

The monguls



What did the ancient Mongols do? The ancient Mongol empire controlled more land than any other empire and included a very wide range of cultures, peoples, and religions. Everyone knows the name of Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan) and his reputation as a fierce warrior and brutal conqueror. What you may not know is that he was a very savvy politician. His political skill not only created this tremendous empire, but also saved his people from destruction. He established the system that preserved their lives and their way of life.

He and his successors took the system he set up and used it to spread their influence far and wide. So, the Mongols owe Chinggis Khan a debt of gratitude for preserving their lives and culture. We modern Westerners also owe him and his people respect for connecting the inhabitants of Western Europe with Asia and all the many benefits of trade and interaction that brought to the world. The Mongols preserved order in the areas they conquered which made it possible for traders to travel safely. This was called Pax Mongolica and was very significant in fostering contact between Europe, China, and all the lands in between.

The disintegration of the Pax or Peace is part of the reason that Europeans were motivated to seek out sea routes to China, since it was no longer safe to travel overland. So, in a sense, you can say that the Mongolians are responsible for Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas! Another thing you may not know about Chinggis Khan: he was not as brutal as he has been depicted. He would usually send emissaries ahead to invite a group of people to ally with him or to give him whatever he was seeking. If they

agreed, they were typically required to give a certain number of warriors and some goods to the Mongols.

If they refused, his warriors would attack mercilessly. However, they typically left women and skilled artisans to continue productive work, rather than totally destroying an area. This is different from some later conquerors who would completely annihilate opponents and their territory. Why did the Mongols pursue such extensive conquests? This geography is an important part of the answer to the question: Why did the Mongolians invade their neighbours? To answer this question, we have to know something about how Mongolians lived in the 1200s.

Because of their geography, Mongols were usually herders and nomads. Define nomad. Why would herding require nomadism? Mongolians had to be able to move frequently in order to find pasture for their animals, primarily sheep, so they needed mobile housing. They made (and still make) felt from wool and use this felt to make the tent-like rounded houses called ger, or yurts by the Russians. Ger can be set up and taken down quickly and packed to be moved. [4-minute video of contemporary Mongolian felt-making and setting up a ger: <http://ragcha.om/mujaan/shorts.html> Click on " Making felt"] Note the horse pulling the felt in order to compact and flatten it. Facts about gers: <http://www.chaingang.org/yurtquest/FAQ.html> Many more pictures of gers: <http://www.chaingang.org/yurtquest/pics.html> You can see that nomadic life isn't easy. For one thing, it requires cooperation which binds people together, since they depend on each other to help them sustain life. At the same time, this kind of climate and terrain will not provide enough food in any one area to support a large population.

This encourages the development of small tribal groups, people who can depend on each other but who do not have too large a footprint on the environment, since they will survive best when they are not all together. If a herd gets too large, it will destroy the grassland and not be able to graze in one place. Also, this climate makes it difficult to accumulate a large enough surplus that you could afford to pay someone else for services. For one thing, you would need to move everything you owned. It was not possible to stockpile any surplus, even if it were possible to accumulate some in a particularly good year.

In the conditions of this harsh nomadic life, it was not possible to create a social class of artisans who would manufacture goods. People were needed for herding and moving. And although there was some very limited agriculture, it was not possible for Mongolians to rely on farming for foodstuffs either. What do you think are typical Mongolian foods? [Animal products predominate - meat, milk products. Berries and vegetation that grows wild or with very little cultivation play less of a role in the traditional diet.] This video clip shows men working on the felt and the ger.

Of course, it is set in contemporary time, not in ancient Mongolia. In ancient Mongolia raiding other tribes or settlements in neighboring areas was an important part of the economy. Of course, raiding isn't part of Mongolian culture now, but it was back then. If military might, necessary both to raid and to protect your own tribe, were such an essential part of your society, how would it affect the culture? One thing that contributed to Mongolian military success was the fact that the men were always ready and available for war.

In order for that to be true, women had to take on many of the jobs that men do in other societies. Along with greater responsibility, the woman also had more rights and privileges than was common in other East Asian societies at that time. For example, they had the right to own property and to divorce. They also were sometimes trained for and participated in the military. We can find many references to women of the Mongol elite in 13th century chronicles from different cultures, including Mongol, Chinese and European. Later on we will discuss some prominent Mongolian women leaders who were very important in China.

Raiding wasn't the only contact they had with settled agricultural society; they also had to trade in order to get many of the goods they needed. Two things happened in the early 1200s to make both nomadism and trading more difficult. One was that the temperature of the steppe declined a little, not enough to threaten human life directly, but enough to affect the fragile balance of the environment and reduce the length of time during the year that grass grew. With less grass, herders had to move. [Refer back to map, climate.]

The other singular development in Mongolia in the early 13th century was the rise of a man called Temujin. He introduced the momentous political innovation of uniting all the Mongolian tribes under his leadership. Previously they had been scattered into separate tribes, a logical political system since the ecosystem would not sustain a large group gathered together, and they had frequent warfare among themselves. But in 1206, after years of preparation, Temujin was named the Great Khan, or ruler over all the tribes at a meeting of tribal elders called a quriltay (koo-ill-tie) or a council.

He claimed to have blessed ancestry and took the name of Chinggis Khan or Ruler of the Universe. His line was established as supreme and having the inherent right to rule. This political development influenced societies in many different areas for hundreds of years. Chinggis Khan took control in a period of economic and political crisis for the Mongolians. Not only was climate change pushing them to move away from their usual areas in search of better pasture. In addition, the northern Chinese ruling dynasty had cut trade with the Mongols.

The Chinese did not need Mongolian products - but the Mongols needed to obtain things from the Chinese. In this unequal relationship the Mongolians were vulnerable. Forced by climate to search for better pastures, cut off by their usual trade partners, Mongolians faced severe challenges to their lifestyles and even their lives. These were the conditions when Chinggis Khan took control over a mobile, dedicated and militarily adept population. The stage was set for the Mongolians to sweep south, east and west throughout Asia and into Europe, conquering as they went.

What were the effects of Mongolian control? Intermixing of many different tribes of people and their geographical displacement. When the Mongols conquered a settlement or tribe, particularly of the Turkish nomads who inhabited the steppe to their south and west, they set them up in a military command structure. Conquered men were turned into warriors. Families accompanied warriors, serving as support so that the men were always available for military service and were not required to stay home and work to care for their families' basic needs.

They also intermixed peoples from different areas in each command unit. That way there was less possibility of conquered peoples uniting to revolt. They were turned into mobile military units which would sometimes be left to settle a different conquered area. This had the effect of intermixing ethnic and tribal affiliations so that most of these peoples no longer retained their own distinct culture, but resulted in them adopting their designation as specific units of the Mongols, or hordes. This legacy is still seen in Kazakhstan today, where the Kazakh population is divided into Greater and Lesser Hordes.