

Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227)

A Mongol prince, the eldest son of Yesügei, Chinggis Khan gathered under his banner the pastoral nomads of the eastern steppe and began a campaign of conquest that led to the creation within three generations of the largest empire in world history to that time.

Given the name Temuchin at birth, he was born into circumstances that hardly presaged his subsequent spectacular career. The pastoralists of the eastern steppe were a divisive lot and it was difficult for anyone to unite many of them for very long. Added to that were the policies of the Chinese emperors, which aimed to ensure that no single chieftain could become powerful enough to pose a threat to the sedentary population under their dominion. The empire of the Meng-ku, predecessors of the Mongols, collapsed in the 1160s when the Jin emperor had formed an alliance with the Tatars, who then turned on the Meng-ku and defeated them.

Our evidence for the life of Temuchin/Chinggis Khan comes mainly from two sources: a Mongol source—*The Secret History of the Mongols*—and a Persian source—*The Compendium of Chronicles (Jāmi‘ al-Tawārīkh)*. The main part of *The Secret History* was most likely written in 1228 and subsequent additions made by 1241 (or 1246 at the latest), so it is a very early source by an unknown author. It presents events from a Mongol point of view including some surprisingly unflattering information about Chinggis Khan—for example, that as a boy he was afraid of dogs. The compiler of *The Compendium of Chronicles*, Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318), was vizier to the Il-khan Ghazan (r. 1295–1304) as well as being a doctor. Much of the work was done by 1304, but he did not complete it until 1310–11. Rashīd al-Dīn apparently had access to the now no longer extant *Golden Book (Altan debter)*, which was the official history of the Mongols, as well as to documents and oral traditions. *The Compendium* tends to present a celebratory view of Chinggis Khan’s life. Our other sources for the life of Chinggis Khan include the Chinese dynastic history, the *Yuanshi*, and the Persian historian ‘Ala al-Din Juvaini’s

History of the World Conqueror. But these two sources are generally considered to provide less reliable information.

The sources agree that Temuchin's father, Yesügei, was of the Borjigid clan, a branch of the Kiyat, which in turn were related to the Tayichi'ut, a people who lived through hunting and fishing in the forest area of the lower Selenga River. Yesügei became chief of the Kiyats. *The Secret History* tells us that Yesügei abducted Ho'elun, his senior wife to be, as she was on her way to marry Chiledu, a Merkit, but Rashīd al-Dīn glosses over this incident. In 1170, Yesügei took the young Temuchin to the Onggirat to be betrothed to Börte. On the way home Yesügei died after partaking of food with the neighboring Tatars, leading to the supposition that he had been poisoned. As a result of his death, the chiefdom collapsed and the Kiyats dispersed. It was not until fifteen years later that they reunited with Temuchin as their chief.

Until then, Temuchin, his brothers (Jochi-Kasar, Kachun, and Temuge), sister (Temulun), and half-brothers (Bekhter and Belgutei) were raised alone by their mother Ho'elun. *The Secret History* reports an incident where Temuchin killed his half-brother Bekhter after the latter had stolen his hunt. During this period, Temuchin befriended one of his long-time companions Bogorju when he helped Temuchin recover eight of his family's stolen horses, and Temuchin met his future blood brother (*anda*) Jamuqa, who later became head of the Jadirat chiefdom. Also during this period, according to *The Secret History*, Temuchin was captured by the Tayichi'ut and an oxen yoke (*cangue*) fastened around his neck. Temuchin managed to escape in part by befriending one of his captors. Rashid tells us that Temuchin was taken prisoner by different tribes "on many occasions," but always somehow managed to escape. The historian Michael H. Hart has, among others, commented on the remarkable circumstance that "[f]rom this extremity of helplessness, as an illiterate prisoner in a primitive, barren country, Temujin rose to become the most powerful man in the world" (Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*, rev. ed. [New York: Citadel Press, 1992] 144).

In 1178, Temuchin returned to the Onggirat to reclaim Börte as his bride and received a black sable coat as a dowry. Shortly thereafter, the Merkits raided Temuchin's camp and abducted Börte in revenge for Yesügei's abduction of Ho'elun over 16 years earlier. According to Rashīd al-Dīn, Börte was already pregnant with Temuchin's first son, Jochi, so the Merkits gave her for safekeeping to Toghril, chief of the Keraits. *The Secret History*, in contrast, presents a more plausible account that Börte was kept by the Merkits and given as wife to Chilger, the younger brother of the now deceased Chiledu. Temuchin presented the black sable coat he had received as a dowry to Toghril, who had been the blood brother of Temuchin's father. Toghril then took Temuchin under his protection, which was of major benefit to both of them, and supplied 20,000 troops to attack the Merkits. Along with another 20,000 supplied by Jamuqa, Temuchin recovered Börte, who was now pregnant. If the account of Rashīd al-Dīn is accepted, then Jochi was Temuchin's legitimate son, but if the account of *The Secret History* is taken, then Temuchin accepted Jochi as his legitimate son even though the probability is he was the son of Chilger. This distinction may be a significant one for understanding why Batu, Jochi's son and khan of the Qipchak Khanate, was never considered for qaghan.

Between 1183 and 1189, three more sons were born to Temuchin and Börte: Chaghatai, Ogedei, and Tolui. During this period, Temuchin gathered together followers who were not part of any clan or chiefdom. This manner of gathering companions allowed him to create a core group who were not divided by other loyalties. The anthropologist Thomas Barfield theorizes that Temuchin continued this practice by distributing members of different clans and chiefdoms among various regiments. The idea was to break down and suppress kinship loyalties in favor of loyalty to Chinggis Khan directly. In Barfield's view, this dividing up allowed the military organization that Chinggis Khan established to survive him and provide the basis for the next big push under Ogedei, Güyük, and Qubilai to further his conquests, including in the West (under Batu), in Iran and the Middle East (under Hülegü), and in China (under Qubilai). Previous to this, allegiance to a charismatic leader was along clan and chiefdom lines, to which subgroups

the members reverted when the charismatic leader died or was overthrown.

In 1185, Temuchin was chosen chief of the Borjigids, his father's clan. According to *The Secret History*, it was at this time that he adopted the title "Chinggis Khan" (§ 127), but that would seem to be much too soon for such a grand title. More likely he was given the title, as *The Secret History* also relates, by the *quriltai* of 1206 (§ 202), which united a huge proportion of the eastern steppe peoples under Temuchin's leadership.

In 1186 (or 1187 at the latest), Jamuqa and Temuchin had a falling out, which led to a battle at Dalan Balzhut. According to *The Secret History*, Jamuqa won, whereas according to Rashīd al-Dīn, Temuchin won. It is more likely *The Secret History* is correct—that is, that Temuchin lost—because we now have an approximately 10-year gap in our sources concerning the life of Chinggis Khan. The historian Paul Ratchnevsky proposes that Temuchin spent those years in China, possibly as a slave of the Jin, and that this period was seen as so embarrassing that even the author of *The Secret History* suppressed it (50).

Around the same time, Toghril fled to Qara Khitai after he was overthrown by the Naimans. When Temuchin returned in 1195 or so, he began gathering forces around him, and Toghril and Temuchin, both of whom had been in exile from the steppe, arranged to meet. *The Secret History* and Rashīd al-Dīn differ on whether the meeting occurred before the campaign against the Tatars or after. Rashīd al-Dīn, who says it was after the campaign, has Toghril being awarded the title *Wang Khan* by the Jin emperor for defeating their common enemy. If so, then Toghril would have had to have met up with Temuchin earlier, as *The Secret History* says, because there would be no reason to award such a title. It is more likely, however, that Toghril was awarded the title some time later for he was not powerful enough at this point for it to do any good to the Jin. In any case, Temuchin's relationship with Toghril was instrumental in his eventual rise to becoming khan of the eastern steppe peoples.

In 1196, Temuchin along with Toghril defeated the Tatars, and Temuchin received a minor title from the Jin emperor for it. In 1197, Temuchin helped Toghril regain his position as chief of

the Keraits. According to *The Secret History*, the Jin emperor bestowed the title *Wang Khan* on Toghril at this time (in Mongol, this title became *Ong Khan*). Wang Khan and Temuchin together attacked the Merkits, who were led by Tokto'a-beki, and defeated them, but our sources tell us that Wang Khan neglected to give Temuchin his share of the booty. Such incidents eventually led to a falling out between them, but for the time being Temuchin continued to play the loyal vassal.

In 1199, Wang Khan and Temuchin engaged in a joint campaign against Buiruk, Khan of the Naimans. Wang Khan pulled back right before the battle, but the Naimans attacked his forces anyway. Temuchin sent troops to aid Wang Khan and saved him from capture. In 1200, Temuchin campaigned against the Tayichi'ut.

In 1201, Jamuqa was chosen Gurkhan (over-khan) and headed a coalition against Temuchin and Wang Khan. Their forces battled at Köyitän. In 1202, Temuchin destroyed the Tatar forces at Dalan-nemurges, near the Khalkha River. Temuchin and Wang Khan broke with each other over Temuchin's proposal to secure a closer alliance of their respective families through marriage. Wang Khan, either because of this proposal or earlier, decided to get rid of his ambitious vassal. A battle with the Keraits at Kalakalzhit occurred resulting in the defeat of Temuchin. From there he withdrew to Lake Baljuna with nineteen companions and a small number of troops (*Secret History* § 175 says 2600; Rashid [103] has 4600). These companions had broken ties with their respective clans and chiefdoms in order to honor their allegiance to Temuchin. In return, Temuchin promised "to share the bitter and sweet fruits" with them (*Yuanshi* as quoted in Cleaves, "Historicity," 397). They then drank from the lake to seal their oaths. As a result, the converters became known as the *Baljuntu* ("Muddy Water Drinkers"), and they became the commanders of Temuchin's restructured army.

In 1203, after gathering more forces, Temuchin battled the Keraits again. Wang Khan was defeated and died. Temuchin then was recognized as chief of the Keraits. And in 1204, he campaigned against the Naimans. It was during this campaign that Tata Tonga, the Keeper of the

Seal of the Naiman, came over into Temuchin's service. Tata Tonga is often credited with setting up the Mongol bureaus on the Naiman model and of transcribing the Mongol language into Uighur.

In 1205, the Naimans led a coalition of chiefdoms, including the Merkits under Tokto'a-beki and the Jadirat under Jamuqa, against Temuchin's army. During the course of the battle, Jamuqa left the field with his forces. *The Secret History*, which displays a sympathy for Jamuqa, explained his action as a ploy to ensure victory to Temuchin. Rashīd al-Dīn, however, provides a more likely explanation—that is, Jamuqa lost faith in the ability of the Naimans to be able to defeat Temuchin's newly restructured army. Some of Jamuqa's followers took him prisoner and handed him over to Temuchin. Differing accounts in *The Secret History* and in Rashid leave many doubts as to the events that followed. In the end, however, Jamuqa, the *anda* and most significant Mongol rival of Temuchin, was executed.

In 1206, Temuchin was declared Chinggis Khan by a *quriltai* held at the source of the Onon River. Over the course of the next 20 years he undertook a number of campaigns of conquest unprecedented in scope and speed in east and central Asian history. In 1209, after defeating Buiruk Khan, subduing the Kirghiz, and engaging the Tanguts, his army attacked the kingdom of Xi Xia. The campaign stalled and Chinggis negotiated with the leaders of Xi Xia who agreed to break with the Jin. In 1210, Chinggis refused to pay any further tribute to the Jin emperor. A *quriltai* on the Kerulen River advised in favor of an attack on northern China in 1211. During the advance, however, Chinggis was wounded and the Mongol army withdrew.

In 1213, Chinggis renewed the campaign against the Jin in northern China taking many cities. He besieged the Jin capital Da-du in the following year. After negotiations and the moving of the Jin capital to Nanking, rebellion broke out in Da-du. Chinggis renewed the siege resulting in the fall of Da-du in 1215. The following year Chinggis returned to the eastern steppe to deal with rebellious chiefdoms. It was at this time that he apparently brought back with him Jin administrators, including the Khitan Yelü Chucai, who became the main adviser to Chinggis

Khan in the setting up of the dual system of Mongol administration based on the Chinese model.

In 1217, Chinggis signed a trade treaty with Muhammad II, the Khwarezm Shah. The following year the Mongol army was engaged in a campaign against the kingdom of Qara Khitai. During the course of the fighting, forces of the Khwarezm Shah engaged a Mongol force under Jochi. In 1219, the Khwarezm Shah killed Mongol ambassadors seeking to reestablish peaceful trade relations. Since this was an open act of war, Chinggis attacked the armies of the Khwarezm Shah. The entire campaign showed evidence of the thorough intelligence work and careful planning that characterized Mongol campaigns. While Chinggis Khan's sons Chaghatai and Ogedei attacked Otrar, a force under his eldest son, Jochi, and the commander Jebei moved south into Transoxiana. In the meantime, a third force, under Chinggis Khan and the brilliant general Subedei moved west and seemed to disappear. The Khwarezm Shah may have felt safe from attack because of the distance from Mongolia and the existence of the Qizil Kum desert in between, which was considered to be impenetrable by an army. But Chinggis Khan found a guide who led his army across the desert so he was able to attack and take Bukhara and subsequently Samarkand. Chinggis Khan chased Jalal al-Din, the son of the Khwarezm Shah, to India with the larger part of his military while the rest of the Mongol army under the command of Jochi and Subodei chased the Khwarezm Shah to an island in the Caspian Sea where he died. This Mongol expedition force then continued north through the Caucasus. It defeated a combined force of Polovtsy and Rus' at the Kalka River in 1223 before returning around the north of the Caspian Sea to Central Asia.

After the success of the Khwarezm campaign, Chinggis began appointing Muslims, such as Mahmud Yalavach, who were, according to *The Secret History* "skillful in the laws and customs of cities" (§ 263) as advisers on commercial affairs and as administrators and tax gatherers. Throughout his campaigns, Chinggis Khan followed a policy of pillaging any city that resisted and of selling the inhabitants into slavery but of sparing cities and people that capitulated peacefully. The idea was to encourage the next city to be attacked to surrender without a fight

and be spared. This form of psychological warfare was not invented by Chinggis Khan, but he used it so effectively that his reputation as a ruthless marauder constantly seeking revenge became well established. More likely, Chinggis Khan, after being selected khan in 1206 and his initial victory over Xi Xia, was motivated by reasons of maintaining trade between the pastoralists of the steppe who he led and the sedentary people of neighboring kingdoms. Recent studies of steppe pastoralists have pointed to the vital importance of trade with sedentary people for necessities to maintain the pastoral lifestyle. When that trade is cut off, the pastoral way of life is threatened.

Chinggis remained in northwestern India for the next few years. It was during this time that the Taoist philosopher Changchun visited Chinggis and was involved in long discussions. In 1225, Chinggis return to the eastern steppe, perhaps in part because Xi Xia had reestablished relations with the Jin. From 1226 to 1227, Chinggis undertook a campaign against Xi Xia and the Jin. He died in August 1227 in northern China and was buried at an unknown location either, according to one tradition, in the Ordos or, more likely, in the Mongolian homeland on the side of the mountain Burqan-qaldun.

Division of the empire had already been determined by Chinggis Khan among his four sons: western steppe to Jochi; central Asia to Chaghatai; Ogedei received northern China; and Tolui, the youngest, received the Mongol homeland—that is the eastern steppe. Since Jochi predeceased his father, Jochi's son Batu received the western steppe “as far as Tatar hoof penetrated” (Juvainī, 42). A successor as qaghan was not chosen until 1229 when his second oldest surviving son, Ogedei, was chosen by a *quriltai*. The army, administrative structure, and alliance system that Chinggis Khan set up survived him, so that his successors were able to make further extraordinary conquests throughout Asia and into Europe over the course of the next half century, which had a profound influence on the sedentary civilizations of Eurasia.

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