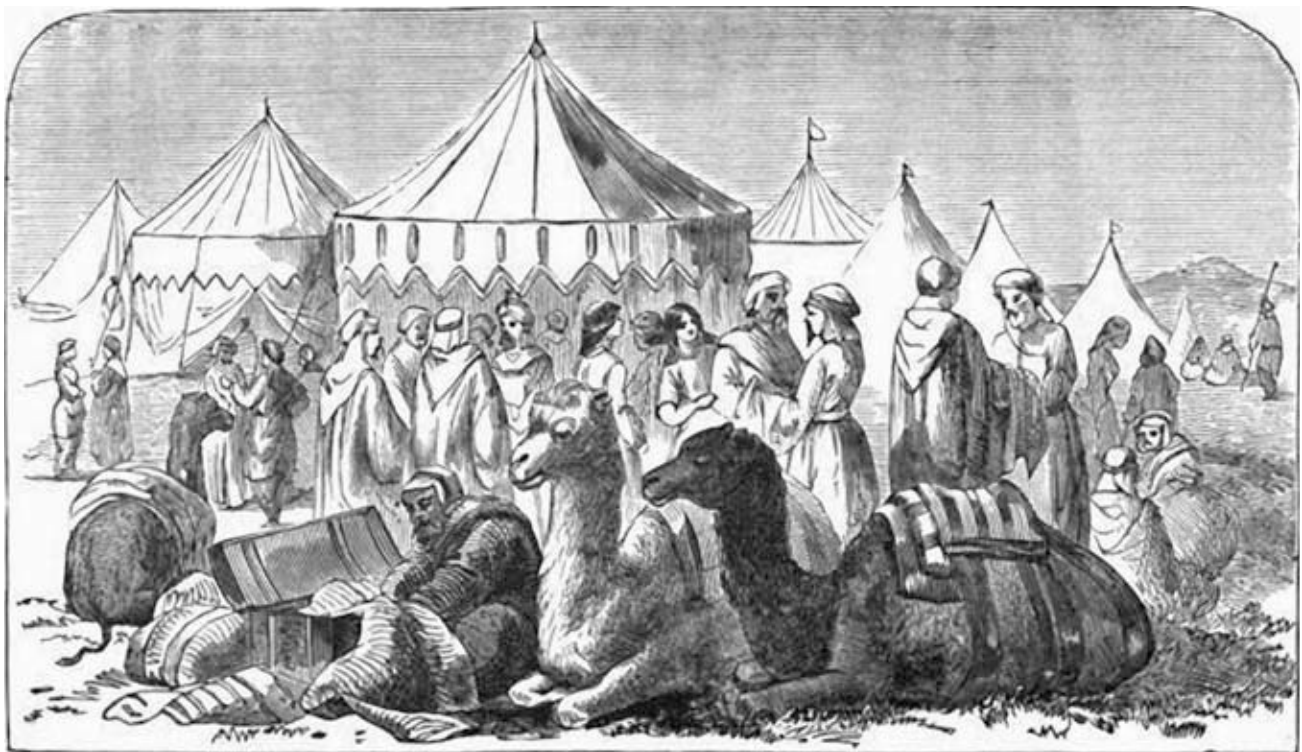
In 1209 the Uygurs voluntarily submitted to Chinggis Khan. Later that year the Mongols began their conquest of the Tangut kingdom of Xi Xia, located in China's

northwestern Gansu Province. After the Tanguts submitted in 1210, hostilities flared between Chinggis Khan and China's Jurchen Jin dynasty (1125–1234). Although the Jin were not defeated until seven years after Chinggis Khan died, the Mongols conquered much of northern China during his lifetime.

Chinggis Khan led his forces toward central Asia in 1219 after a Mongol-sponsored caravan was massacred in the Khwarazmian empire (consisting roughly of modern-day Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, part of Pakistan, and Iran). In fighting with the Khwarazmian empire, the Mongols devastated most of central Asia and eastern Iran. After routing the Khwarazmians the Mongols withdrew to deal with their disobedient vassal Xi Xia, which had refused to send troops for the campaign in central Asia. During this campaign Chinggis Khan died from internal injuries suffered after he fell from his horse while hunting in August 1227.

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**Historical illustration of “Merchants offering their Goods” at one of Chinggis Khan’s encampments. From *Ghengis Khan* by Jacob Abbott. Even after his death the Mongol armies dominated the battlefield until the empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.**





**“The Inauguration of Chinggis Khan,” an historical illustration from a book by Jacob Abbott published in New York by Harper & Brothers in 1902. After uniting the tribes of Mongolia, Chinggis Khan conquered much of northern China and central Asia. He launched his invasions not to rule the world but rather to maintain stability in Mongolia.**

The wars of Chinggis Khan were motivated as often by retaliation as by greed for territory or riches. His strategic and organizational genius created one of the most highly disciplined and effective armies in history, but that same genius created the core administration that ruled that army. Even after his death the Mongol armies dominated the battlefield until the empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Adriatic Sea.

## Nonmilitary Achievements

Chinggis Khan’s nonmilitary achievements include the introduction of a writing system to the Mongols, the ideal of religious tolerance throughout his empire, and unity among the Mongols. His accomplishments cannot be counted in terms of territory or victories but rather in the presence of a Mongol nation and culture. Mongols still venerate him as the founding father of Mongolia, naming airports, hotels, streets, universities, and banks after him.

**Timothy M. MAY**

## Further Reading

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