

# HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

This document covers the Mongol history, from the unification of the steppe tribes under Genghis Khan in 1206 CE to the end of the Yuan dynasty in 1368 CE. The final section will bring the narrative to modern-day Mongolia.

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# 1: Unification



SIDES:

- **ORANGE** = Naimans
- **BROWN-RED** = Kereyits
- **TAN** = Tatars
- **BLUE** = Tayichi'uts
- **TURQUOISE** = Oirats
- **BLACK** = Mongols

**OVERVIEW:** In the late 12th and early 13th centuries, **Temüjin**, a fatherless Mongol boy, rose through decades of war against rival tribes to unite the steppe. At the 1206 kurultai he was proclaimed **Genghis Khan** (better transliterated as 'Chinggis Khan'), a title meaning "Supreme Ruler". He would go on to amass an empire that would conquer half the known world.

**Detailed Information:**

The Mongols originate from the **Shiwei**, a cluster of Mongolic-speaking tribes who first appear in fifth-century Chinese records. The "**Mengwu**" branch of the Shiwei were herders and hunters along the Argun River, generally believed to be the origin of the Mongol name. The twelfth-century Mongolian steppe was a patchwork of feuding tribes that shared a language and a pastoral way of life but had no political unity. The **Mongols** were only one people among many, living alongside the **Tatars**, the Christian **Kereyits** under Khan Toghrul, the culturally sophisticated **Naimans**, the forest-dwelling **Merkits**, and dozens of smaller clans.

The **Jin dynasty** of northern China loosely controlled the region by setting tribe against tribe, a strategy of **divide and rule** meant to keep the steppe too fractured to threaten its frontier.

Around 1162, a boy named **Temüjin** was born to a minor **Borjigin Mongol** chief named Yesügei. Temüjin's great-grandfather was Khabul Khan, the warlord who had once united the clans into the Khamag Mongol ("Whole Mongol") and repelled the Jin before that fragile unity collapsed. According to the *Secret History of the Mongols* (the oldest surviving literary work written in the Mongol language), Temüjin came into the world clutching a blood clot, taken as an omen of conquest, and was named after a Tatar chieftain his father had recently killed. When Temüjin was nine, Tatars poisoned Yesügei in revenge, and the Borjigin clan abandoned the widowed family to die. His mother Hoelun kept her children alive by foraging for roots and fish, a harsh period of poverty on the margins of the steppe that hardened her son into a resourceful individual.

Ruthlessness was the reality of the steppe. With his brother Khasar, Temüjin killed his domineering half-brother Begter, seizing authority over the household by force. Around the age of fifteen he was captured and **enslaved** by the rival **Tayichiud clan**, but escaped with the help of a sympathetic family whose patriarch, Sorkan-Shira, would later become one of his trusted followers. His early rise rested on two key alliances. His bond with his late father's friend Khan

Toghrul of the Kereyits gave him a powerful patron, while his marriage to Börte bound him to her Onggirat people. Börte remained his principal wife and empress, and her four sons would be his only recognized heirs, but like other steppe rulers Genghis took many secondary wives and concubines over his lifetime, often acquired through alliance or conquest. Temüjin's earliest companions included Bo'orchu and Jelme, but the most important bond of his youth was with **Jamukha**, a Jadaran noble with whom he swore **anda** (the sacred oath of blood-brotherhood).

When the Merkits abducted Börte to avenge Hoelun's own earlier capture, Temüjin called on Toghrul and Jamukha to help him rescue her. She soon gave birth to **Jochi**, whose paternity was always quietly doubted, a shadow that would later poison the question of succession. In time the friendship between Temüjin and Jamukha soured into rivalry. They differed in this way: Temüjin promoted men by ability and loyalty rather than birth, offering protection for unwavering allegiance, while Jamukha stood for the old aristocratic order of inherited rank.

Decades of shifting warfare followed. In 1196, Temüjin and Toghrul crushed the Tatars alongside Jin forces, winning Temüjin formal Jin recognition. He then exterminated the Tatars outright, putting to death every male taller than a cart's linchpin and absorbing the women and children. In 1203, Toghrul, manipulated by his son Senggum and by Jamukha, turned on his protégé and ambushed him at the **Battle of Qalaqaljid Sands**. Temüjin fled with only nineteen

followers to muddy **Lake Baljuna**, where they drank its brackish water together and swore eternal loyalty. The **Baljuna Covenant** became a founding myth of the empire, binding men of different tribes and faiths to Temüjin personally. He rebuilt his strength, struck back in a surprise night attack, and destroyed the Kereyits. Toghrul fled west and was killed by Naimans who did not recognize him.

Only the Naimans remained. Their leader, **Khan Tayang**, influenced by his mother Gurbesu (who mocked the Mongols as filthy and foul-smelling), was urged on by Jamukha to attack. In 1204, at the decisive **Battle of Chakirmaut**, Temüjin tricked the Naiman scouts by ordering each of his men to light five separate campfires at night, conjuring the illusion of an army far larger than his own. The Naimans were broken. Jamukha, betrayed and handed over by his own men, refused his anda's offer of reconciliation, declaring that there could be only one sun in the sky, and asked instead for an honorable, bloodless death. He was wrapped in a felt rug and had his back broken.

In the spring of 1206, at a great **kurultai** (a grand Mongol assembly) on the banks of the Onon River, the forty-four-year-old Temüjin was proclaimed **Genghis Khan**, "universal ruler." In thirty years he had risen from fatherless outcast to master of the steppe. He welded the feuding tribes into a single nation built on a strict **decimal system** of tens, hundreds, thousands, and ten-thousands, governed by the written law code of the **Yassa**, guarded by the elite **keshig** bodyguard, and

fielding roughly 100,000 horsemen. The Mongol military hierarchy began with the **arban** consisting of ten men. Ten arbans was a **zuun** (one hundred soldiers total). Ten of those were a **mingghan** (one thousand soldiers), continued similarly to a **tumen** (ten thousand), commanded by an appointed individual called a **noyan**, and ultimately to the one hundred thousand strong **ordu** (a Mongol term meaning “royal court”, later transliterated into the Western word of “horde”).

The conquered peoples, the Tatars, Kereyits, Naimans, and Merkits, were broken up and scattered through these new units until the old tribal names faded and all alike simply called themselves Mongols. The army was almost entirely cavalry, made of a vast host of **horse archers**. Each rider’s main weapon was the **composite recurve bow** made of horn, wood, and sinew. A rider carried 2-3 bows with several quivers of arrows. Their secondary weapons consisted of a curved sword, javelin, or axe. Some had a lasso to drag enemy riders off their horses. It was the most disciplined fighting force the world had yet seen. That discipline was forged not only in war but in the hunt. Each winter, the Mongols held a great ring hunt called the **nerge**. Warriors formed a vast circle, sometimes dozens of miles across, and over days marched inward, driving every animal before them, deer, boar, wolves, toward the center, where the leaders took the first kill. The whole exercise rehearsed the army’s coordinated movement. Genghis now turned this army toward the wealthy empires of China, Central Asia, and Persia.

## 2: Invasion of Central Asia & China



SIDES:

- **TURQUOISE** = Mongol Empire
- **LIGHT BLUE** = Western Xia (Tangut Empire)
- **VIOLET** = Jin Dynasty
- **BABY BLUE** = Qara Khitai (Western Liao)
- **STEEL BLUE** = Khwarezmian Empire

**OVERVIEW:** Between 1209 and 1227, Genghis Khan led the Mongol Empire in relentless campaigns across northern China, Central Asia, and Persia, shattering rival kingdoms, leveling great cities, and expanding his realm greatly before dying.

**Detailed Information:**

Having united the steppe, Genghis Khan now commanded a disciplined army of mounted archers. Just beyond his borders lay many empires and kingdoms of staggering wealth. His first target was the kingdom of **Western Xia**, a Buddhist state ruled by Tangut people (Sino-Tibetan in origin), that straddled the eastern Silk Road. The Mongols invaded in 1209, broke the Tangut army, and besieged the capital Yinchuan. Unable to storm the walls, Genghis tried to drown the city by diverting the Yellow River, a scheme that backfired and flooded his own camp instead. The Tangut emperor submitted anyway, paid tribute, and gave a daughter in marriage, and Western Xia became a vassal state. The failed siege taught a lesson Genghis never forgot. From then on he systematically recruited Chinese,

and later Persian, **siege engineers** to build the catapults, trebuchets, and incendiary weapons that allowed his cavalry army to conquer enemy cities.

In 1209, the Uyghurs of Qocho, resentful of their Qara Khitai overlords, submitted to Genghis voluntarily. The Karluks of Semirechye soon followed. These literate peoples gave the Mongols their scribes, administrators, and the Uyghur script the empire adopted for its language. In 1211, Genghis turned against the **Jin dynasty** of northern China, which was led by the Jurchens, a Tungusic people who are the direct ancestors of the Manchus. The Jin were far richer and more populous, with heavy cavalry and advanced siege technology, but their court was unstable. Genghis pierced the **Great Wall**, a line of fortifications running across northern China, continually built upon by successive Chinese dynasties over many centuries to keep out the nomadic horse peoples of the steppe. At this time it was a patchwork of earthen ramparts and garrisoned passes, nothing on the scale of the monumental walls built by the later Ming dynasty that tourists see today.

Genghis shattered the Jin field armies in 1211 and 1212, and by 1213 his horsemen were sweeping across the North China Plain, bypassing the fortified cities he could not yet storm. The Jin emperor abandoned Zhongdu (modern Beijing) and fled south to Kaifeng. Zhongdu would fall in 1215 after a lengthy blockade drove the defenders to cannibalism. The sack was so total that a visitor years later described hills of white bones outside the walls. The Jin retreated to

their territory south of the Yellow River, enduring for another two decades. They wouldn't be fully conquered until 1234, when Genghis's son Ögedei would ally with the Song, and invade. The Song joined out of long-held resentment as the **Jin–Song Wars** (1125–1234) had cost them northern China and pushed their court south of the Yangtze. The Song had wanted those lands back.

Genghis would continue his conquest with **Qara Khitai** on his western flank. It was effectively a usurped, crumbling state seized by the renegade Naiman prince **Kuchlug**, an old enemy from the unification wars. Originally a **Buddhist**, a religious tradition founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in ancient India that teaches that suffering arises from craving and can end by following the Eightfold Path to nirvana, Kuchlug had recently converted to **Christianity**, which led him to persecute his Muslim subjects. Genghis sent his general **Jebe** in 1216, who quickly won support among the Muslim subjects who saw the invaders as liberators. Kuchlug would attempt to flee across the Pamir Mountains, but he was caught by local hunters and handed to the Mongols, who beheaded him in 1218.

Qara Khitai took its name from an old steppe custom of using colors for compass directions. Blue stood for east, white for west, red for south, yellow for the center, and black for north. “Qara” means black in Turkic. Thus, its name means Black Khitai, or Eastern Khitai. It marked the realm as the northern branch separated from the original Khitan homeland in the east. The **Khitans** were a

nomadic Para-Mongolic people from Manchuria descended from the Xianbei. They ruled northern China as the Liao dynasty from 916 to 1125 until the Jurchen Jin destroyed it. When the Liao fell Prince Yelü Dashi led survivors westward and founded a new realm in Central Asia called the Western Liao or Qara Khitai. Because the Khitans ruled the lands bordering Central Asia, the peoples there took the rulers' name, "Khitai," as their word for all of China itself. Persian and Arabic writers carried this form westward as "Khitāy," and as Silk Road traders and travelers passed it into Latin and the European vernaculars, the guttural "Kh" softened into a "C," yielding "Catai" and then "**Cathay**." By contrast, the word "**China**" derives from the Sanskrit word *Cīna* that is generally traced back to the time of the Qin dynasty of the third century BCE. This term would arrive much more slowly to Europe, only arriving when Portuguese traders carried its descendant form west in the 1500s, applying it to the southern coast where they made landfall. The etymological derivation can be summarized as: Sanskrit *Cīna* → Persian *Chīn* → Portuguese *China* (though not as linguistically direct as arrows may convey). With the two names in circulation, Europeans believed Cathay and China were two distinct realms, keeping them separate on their maps. This held until around 1600, when the Italian Jesuit missionary **Matteo Ricci**, in China since 1583, recognized that what Marco Polo had called Cathay was the same as China, and his order sent Bento de Góis overland through Central Asia (1603–1607) to

confirm it. Góis traced the overland Silk Road route eastward and reached the western edge of China, where merchants returning from the capital confirmed that the land called Cathay. Proven to be identical, “China” prevailed as the standard name, while “Cathay” lived on as a poetic term for the country, famously used by Ezra Pound in 1915 to title his collection of classical Chinese poetry he translated into English.

This realm of Qara Khitai had a Khitan elite ruling over a Turkic population. The **Turkic peoples** trace their roots to an ancient Northeast Asian gene pool that originated on Mongolian steppes. They connect to the Xiongnu confederation (200 BCE–100 CE), which first united the eastern steppe into a nomadic power. Their political identity took shape in the sixth century under the **Göktürks**, ruled by the Ashina clan nearly six centuries before the time of Genghis Khan. At its peak, the **Göktürk khaganate** stretched from Manchuria to the Black Sea, though it soon split into eastern and western halves that fell to Tang China in the seventh century before a revived khaganate was overthrown by the Uyghurs in 744. The Göktürks were not the genetic origin point of the Turkic peoples but a political framework that crystallized many groups together under one Turkic identity. The unifying thread is language rather than ancestry: "Turkic" denotes a family of closely related languages and the shared culture carried with them, not a single bloodline. From that framework their successors, the Uyghurs, Karluks, and Oghuz, carried Turkic

speech and customs westward into Central Asia, Persia, and eventually Anatolia. Without modern scholarship regarding genetics or archaeology, the origins of the Turks were explained by legend. Medieval Islamic genealogists, later echoed by early European works such as François Pétis de la Croix's *The History of Genghizcan the Great* (1722), traced them to "Türk," a son of Japheth and grandson of Noah, while weaving in legendary ancestral figures such as the eponymous Oghuz Khan and the biblical peoples of Gog and Magog. These stories reveal less about real descent than about how outsiders sought to fit the nomads of the steppe into a familiar biblical map of the world.

When the Mongols absorbed Qara Khitai, they came to share a border with the **Khwarezmian Empire**. It was ruled by Shah Muhammad II, and it boasted some of the wealthiest cities on earth, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv. The Khwarazm had only recently conquered the Iranian plateau, and its Turkic aristocracy was resented by its Persian subjects, and its ruler was vain and indecisive. Genghis sought trade, sending a caravan of some 450 merchants to the frontier town of **Otrar** in 1218. The governor Inalchuq accused them of spying, seized their goods, and massacred them. When Genghis demanded justice, the Shah executed his chief envoy and sent the rest home with their beards burned off. It was a declaration of war, and Genghis would answer it with total annihilation.

In 1219, he led an army of perhaps 150,000 men through the Tian Shan, a massive 1,500-mile mountain system whose name means "Mountains of Heaven." The Khwarezmian army had larger total numbers, around 400,000, but the Shah, fearing his own commanders, scattered it among his cities, and the Mongols destroyed the garrisons one by one. Otrar held for five months before falling; Inalchug was captured and killed by having **molten silver poured into his eyes and ears**, a punishment fitted to his greed. Bukhara surrendered swiftly, and Genghis reportedly rode into its great mosque, scattered Qurans for his horses to trample, and addressed the people from the pulpit, naming himself the 'punishment of God' sent for their sins. Samarkand fell within days when its Turkic mercenaries deserted; its skilled artisans were sent east to Mongolia, while its young men were forced to serve in the Mongol army in future campaigns.

Shah Muhammad fled west in panic, hunted across his own empire by the Mongols until he died of illness on the Caspian island of Abaskun in late 1220. His more capable son **Jalal al-Din** raised a fresh army in Afghanistan and won a startling victory at **Parwan**, the only real defeat the Mongols suffered in the whole campaign. Genghis pursued him to the **Indus River**, where Jalal al-Din spurred his horse off a cliff and swam across under arrow fire to escape into India. Watching from the bank, Genghis is said to have admired his courage, remarking that this was the kind of son any father should hope to produce. Elsewhere, his other armies

methodically erased the great cities of **Khorasan**. Merv would then surrender on a promise of mercy but was slaughtered all the same. **Nishapur**, where Genghis's son-in-law had been killed by an arrow, was destroyed with special savagery on the orders of his grieving widow, who reportedly demanded that not even the cats and dogs be left alive. Herat, Balkh, Bamiyan, and a dozen other ancient cities met the same end. The irrigation networks built up over centuries were wrecked, and much of the region never recovered. Modern historians estimate the death toll to around three-quarters of the Iranian plateau's population, perhaps 10–15 million people, with some believing Iran's numbers did not recover to pre-Mongol levels until the twentieth century. Much of what we know of these campaigns comes from **Ata-Malik Juvayni** (1226–1283), a Persian official who, like many of the conquered, entered Mongol service. He would go on to govern Baghdad. Written with close access to the Mongol elite, his **Tarikh-i Jahangushay** ("History of the World Conqueror") is among the earliest and fullest accounts of the war on Khwarezmia.

During the Mongol onslaught deep in Khwarezmian territory, few resisted as stubbornly as **Timur Malik**, governor of Khujand on the Syr Darya, who held a thousand men on a fortified river island, harassing the Mongols before breaking out and escaping downriver. Because Khujand lies in modern **Tajikistan**, Timur Malik is honored there today as a national hero, commemorated by a bronze statue

of him in the courtyard of the Historical Museum of Sughd, located at the restored site of the city's citadel. Neighboring Kyrgyzstan holds a parallel reverence for the **Epic of Manas**, the longest known epic poem in the world at roughly half a million lines, some twenty times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined. Passed down for centuries by bards called **manaschy** and first attested in a Persian manuscript of 1792, it recounts how its eponymous hero Manas united the forty Kyrgyz tribes against the Mongol Oirats, a number symbolized today in the forty sun-rays of **Kyrgyzstan's** national flag.

While Genghis hunted the Shah's heirs, he sent two of his finest generals, **Jebe** and **Subutai**, on an extraordinary raid clear around the Caspian Sea. They crushed the Christian kingdom of Georgia in two campaigns, then forced their way through the Caucasus onto the steppe beyond, where they broke the Alans and the Cuman-Qipchaq tribes. When the Cumans turned to the Rus princes for help, the Mongols destroyed the combined host at the **Battle of the Kalka River** in 1223 with their signature feigned retreat. This three-year loop gathered the intelligence on Russia and Eastern Europe the Mongols would exploit a generation later, after which the two generals rejoined Genghis in the east.

Genghis turned homeward in 1223 after four years of campaigning. He learned that the **Tanguts** had refused to send promised troops and had intrigued with the Jin, and in 1226 he led one last campaign to punish them. The city fell, the

emperor was killed, and the Tanguts ceased to exist as a nation, in fulfillment of his order that the entire Tangut population be **exterminated**. In the campaign, Genghis fell from his horse while hunting, suffered serious internal injuries, and never fully recovered, his health failing through the long final siege.

**Genghis Khan died in August 1227** in the Liupan Mountains and his last command was that his death be kept secret until the city had fallen. His escort was ordered to carry the body home. Legend states that his funeral procession killed every living thing it met on the road, so that no witness survived to point the way to the burial place. Somewhere in the **Khentii Mountains**, near the land of his birth, Genghis Khan was lowered into an unmarked grave, and the earth was ridden flat above him. Despite the centuries since, his tomb has never been found.

He left four sons by Börte: **Jochi**, who had died months earlier under suspicious circumstances; **Chagatai**, proud and hot-tempered; **Ögedei**, the genial drinker named as successor; and **Tolui**, the youngest. The empire was parceled out among them as appanages while the Great Khan's supreme authority was preserved.

### 3: Invasion of Europe



SIDES:

- **TURQUOISE** = Grand Duchy of Vladimir
- **BABY BLUE** = Principality of Kiev
- **YELLOW** = Principality of Ryazan-Murom
- **ORANGE** = Principality of Chernigov
- **OLIVE GREEN** = Principality of Smolensk
- **GREEN** = Principality of Rostov-Suzdal
- **BLUE** = Novgorod Republic
- **PURPLE** = Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia
- **PINK** = Kingdom of Poland
- **BLACK** = Teutonic Order
- **CYAN** = Principality of Poltosk
- **RED** = Kingdom of Hungary
- **BROWN-RED** = Kingdom of Lithuania
- **PEARL-GRAY**, **BROWN** = Mongol Empire (Subutai & Batu Khan)

**OVERVIEW:** Between 1236 and 1242, Subutai and Batu Khan swept across Eastern and Central Europe in a devastating invasion, crushing rival armies from the Volga to the Adriatic and burning great cities to the ground before the sudden death of their supreme ruler caused the Mongol armies to be recalled to the east.

**Detailed Information:**

The Mongol assault on Europe was the deliberate result of a plan drawn up at a great kurultai in Mongolia in 1235, seven years after Genghis Khan's death. His successor **Ögedei** presided over the assembly at the new capital of **Karakorum**, which approved simultaneous offensives on every frontier. The largest was aimed westward into the **Kipchak steppe**, the vast grassland running

from the Volga to the Danube. Nominal command was given to **Batu**, son of the late Jochi, with the conquered lands promised to Jochi's branch as their **ulus** (the Mongol term for "nation" or "realm"). The true architect of the campaign was **Subutai**, the orphaned blacksmith's son who had risen under Genghis to become the empire's greatest general. Now in his sixties, he had already campaigned around the Caspian in 1223, defeating a Russian and Cuman army at the Kalka River before returning to the steppe. Now, he intended to go further.

The campaign opened in the autumn of 1236 with the destruction of the **Volga Bulgars**, a wealthy Muslim trading kingdom whose capital Bolgar was sacked and its people massacred. The Mongols then shattered the Cuman and Kipchak confederations in a winter campaign, scattering the survivors westward. Some 200,000 **Cumans** led by Khan Köten fled to **Hungary**, where King Béla IV granted them asylum in return for conversion to Christianity. This decision would eventually prove to be catastrophic. The Hungarian nobles resented the newcomers, and when the Mongols eventually invaded, a mob murdered Köten, driving the Cumans out, which would rob Béla of the very cavalry he most needed.

For now, the Mongols were on the doorstep of **Kievan Rus**, a quarrelsome patchwork of Slavic principalities. Originally founded in 862 by Varangians, Norse warriors and traders from Scandinavia, it peaked under Vladimir the Great, who adopted Orthodox Christianity in 988. Later, it fragmented into many rival

principalities. This disunity would benefit the Mongols, who attacked in the winter of 1237. Ryazan fell first, with the Mongols demanding a tenth of everything the city possessed. Russians refused, and the city was destroyed so completely that the survivors rebuilt Ryazan on a new site, with the original vanished from history. Next came Vladimir-Suzdal, the most powerful principality of northern Rus, and it was overrun the same. More towns fell, including Moscow, then only a small wooden trading post named for the Moskva River it sat on, until the Mongols reached the capital city of Vladimir itself in February 1238. When the walls were breached, the grand duchess and her family took refuge in the cathedral and burned alive as the Mongols put the city to the torch. Nearly every town of northern Rus lay in ashes. Despite this, **Novgorod**, the great merchant city of the north, was spared. Spring weather brought tremendous rains that transformed the forest roads into an impassable swamp, robbing the invading cavalry of the firm ground it needed. The Mongols came within some seventy miles of the city before the mud forced it to turn back.

The **Novgorod Republic** was truly a genuine republic, standing out from the many other principalities of Kievan Rus. Its name comes from the Old East Slavic *novu* ("new") and *gorod* ("town"), together meaning "new town." From 1136 it governed itself through a popular assembly, the **veche**, which elected its officials and even hired and dismissed its princes, who served as military commanders

rather than sovereigns. The veche was an open gathering rather than a body with fixed membership: any free male resident, summoned by the ringing of the bell, could attend. Decisions were made by shouting approval rather than a counted vote, so in practice, organized factions would dominate more easily. Chief among these factions were the **boyars**, the aristocratic class of wealthy landowning nobles, who ended up the majority of the city's officials, and formed the **Council of Lords**, a body that set the agenda the veche voted on. The agenda items could be whether or not to pass a law, declare war, or approve various appointments. Such appointments were the mayor (**posadnik**), who ran civil administration and the courts, the **tysyatsky**, who led the local militia and oversaw trade, and the prince (**knyaz**), hired by the city to lead its armies. The most famous Novgorod prince was **Alexander Nevsky**, who would defend the republic against the Teutonic Knights, a German crusading order seeking to conquer and convert the Orthodox lands of Rus to Catholicism, beating them at the **Battle on the Ice** at Lake Peipus on April 5, 1242.

In 1240, the Mongols under Batu Khan attacked the ancient city of Kiev. Abandoned by Prince Danylo of Galicia-Volhynia, the city was defended by voivode Dmytro. The Mongols surrounded the city in late November, bombarding the walls relentlessly for nine days. On December 6, 1240, the defenses were

breached. Desperate citizens packed the Church of the Tithe until its roof and upper levels gave way under the weight, killing many beneath the rubble.

Subutai fixed his eyes on mainland Europe, and his intelligence was extraordinary. He knew the Catholic kingdoms of Hungary and Poland were not allied, and that Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II was locked in his own war with the Pope. For the spring of 1241 he split his army into three columns aimed to strike together across a thousand miles of mountain and forest. A northern wing under Baidar and Kadan would sweep through Poland to keep its knights from reinforcing Hungary. A southern wing would swing through Transylvania. The main army would be the middle thrust, led by Subutai himself, and would drive straight across the Carpathians into the Hungarian plain.

The northern wing was a brilliant diversion. Baidar and Kadan tore through southern Poland, sacking Lublin and Sandomierz and burning Kraków on Palm Sunday. Duke **Henry II of Silesia**, called Henry the Pious, gathered Polish knights, German crusaders of the **Teutonic Order**, miners from Goldberg, and contingents of Templars and Hospitallers, and marched out hoping to hold until the king of Bohemia could join him. At the **Battle of Liegnitz** (April 9, 1241), on a field still called the *Wahlstatt*, the "place of slaughter," the Mongols drew the knights into a feigned retreat, surrounded them with horse archers, and destroyed them. Henry was killed and his head paraded on a lance before the city walls. They

then turned south to rejoin the main army under Subutai. Later stories about the event stated that the Mongols filled up nine sacks with the collected severed right ears to tally their kills. The southern wing had just rejoined Subutai's army after overrunning Transylvania, killing around twenty percent of its population.

Just two days after Liegnitz, on **April 11, 1241**, Batu and Subutai won a great victory over the Kingdom of Hungary at the **Battle of Mohi**. Béla IV had marched from Pest with perhaps 60,000 men, and camped at the meeting of the Sajó and Tisza rivers. There he made the fatal error of ringing his camp with chained wagons, a wall that looked secure but left his army no room to fight. The Mongols crossed the Sajó in the dark, surrounded the camp before dawn, and bombarded it with siege weapons. In the moment, the Mongols deliberately left a single hole in their lines to lure the panicked Hungarians out. The fleeing army was hunted down along the road to Pest over two days of slaughter, and as much as half the kingdom's nobility perished. Béla IV himself survived only by switching horses, escaping to Trogir, a fortified island in the Adriatic. With the Hungarian army destroyed, the Mongols occupied the plain for the rest of the year, struck their own coinage, and governed the country as a conquered province.

Mongol detachments under Kadan crossed the frozen Danube in early 1242, sacking Buda and Esztergom and raiding south through Croatia toward the Adriatic coast, while still others probed the Austrian passes and clashed with Babenberg

outposts within sight of Vienna. The lands of Germany and Italy were clearly the targets of the next year's campaign. But this never came to pass: a courier from the east brought news that the Great Khan **Ögedei had died** on December 11, 1241, after a heavy night of drinking. Mongol law required every senior prince to return for a kurultai to choose his successor. Batu, who had ambitions of his own in that election, turned his army. By late spring of 1242, the entire host withdrew from central Europe and recrossed the Carpathians toward the Volga. Whether the Mongols could have taken Vienna and Rome is one of the great unanswerable questions of medieval history.

Batu never reached Mongolia. He halted on the lower Volga and built a new capital at Sarai, founding the khanate that became the **Golden Horde**, which would rule Russia and its steppes for two centuries. The name "Golden Horde" is largely retrospective, coming from later 16th-century Russian sources rather than the Mongols themselves. The name likely refers to the khan's golden ceremonial tent or pavilion, typically draped in gold ornamentation. The election Batu hurried home for dragged on for years due to infighting and eventually fell to Ögedei's son Güyük. The shattered Russian principalities bent the knee and paid tribute to the Golden Horde for some 240 years, the long subjugation Russian historians still call the **Tatar Yoke**, which shaped Russian culture and identity. The Jochid realm was itself split into two color-coded wings: Batu's western wing, ruling Russia from

Sarai, and the eastern wing under his elder brother Orda, who deferred to Batu but ruled with near-total autonomy. These were the "White Horde" and "Blue Horde," though sources disagree maddeningly over which color went with which, with Russian and Timurid chronicles assigning them in opposite directions.

After the invasion, Poland and Hungary (with Béla IV returning from exile) slowly rebuilt. The leaders of Europe trembled at the prospect of the Mongols' return, leading the papacy to learn who these invaders truly were. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV dispatched the elderly Franciscan friar **Giovanni da Pian del Carpine** (**Carpini**) to carry letters to the Mongol court and to gather what intelligence he could. Then about sixty years old, he traveled overland through the ruined lands of Poland and Rus and across the steppes of central Asia, reaching the Mongol heartland in time to witness the enthronement of the new Great Khan Güyük near Karakorum in August 1246. He returned to Europe in 1247 and set down his findings in a report titled *Historia Mongalorum*, titled by modern translations as “**The Story of the Mongols Whom We Call the Tartars**”. Its title displays the name by which terrified Europeans labeled the invaders. The **Tatars** were one of the tribes Genghis Khan had originally absorbed on the steppe, and through Persian and Turkic intermediaries their name came to stand for the whole Mongol host. Then, Latin Christendom twisted it into **Tartar**, associating them with **Tartarus**, the abyss of the classical underworld, so that the word itself proclaimed the belief

that these horsemen were demons risen out of hell to scourge the earth. And no, “tartar sauce” has its origins in 19th-century French cuisine, named only that to sound foreign and exotic, and is completely unrelated. The same goes for the raw minced meat dish of “steak tartare.” It started as beef steak served alongside tartar sauce, thus earning its name at the turn of the 20th century.

Carpini’s account of Mongol life details its customs, religion, political structure, and their methods of war. In it, he describes the Mongols' felt-covered tents they called a “ger”, now called **yurts**. They were portable, domed homes on collapsible wooden frames, the largest so vast they had to be hauled whole on wagons drawn by teams of oxen. He noted how the women dwelt on one side and the men on the other, and how a pair of felt idols guarded the doorway, one bearing a cow's udder for the women who milked the cows, the other a mare's udder for the men who milked the mares, each presiding over the labor assigned to its side of the tent. He was struck above all by their fierce discipline and loyalty, writing that they obeyed their lords more faithfully than any people on earth, that brawling and theft were almost unknown, and that they left their dwellings and wagons unlocked because no one would think to rob them. His account gave Europe a clear portrait of these formidable people. Much later, the Italian novelist Dino Buzzati would borrow their name for his 1940 novel “The Tartar Steppe”, in which a young officer is posted to a remote frontier fortress, watching the vast desert beyond for

the legendary Tartar army. The fictional novel becomes an existential meditation on anticipation itself and endures as a great literary work of magical realism.

Mention of the "Tartars" resurfaced online in the 2010s with the "Tartaria" conspiracy theory that claimed that a vast, technologically advanced lost empire called Tartaria was deliberately erased from history. Believers invoke a cataclysmic "mud flood" said to have wiped out the old civilization, burying its buildings and monuments half into the earth. They claim that grand structures like the pavilions of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair were built hundreds of years earlier by the Tartarians and merely "found" by the societies that later took credit for building them. Historians and archaeologists dismiss it as **pseudohistory**, pointing out that "Tartary" was only a vague European label for Central Asia, and that the theory is similar to other myths such as Poland's "Great Lechia," which claims a glorious lost Slavic empire erased from the historical record by a supposed conspiracy of mainstream historians.

## 4: Invasion of the Middle East



SIDES:**1. MONGOLS & CO-BELLIGERENTS**

- **BLACK** = Mongols led by Hülegü Khan
- **TAN** = Mongols led by Bayju
- **OLIVE GREEN** = Mongol Vassals
- **PURPLE** = Empire of Nicaea
- **CYAN** = Outremer

**2. ENEMIES**

- **RED** = Seljuk Empire
- **ORANGE** = Mamluk Sultanate
- **BROWN-RED** = Bulgaria (remnants of Second Bulgarian Empire)
- **VIOLET** = Byzantine Successor States

**OVERVIEW:** Between 1253 and 1260, the Mongols swept through the Middle East under a grandson of Genghis Khan, destroying legendary mountain fortresses, sacking and burning the greatest city of the Islamic world, and rolling on through Syria before their defeat at Galilee forced a withdrawal.

**Detailed Information:**

By the time Hülegü rode west in 1253, the Mongols were not entering into uncharted territory but returning to one already half-broken. The work had begun a generation earlier. After Genghis ran Jalal al-Din to the Indus, the Khwarezmian prince had drifted back to stir up Persia, so around 1230 Ögedei dispatched the general **Chormaqan** with a standing army to finish him and pacify the west. While Batu Khan and Subutai were advancing in the Pontic steppe towards Kievan Rus,

Chormaqan's smaller force hunted down Jalal al-Din, broke the last Khwarezmian resistance, and subdued large parts of **Iran**, **Armenia**, and **Georgia**, reducing their princes to tribute-paying clients. His successor **Baiju** continued, shattering the Anatolian Seljuks of the **Sultanate of Rum** at the **Battle of Köse Dağ** in 1243 and turning them into vassals as well.

Back home, the eastern Mongol armies attacked the Korean peninsula, launching repeated invasions of the kingdom of **Goryeo** in 1231–1259. The Korean court fled to the island of Ganghwa, safely beyond the reach of the land-bound Mongols without a navy presence. The royal court held out there for decades while the Mongols ravaged the mainland. There, in 1232, the Mongols burned the original **Tripitaka Koreana**, a monumental set of more than 80,000 carved wooden printing blocks that held the entire Buddhist canon in Chinese script. These treasured artifacts represented decades of devotion meant to protect Korea from invasion. Their destruction was a profound cultural and religious blow. Resistance finally collapsed in 1259, when the assassination of the strongman Choe Ui ended the warlord's dictatorship, allowing the court to sue for peace. They sent the crown prince to submit, and its royal house was bound to the Mongols by intermarriage. A replacement Tripitaka Koreana was carved in 1236–1251 during the exile and can be seen today at the Haeinsa Temple in South Korea.

Far to the south lay the high **Tibetan plateau**, and the Mongol conquest there took an unusual form. Prince Köden first entered with his Mongol army into Tibet in the 1240s, summoning Tibetan religious leader, the revered lama **Sakya Pandita**, to his court in 1247. The following submission by the Tibetan ultimately secured the country through diplomacy rather than slaughter. Later, under Kublai, the bond ripened into the famous **patron-priest relationship**, a marriage of throne and altar in which the khan stood as Tibet's worldly protector and the head of the Sakya school as his spiritual master. It yoked Tibetan Buddhism to the Mongol throne and would shape the faith of Mongolia and the steppe for centuries to come.

The campaigns of the Mongols had affected religious life, sometimes indirectly. Jalal al-Din Muhammad, who would become known to history as **Rumi**, was a young man when he left with his family fleeing the Mongol invasion of their hometown of Balkh in Khorasan (Afghanistan), arriving in **Konya** (modern-day Turkey) on May 1, 1228, the capital of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum. There he succeeded his father as a jurist and preacher, until the wandering mystic **Shams of Tabriz** arrived to Konya in 1244. The two quickly became inseparable, and their closeness angered Rumi's students who felt neglected. In 1248, Shams vanished, probably killed by those same students. The loss turned Rumi from a teacher into a poet. He mourned Shams in the **Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi**, a collection of poems consisting of thousands of ecstatic *ghazals* (short lyrics in rhyming couplets) and

*quatrains* (four-line verses). In these poems he would not sign off with his own name but rather that of Shams or Khâmush (Silence). His late-life masterpiece, the **Masnavi**, became one of the most influential works in the history of **Sufism**, the mystical branch of Islam. In its twenty five thousand verses (50,000 lines) spanning six books, it teaches the reader that finding divine truth and achieving a true relationship with God is done through love, music, and devotion rather than strict religious law. Rumi died in Konya in 1273, and his son Sultan Walad gathered the disciples into the Mevlevi order, the **whirling dervishes** whose spinning dance enacts the soul's turning toward God. In the present day, tourists can visit Konya to pay their respects at the Mevlana Museum, the former lodge of the Mevlevi order built around Rumi's tomb beneath its distinctive turquoise-tiled dome, which remains one of Turkey's most visited shrines.

While Rumi was crafting his verse in the relative calm of Konya, a new Mongol storm was gathering far to the east. The Great Khan **Möngke**, eldest son of Tolui, had politically taken over in the 1251 **Toluid Revolution**, a swift and bloody coup where Möngke's faction purged the Ögedeids/Chagataids. After securing the throne, Möngke believed that there was still further conquest to be made. He sent his brother **Kublai** east to break the **Song dynasty** in southern China and his brother **Hülegü** west to subdue the Middle East. Hülegü struck first at the **Nizari Ismailis** (the Shia sect the Christian Crusaders called the Assassins),

demanding the submission of the Abbasid Caliph, aiming to advance toward Syria and Egypt. The **Ismailis** were founded by the Persian missionary Hassan-i Sabbah, who had seized the mountain fortress of **Alamut** in the Alborz range around 1090 and woven a network of perhaps a hundred castles across Persia and Syria. Their signature tactic was the use of the **fida'i**, a devoted agent sent to murder a chosen target in public. This main action of theirs, noted in the sensational tales of Marco Polo, coupled with the Arabic word for "hashish-users", *hashishin*, a derogatory slur flung at the Ismailis by rival Muslims to brand them as drug-addled outcasts, would be the origin of the Western word of "assassin". For over 150 years they had survived as a fortified statelet that even the Seljuks could not dislodge. Their reduction was methodical and professional. Chinese-made siege engines were hauled up the steep slopes, and the strongholds fell one by one. The key fortress of Maymun-Diz was broken, and the young, irresolute grandmaster **Rukn al-Din Khurshah** capitulated in November 1256, ordering his remaining castles to surrender. Alamut itself yielded that December and its walls were thrown down. Its famous library was largely destroyed, though the historian **Juvayni**, who rode with Hülegü, was allowed to examine the shelves and reportedly salvaged a number of manuscripts before the fire. Rukn al-Din hoped to negotiate, but after being sent toward Karakorum, he was killed in 1257. The Persian Nizari state was finished, and the surviving Ismailis scattered into hiding, where small communities endure

today under the spiritual leadership of the **Aga Khan**, a title now held by Aga Khan V, Rahim al-Husseini, who succeeded his father in 2025. He is the 50th Imam of the Nizari Isma'ili Shia Islam.

Now, Hülegü turned to **Baghdad**. For five centuries the city had been the Abbasid capital, and though the caliphs had long since lost real power to Turkish sultans, the caliph still reigned as the symbolic head of Sunni Islam. The reigning **al-Mustasim** was an unworldly man who collected songbirds and was served by ministers who hated one another. When Hülegü's envoys demanded submission in late 1257, the Caliph answered with empty threats and token gifts (consisting of small sums of gold coins and textiles) while his advisors remained paralyzed by infighting. The Mongol army arrived in January 1258 and besieged Baghdad. The invaders deployed forces on both banks of the Tigris, building pontoon bridges for movement and to seal off any enemy escape by water. Chinese engineers built their siege engines on the spot, majority of those being stone-throwing **traction trebuchets** and **triple-bow arcuballistas** (large frame-mounted crossbows using three combined bows to obtain the tension required to launch massive iron-tipped wooden logs). A relief sortie was lured out and drowned when the Mongols broke the river dikes beneath the Muslim cavalry. Around February 5, 1258, the Mongols breached the eastern wall of Baghdad and seized control of it. With the defenses collapsing and no relief in sight, al-Mustasim came out of the city with his sons

and court officials. The resulting **Sack of Baghdad** began on February 13 and ran for seven days. The great libraries, including the **House of Wisdom** that had carried Greek learning into Arabic four centuries earlier, were utterly destroyed. The city's **madradas**, Islamic colleges acting as places of higher learning (traditionally for religious studies), were ruined alongside it. The later 13th-century Persian chronicler Wassaf would record the oral testimonies of the survivors, writing that the Tigris ran black with ink from destroyed manuscripts and red from spilled blood. Surprisingly, the Christian quarter was spared, at the plea of Hülegü's Nestorian wife Doquz Khatun. The city's ruler fared no better than some of its inhabitants. Adhering to a Mongol taboo against spilling royal blood, Hülegü had al-Mustasim wrapped in a rug and trampled by horses on February 20, 1258.

In mid 1259, Hülegü marched into Syria, where the Ayyubid emirates founded by **Saladin's** heirs had splintered into quarreling fragments that could not stand against him. Aleppo was stormed in January 1260 and its people massacred. Seeing this, the city of Damascus would not resist, thus opening its gates to deter the wrath of the Mongols. The occupying Mongol army was led by the Nestorian general **Kitbuqa**, an Eastern Christian of the Naimans, one of many steppe groups that were subservient to the Mongol Empire. This was one of the many examples of the open religious character of the Mongols. Genghis Khan and his original native confederation of Khamag Mongols followed an ancestral faith of **Tengrism**.

At its center was the worship of **Tengri**, the Eternal Blue Sky, alongside the spirits of the land and the rivers. Holy men communed with the unseen world through trance and sacrifice. But the Mongols never sought to impose it. From Genghis Khan onward the empire practiced a sweeping **religious tolerance** for those who submitted to his invading army. This allowed Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jew, to be free to worship, (for those who submitted), though they were often required to pay heavy taxes and tribute. This allowed for the transfer of religion. As stated before, Hülegü's senior wife was a devout **Nestorian Christian** (who believed Christ existed as two distinct persons: one divine, one human), even though he would personally be inclined toward **Buddhism**. In time, Hülegü's heirs who ruled over conquered Muslims would themselves embrace **Islam** as their faith.

Regardless, the **Crusader states of Outremer** faced a great dilemma. The Frankish lords of the coast watched the Mongol advance with both hope and dread. They wavered between uneasy neutrality, opportunistic raids, and repeated attempts at a **Franco-Mongol alliance** that became fruitless. In Outremer, **Bohemond VI of Antioch**, son-in-law of the Mongol-aligned Armenian king Hetoum I, broke ranks and openly submitted to Hülegü, marching his knights beside the Mongol columns, capturing Latakia and lands toward Antioch. Dissimilarly, the barons of Acre became wary of the ruthless Mongols, and chose neutrality. In 1260, they made the fateful decision to let the Mamluk army pass

through their territory to march north towards the Mongols. It was a choice that helped seal the fate of the Mongol position in Syria.

Hülegü sent envoys to the Mamluks in Cairo bearing severe warnings. The **Mamluk Sultanate** itself was founded by former military slaves, foreign boys bought young off the Kipchak steppe, converted to Islam, and trained into an elite soldier caste, who had overthrown Saladin's **Kurdish Ayyubid** dynasty and seized Egypt a decade earlier. The Mamluk sultan, **Qutuz**, himself a Kipchak Turk sold into slavery in his youth, answered in the language the Mongols best understood. He executed the envoys at the gates of Cairo, mounted their heads on the Bab Zuwayla (which is one of three remaining city wall gates of historic Cairo in modern-day Egypt). Qutuz then marched his army forward, having calculated that Hülegü's main army was no longer in Syria. He was right. Word had come that Great Khan Möngke had died in China, and Hülegü, needing to be in Persia to protect his claim over his own ulus, as well as to mediate the succession struggle between Kublai and Ariq Böke, which became the **Toluid Civil War** (1260–1264). Hülegü pulled the bulk of his forces back across the Euphrates, leaving Kitbuqa with only about ten thousand men consisting of Georgian and Armenian vassal auxiliaries.

Qutuz crossed the Sinai in late summer 1260 with his brilliant young general **Baibars**, a Kipchak Turk once sold as a slave in the markets of Damascus, who in

the future would become the greatest of all Mamluk sultans. The armies met on September 3, 1260, at **Ain Jalut** in Galilee. With a feigned retreat, Baibars drew Kitbuqa into a trap among the hills where the main Mamluk army lay waiting. Now surrounded, the Mongols fought desperately. Kitbuqa refused to flee, was unhorsed and captured, and was beheaded after defiantly warning that Hülegü would return to avenge him. His army was scattered back across the Euphrates, and within weeks Syria rose against its Mongol garrisons. Damascus and Aleppo returned to Muslim hands, and the Christians who had welcomed the invaders suffered terrible reprisals.

Hülegü never returned to avenge the defeat. The succession struggle and a sudden war on his northern border consumed the rest of his life, and by staying to defend his conquests rather than marching east, he quietly transformed his holdings. The **Hülegü Ulus** (literally “realm of Hülegü” in Mongol) was the portion of the empire allotted to his line. It quickly transformed into a hereditary state ruling Persia, Mesopotamia, and the Caucasus from his capital at Tabriz. He took the title **Ilkhan**, meaning subordinate or lesser khan, a nominal bow to his brother Kublai in distant China, and the dynasty he founded became known as the **Ilkhanate**. He soon found an enemy in his own cousin Berke, the Muslim khan of the **Golden Horde**. This became what is known as the **Berke–Hülegü war** (1262–1266), the first open conflict between Mongol states. In 1263, Berke’s general

**Nogai** routed Hülegü's forces near the Terek River. Hülegü retreated south and never seriously threatened the Caucasus again. Hülegü died in February 1265, succeeded by his son Abaqa, while Berke died in 1266 near Tbilisi while marching to invade the Ilkhanate again, prematurely ending the campaign. The respective deaths of both khans resulted in the inconclusive ending of hostilities.

The Byzantines, for their part, were fortunate to sit just beyond the reach of the Mongols that had swallowed Persia and the Russian steppe. Despite this, they had issues of their own. In 1204, the knights of the Fourth Crusade had stormed and sacked Constantinople itself, carving the Latin Empire out of its heart and sattering the Byzantine inheritance among rival successor states. Of these, the **Empire of Nicaea** emerged as the strongest, and it was from there that **Michael VIII Palaiologos** at last recaptured Constantinople in 1261, restoring the Byzantine line to its ancient capital. **Bulgaria**, the other Balkan power, reached its high point when its Second Bulgarian Empire won the 1205 Battle of Adrianople, but was in steady decline after years of internal political turmoil. Since the Mongol invasion of 1242, its tsars submitted with annual tribute, and would continue until 1300, when Theodore Svetoslav ended it.

Around the same time, the Mamluk general Baibars, who expected to be rewarded for his victories with the governorship of Aleppo, was denied it by the

Sultan Qutuz. On the march back to Cairo in late 1260, he conspired to ambush and kill the sultan on a hunting trip, seizing the throne for himself. With the throne, Baibars would lead relentless jihad against the remaining Crusader states, storming Antioch in 1268. He then crushed the Syrian Nizari Ismailis, taking Masyaf and their remaining castles between 1270 and 1273. He also cemented an alliance with the Golden Horde to protect himself from the Ilkhanate. Domestically, Baibars secured the slave routes that bolstered his army, rebuilt the navy, dug canals, and built a relay postal network that could send a message from Cairo to Damascus in four days. Baibars would die in Damascus on June 30, 1277, at the age of 53. The most widely accepted story is that he died after accidentally drinking poisoned **kumis** (fermented mare's milk) that was actually intended for someone else.

The Ilkhanate that Hülegü founded would rule over Persia for another seventy years, with its khans converting to Islam, patronizing Persian art and science. But when the last effective ruler, **Abu Sa'id**, died without an heir in 1335, the dynasty splintered into rival factions, with regional warlords and military families propping up puppet khans before abandoning the fiction entirely. Successor states carved up the corpse: the **Jalayirids** took Baghdad and Azerbaijan, the **Chobanids** held the northwest, and dynasties like the **Muzaffarids** and **Sarbadars** seized Persia's south and east.

**Kublai** indeed defeated his younger brother Ariq Böke, successfully using his advantage of northern China's grain supply and revenues, starving him out in arid Karakorum. In 1264, Ariq Böke would willingly submit to Kublai at Shangdu. Kublai spared his brother's life but kept him imprisoned. Ariq Böke died two years later, amid rumors of poison.

In 1271, Kublai proclaimed the **Yuan dynasty**, casting himself not as a foreign conqueror but as a legitimate Chinese emperor. On the advice of his **Confucian** counselor **Liu Bingzhong**, he took the dynastic name **Da Yuan**, "Great Origin," from a line in the ancient **Book of Changes** evoking the primal force of heaven from which all things spring. The choice was deliberate: by claiming the **Mandate of Heaven** in classical terms, Kublai bound Mongol power to the imperial tradition of the lands he ruled. Unlike the western khanates that splintered apart, the dynasty here took root, governing from walled capitals and drawing on the revenues of a settled empire rather than the tribute of the steppe. Secure on this base and immensely wealthy, the Great Khan now turned his gaze outward across the water, toward the island kingdom that had so far escaped his reach.

## 5: Attempted Invasions of Japan & More



SIDES:**1. YUAN DYNASTY**

- **OLIVE GREEN** = Grand Mongol Navy

**2. KAMAKURA SHOGUNATE**

- **BLUE** = Hojo Clan
- **BABY BLUE** = Ashikaga Clan
- **ORANGE** = Hosokawa Clan
- **LIGHT BLUE** = Yamana Clan
- **PEARL-GRAY** = Ouchi Clan
- **PINK** = Otomo Clan
- **YELLOW** = Shimazu Clan

**OVERVIEW:** In the late 13th century, Kublai Khan launched massive seaborne invasions against Japan (1274 & 1281) and Java (1293). He also mounted repeated campaigns into Vietnam (1258, 1285 & 1287–88).

**Detailed Information:**

By the time he turned toward the eastern sea, **Kublai Khan** ruled all of China as emperor of the Yuan from his great northern capital of Dadu, the city the Mongols called Khanbaliq. Kublai's power over China started with the 1253 conquest of the Dali Kingdom in southwest China, done when he crossed the Tibetan plateau to outflank the Southern Song Dynasty. The Southern Song itself would hold out until 1279. Kublai's court had become the wonder of the age, drawing merchants and envoys from across the world. The most famous of them was **Marco Polo**, a young Venetian who set out around 1271 with his father and

uncle, crossed Persia and the length of the Silk Road, and by his own account spent some seventeen years in Kublai's service, traveling the empire and marveling at its cities, its paper money, and a scale of wealth no European had imagined. The book he later dictated in a Genoese prison would give Europe its fullest picture of the East. **Japan** lay just beyond Kublai's recent conquests, well within the reach of his ambitions. Rumors of its great wealth reached the Mongol court, where Marco Polo recorded tales of the island nation they called **Cipangu**, a land so rich in gold that its ruler's palace was roofed and paved with it. The prospect of these riches made invasion inevitable. This relationship between Marco Polo and Kublai would be explored in the 1972 novel "Invisible Cities" by Italo Calvino, in which Polo describes dozens of fantastical, impossible cities to an aging Kublai Khan, each a meditation on memory and the nature of storytelling itself.

Kublai sent his first embassy in 1266, carrying a letter that ordered the ruler of Japan to come in person and do homage at the Yuan court. Further embassies followed in 1268, 1271, and 1273, and all were met with studied silence by the young Kamakura regent **Hojo Tokimune**, head of the **Hojo clan** that held the real power in Japan behind the largely figurehead shogun and emperor. The **shogun** was nominally the supreme military commander of Japan, appointed by the emperor, but at this time the position had become largely ceremonial. The Hojo clan was led by hereditary **shikken** (regents) to the shogun after marrying into the

founding Minamoto family. Through this recently, they controlled the **bakufu** (military government) and effectively ruled Japan. With no reply, an increasingly angry Kublai ordered his Korean vassals to begin building a fleet.

The first invasion sailed in early November 1274, carrying roughly 15,000 Mongol and Chinese soldiers and some 15,000 Korean troops and sailors aboard about 900 ships. The fleet first appeared off **Tsushima** on November 5, where a garrison of about eighty samurai under **So Sukekuni** rode down to the beach to fight in the traditional Japanese manner, with formal challenges and single combat, and was annihilated almost at once by massed Mongol arrow fire. The smaller island of Iki fell days later, and by November 19, the fleet had reached **Hakata Bay** on northern Kyushu and begun landing troops.

At Hakata Bay the Mongol style of war caught the samurai off guard. Japanese warfare was still an aristocratic affair of mounted warriors who prized individual prowess. The Mongols, by contrast, fought as coordinated units maneuvering under drum and gong, loosing concentrated volleys of poisoned arrows and wielding weapons the Japanese had never seen. Chief among these were the **tetsuhau**, explosive "iron bombs" that contemporary accounts call terrifying for their noise and for the panic they spread among the horses. Warriors who rode out to issue formal challenges were shot down before they could speak. The defenders were pushed off the beaches into Hakata, which burned, and by

nightfall had fallen back toward Mizuki for a hopeless last stand. It never came. In the small hours of November 20 a violent storm blew up, and the Mongol commanders, fearing their ships would be wrecked on the rocks, ordered the force back to sea to ride it out, where in open water the fleet lost perhaps a third of its ships and as many as 13,000 men.

Kublai treated the failed campaign as a mere setback and sent another embassy in 1275. Tokimune answered by having the entire delegation **beheaded at Kamakura**, an act of calculated defiance that made any peaceful settlement impossible, and when a second embassy arrived in 1279 he had it beheaded at Hakata as well. Certain now that a second invasion would come, the shogunate prepared in earnest. Tokimune ordered the construction of a great defensive stone wall along the likely landing beaches of Hakata Bay, a barrier some two meters high and twenty kilometers long.

In 1279, Kublai finished off the Southern Song at the **naval battle of Yamen**, where the last Song fleet was destroyed and the boy emperor drowned. With that conquest he gained the great shipbuilding centers of the south Chinese coast and the entire former Song navy. The expedition he assembled for 1281 was on a scale the world had never seen, split into two armies: the Eastern Route Army of about 40,000 men in 900 ships, sailing from Korea, and the far larger Southern

Route Army of perhaps 100,000, mostly former Song troops, in 3,500 ships crossing from Quanzhou and Ningbo to meet it off the Japanese coast.

Coordination on such a scale strained medieval communications, and the plan unraveled at once. The Eastern Route Army, eager for glory before the southern force arrived, sailed on schedule and reached Hakata Bay in late June 1281 to find a transformed coast: the great wall lined the beaches, samurai stood ready in their thousands, and fast Japanese craft raided the anchored ships nightly, warriors swimming out in the dark to fight hand-to-hand on deck. The struggle dragged on for weeks. One warrior, **Takezaki Suenaga**, fought in the front line and later had his deeds painted in an illustrated scroll that survives as one of the great visual records of medieval Japanese warfare.

Through July the Mongols held offshore, plagued by heat, dysentery, and raids while awaiting the late southern fleet, delayed for weeks by its commander's death and logistical chaos. In early August the combined armada of over 4,000 ships gathered off Takashima for a major assault. They never made it. On August 15–16, 1281, a **typhoon** of extraordinary violence broke directly over the fleet. Japanese accounts tell of the sky blackening at midday and waves driving ship against ship and onto the rocks. Anchored in close formation in shallow water, the armada was almost wholly destroyed. This disaster is confirmed by modern marine archaeology off Takashima. Perhaps 100,000 men drowned in two days. Survivors

who washed ashore were hunted down, the Mongols and northern Chinese were killed on the spot while the southern Chinese was spared and enslaved.

To the Japanese, watching the storm shatter the greatest fleet ever sent against them, it was unmistakably divine intervention. The **Shinto** shrines of Ise and the temples of Kyoto had kept up continuous prayers for deliverance all summer, and the storm was credited to the gods answering them. The typhoon became known as the **kamikaze**, the "divine wind," taken as proof that the gods themselves shielded the islands from invasion. This would shape Japanese understanding for the next seven centuries and be invoked again, with very different consequences, by the suicide pilots of 1944 and 1945.

Kublai received news of the second disaster with rage, but his attention was already being pulled away. Two expeditions against **Vietnam** in the 1280s, meant to bring the Tran dynasty to heel, were undone by climate, terrain, and the guerrilla genius of the general **Tran Hung Dao**, who lured the Mongol armies deep into the Red River delta and destroyed them piecemeal. At the **Battle of Bach Dang** (1288), he impaled the Mongol fleet on iron-tipped stakes hidden in a tidal river and burned it on the falling tide. The Mongols had first tried to invade Vietnam in 1258, but, worn down by heat and disease, soon withdrew. The nearby kingdom of **Champa**, an Indianized maritime state (Hindu-Buddhist) that occupied the southern Vietnamese coast, withstood a Mongol campaign in the 1280s.

Elsewhere the results were more mixed. The **Pagan Kingdom of Burma** fared worst of all. Mongol invasions through the 1270s and 1280s culminated in the sacking of Pagan around 1287, shattering the kingdom into smaller successor states such as Ava, Pegu, and the Shan principalities. The old **Khmer Empire** of Angkor, already past its peak, was left standing, and a Yuan envoy named **Zhou Daguan** visited around 1296, leaving a famous first-hand account of daily life in the city. The Khmer would fade over the following century, their great capital finally sacked by the rising Thai kingdom of **Ayutthaya** in 1431. The grand temple complex at Angkor, built by the Khmer, draws visitors to Cambodia today.

In 1293, a Mongol naval expedition against **Java** was outwitted by a clever prince named **Raden Wijaya**, who welcomed the invaders as allies against a local rival, used their army to defeat him, then turned on them and drove them back to their ships. Out of this triumph he founded the **Majapahit Empire**, which would dominate the region for the next century.

These failed campaigns, together with the disasters in Japan, broke the Mongol mythology of invincibility. Kublai, growing old and distracted, at last abandoned his plans for a third invasion of Japan. He died in 1294 without launching it, and his successors never seriously revived it. Japan was left alone for the rest of the dynasty.

## 6: Disintegration



SIDES:

- **TURQUOISE** = Golden Horde
- **GREEN** = Chagatai Horde
- **OLIVE GREEN** = Yuan Dynasty
- **YELLOW** = Muscovy
- **BLUE** = Jalayirids
- **ORANGE** = Mamluks
- **PINK** = Poland-Lithuania
- **RED** = Timurids

**OVERVIEW:** For all its terrifying unity in war, the Mongol Empire carried a fatal flaw in peace: it had no fixed law of succession. Each time a **Great Khan** died, every senior prince was bound to return for a **kurultai** to elect the next, and in the long interregnums that followed, the empire could easily fragment.

**Detailed Information:**

The disintegration of the Mongol Empire was not immediate. For decades after Genghis Khan's death the realm held together, and in the dangerous gaps between one Great Khan and the next, it was preserved again and again by its Mongol queens (**khatuns**) who seized the regency.

The first was **Töregene Khatun**, widow of Ögedei. When the Great Khan died in 1241, she took control as regent and governed for some five years, smothering the succession crisis until she secured the throne for her son **Güyük**. The second was **Sorqatani Beki**, widow of Tolui. A Kereit princess and Nestorian

Christian, she refused remarriage after her husband's death in 1232 and governed his vast appanage herself, cultivating allies across the empire. In 1251, her quiet maneuvering gained her political support (chiefly from Batu), toppling the house of Ögedei to win the throne for her line. **Möngke** and **Kublai** rose to Great Khan, **Hülegü** founded the Ilkhanate, and **Ariq Böke** contended for the throne. It should be noted that the Mongols never used the term "Great Khan" that we use as an English rendering. They distinguished a **khan**, the ruler of one tribe, from the **khaan** (or khagan), the khan of khans who stood above them all. In an empire remembered for its conquerors, it was its queens who held power together and decided who would wield it.

When **Möngke died in 1259**, his brothers went to war over the succession, and the empire settled into its four great realms: the Yuan in China, the Ilkhanate in Persia, the Chagatai Khanate in central Asia, and the Golden Horde on the Russian steppe. Each would decline in its own way.

The **Chagatai Khanate** would cling to the old steppe tradition. Founded by **Chagatai**, the second son of Genghis Khan, it was split between the nomadic eastern steppe and the wealthy western trading cities. In the 1340s, the khanate split into two. The west fell to Turkic warlords, while the eastern half, called **Moghulistan**, continued as a weak nomad realm for centuries until it was absorbed by the Dzungars in 1680 (later conquered by the Qing in 1759).

The **Ilkhanate** was riven by such struggles from the start. In 1284, the prince **Arghun** overthrew his uncle Tegüder, a convert to Islam who had taken the name Ahmad, in a revolt that set the dynasty's Buddhist and Muslim factions at each other's throats. In the **civil war of 1295**, Ghazan seized the throne from Baidu and formally converted the Ilkhanate to Islam. After the heirless Abu Sa'id died in 1335, the realm splintered for good, its richest fragment falling to the **Jalayirids** in Baghdad while the Mongol throne behind them faded into fiction. The vacuum would not last, for a new power was already rising on in its northern frontier.

A Turco-Mongol warlord named **Timur** ruled over the region of Transoxiana. He rose from a minor noble of the Barlas tribe to become the last great conqueror in the Mongol tradition. As he was not a descendant of Genghis Khan, he could never claim the title of khan, instead ruling through puppet khans of Chagatai blood, holding the title of **amir**. His name comes from the Chagatai Turkic and Mongolian Temür, meaning "iron." The Western form of his name, **Tamerlane**, is a corruption of Timur-i Lang, "Timur the Lame," an epithet earned from severe crippling injuries to his right leg and hand in his youth that left him with a permanent limp. From his capital at Samarkand, which he adorned with the plunder and the captive artisans of sacked cities, Timur drove his armies across the breadth of Asia in a career of almost ceaseless war. He won battles against the Golden Horde under Tokhtamysh in the great campaigns of the 1390s, shattering

its power on the steppe, and turned south to overrun Persia, sack Baghdad, and storm the fortresses of Georgia and the Caucasus. In 1398, he descended on India and **sacked Delhi**, carrying off its wealth and craftsmen. In 1400, he overwhelmed the Mamluks in Syria, sacking both Aleppo and Damascus. Next, in the **Battle of Ankara** (1402), he shattered the Ottoman army and captured the sultan Bayezid himself, who died in captivity in March 1403. The cause of his death is uncertain. Timur's court claimed the sultan was treated well, while later Ottoman tradition held that he took his own life. The devastating defeat at Ankara and the removal of sultan Bayezid produced a political void. This plunged the Ottoman state into the **Fetret Devri**, the Interregnum period of 1402–1413.

In 1405, **Timur died** of severe illness (possibly pneumonia or plague), while marching east in an attempt to conquer China. After his death, the Timurid Empire he founded quickly fractured as his sons and grandsons fought over succession, splitting into rival regional states that gradually shrank until the dynasty lost most of its territory by the late 1400s. Timur's body was carried back and interred in the **Gur-e-Amir mausoleum** in Samarkand, a complex he himself ordered the construction of during his lifetime, intending it for his beloved grandson and heir, Muhammad Sultan, who had died early due to illness. This monumental funerary complex can still be visited today in modern Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Interestingly, Timur's tomb was opened on June 19–20, 1941, by a Soviet scientific expedition led by the anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov, ordered by Joseph Stalin. Just two days later, on June 22, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, its massive invasion of the Soviet Union. This development of events would start a local legend that the tomb bore an inscription warning that whoever disturbed it would unleash an invader more terrible than Timur himself. The legend would only grow when Timur was reburied with full Islamic rites in December 1942, shortly before the Soviet victory at Stalingrad turned the tide of the war, after which Germany would no longer advance on the Eastern Front. Regardless, the **Curse of Timur** has no physical proof on the tomb itself. When the coffin was actually examined, it held nothing but a simple Islamic prayer, while the jade slab over the grave bore only a list of Timur's ancestors, not the famous warning of an invader more terrible than himself. The tale appears to have taken shape decades later, told in detail for the first time in a 1990 magazine article and then popularized by a 2004 Russian television documentary.

A century later, Timur's great-great-great-grandson **Babur** was driven out of central Asia by the Uzbeks. He turned toward India and overthrew the **Delhi Sultanate** (founded after the Ghurid invasion of India in 1175–1206). By defeating Ibrahim Lodi at the Panipat in 1526, Babur founded the **Mughal Empire** that would rule much of the subcontinent for the next three hundred years. The very

name "Mughal" derives from the Persian word for Mongol. The Muslim ruling class governed over a vast Hindu majority through alliances with Hindu elites, religious accommodation, and a ranked bureaucracy that integrated both faiths into imperial service. During early Mughal rule the new religion of **Sikhism** quickly spread in the Punjab region, the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. It was founded by **Guru Nanak** after a spiritual awakening in 1499, and rejected the caste hierarchy of Hindu society along with the empty ritualism he saw in both Hinduism and Islam, calling instead for devotion to a single formless God and the equality of all people before the divine. The empire reached its golden age under **Akbar**, who entrenched this policy of tolerance, abolishing the **jizya** tax on non-Muslims. The empire reached its greatest size under **Aurangzeb**, who ruled nearly the whole subcontinent. After a series of succession wars, the empire entered a long decline, losing territory to the **Maratha Confederacy**, an alliance of Hindu warrior states in western India, before being fully absorbed by the **British East India Company**, which deposed the last Mughal emperor in 1857. The Mughal legacy can be seen today with the **Taj Mahal** (its name meaning "Crown of the Palace"), the marble mausoleum built by Shah Jahan in the 1600s for his wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

Back in Persia, the Timurid lands fell to two rival Turkmen tribal confederations, the **Kara Koyunlu** ("Black Sheep") and the **Aq Qoyunlu** ("White

Sheep"), who fought over the region through the 15th century. Both were swept away by the rise of the **Safavids**, a militant Sufi order turned dynasty under the young **Shah Ismail I**. His armies were drawn from the **Qizilbash** ("redheads"), fanatically devoted Turkmen tribesmen named for their crimson caps. Ismail conquered Persia with his capture of Tabriz in 1501 and made **Twelver Shia Islam** the state religion, forcibly converting a largely Sunni population. The Safavids and the dynasties that followed them would rule Persia as monarchies until the 1979 Revolution expelled the last shah and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. The architectural legacy of these historical dynasties can still be seen across Iran, from the Ilkhanate's domed Jameh Mosque of Yazd to the Timurid masterpiece of the Goharshad Mosque in Mashhad. The latter stands beside the Imam Reza shrine, one of the holiest sites in Shia Islam, built around the tomb of the eighth of the twelve imams that Iranian Shias hold as the true successors to Muhammad.

North, the **Golden Horde** ruled over the lands of the Rus, not allowing any Russian prince to govern without its approval. Each had to journey to **Sarai**, the Horde's capital on the Volga, to receive the **yarlik**, the khan's patent granting the right to rule in exchange for tribute. In the 14th century, the **bubonic plague**, originating from the wild rodent populations in central Asia, transmitted to humans through infected flea bites, spread westward along the Silk Road trade routes. In 1346, the Golden Horde was besieging the Genoese trading port of **Caffa** in

Crimea, and plague broke out among Mongol ranks. According to the chronicler Gabriele de' Mussi, the besiegers catapulted the corpses of their dead over the city walls, hoping disease would break the defenders. This event is argued to be the first recorded instance of **biological warfare**. The siege ended up being inconclusive due to both sides suffering from the infectious disease. The pandemic that followed, known as the **Black Death**, became one of the deadliest catastrophes in human history. Possibly, it initially entered Europe aboard the fleeing Genoese ships sailing to the Mediterranean from Caffa, though modern historians argue that there were more likely multiple trade routes to blame for the spread. Sweeping across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa in 1347–1351, the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* killed an estimated 75–200 million people, annihilating about a third of Europe's population in just a few years.

Among the Russian principalities, **Muscovy** quickly accumulated wealth by serving as the Golden Horde's chief tax collector. The murder of Khan Berdi Beg in 1359 plunged the Golden Horde into a chaotic twenty-year cycle of civil war in which the throne changed hands constantly. Out of this disorder rose Mamai, a commander of the Kiyat clan who governed the Horde's western wing yet could never claim the title of khan himself, since he descended from no line of Genghis Khan and had to install Jochid figureheads in his place. The turmoil was Moscow's opportunity to stop sending its tribute. When Mamai sent a punitive force to

discipline the principality, Grand Prince Dmitry Ivanovich destroyed it at the **Battle of the Vozha River** (1378). This was the first clear Russian win over a Horde army. Determined to answer the humiliation, Mamai spent the next two years raising a massive host and arranging support from Jogaila of Lithuania. Dmitry summoned the Russian princes and raced south to meet this threat before the Lithuanians could link up with the Horde. The two armies met at **Kulikovo Field** on **September 8, 1380**, where Dmitry faced not only the Horde but also Mamai's mixed host of Genoese and other European mercenaries, Cumans, Circassians, and Ossetians. Dmitry's forces won a hard, costly victory that became a landmark moment in Russian resistance to the Golden Horde, even though the Horde struck back two years later, sacking Moscow in 1382.

Over the next century, the Golden Horde splintered into multiple rival successor states: the **Kazan Khanate** on the middle Volga (founded around 1438), the **Crimean Khanate** under the Giray dynasty (established in the 1440s), the **Astrakhan Khanate** near the Caspian (around 1466), the nomadic **Nogai Horde** (consolidated in the 1440s), and the **Khanate of Sibir** beyond the Urals (around 1468). Nearby in the east, the nomadic **Uzbeks** united under Abu'l-Khayr Khan, and when a faction broke away around 1465 they became the **Kazakhs**, whose people would give their name to modern Kazakhstan. Both were Turkic peoples carrying significant Mongol admixture from the Horde, and both remain

predominantly Sunni Muslim today. Nearby lived the **Kyrgyz**, a Turkic mountain people of the Tian Shan, and the **Tajiks**, descendants of the region's older Persian-speaking population. In the south-west of that region were the **Turkmen**, descendants of the Oghuz Turks, the same Turkic branch from which the Seljuks of Anatolia also sprang.

What was left of the old center survived as the Great Horde, a shrunken rump that still claimed supremacy but no longer held it. In 1480, its khan, Akhmat, marched against Grand Prince **Ivan III** of Moscow to force the lapsed tribute, but the two armies faced each other across the Ugra River for weeks without giving battle, and Akhmat eventually withdrew. This bloodless “**Great Stand on the Ugra**” is remembered as the traditional end of Moscow's subjection to the Horde. The Great Horde finally ended in 1502, when Meñli Giray of Crimea overran and destroyed it. Underlining this era was Moscow's continued rise. Ivan III had conquered the rival republic of Novgorod in 1478. Moscow's consolidation of Russian lands culminated on January 16, 1547, when **Ivan IV**, famously remembered as **Ivan the Terrible**, was crowned the Tsar. This Tsardom of Muscovy would gradually be known as the Tsardom of Russia. One by one, the successor khanates fell to the Russian state, ending with Catherine the Great's annexation of Crimea in 1783.

Elsewhere, Anatolia underwent major changes. The Seljuk Sultanate of Rum declined, and by the start of the 14th century, disintegrated into a patchwork of independent Turkish principalities known as **beyliks**. One of these beyliks was the small frontier principality of **Osman**, which would quickly expand and evolve into the **Ottoman** state, its name derived from its first ruler, Osman I (known as Uthman in Arabic). The Ottomans crossed into Europe, took Constantinople in 1453 under Mehmed II, and expanded in every direction, culminating in Selim I's conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517, which brought Syria, Egypt, and the holy cities of Arabia under Ottoman rule.

For China, its Mongol-led Yuan dynasty was beginning to unravel due to **Kublai Khan's death** on February 18, 1294. He died at the age of 78, after years of declining health driven by obesity, gout, and grief over the deaths of his favorite wife Chabi and his heir Zhenjin. Following Mongol custom, he was carried back to Mongolia and buried in a secret, unmarked grave in the Khentii Mountains, which like Genghis, has never been found. He was succeeded by his grandson Temür Khan (Emperor Chengzong), but when Temür died in 1307 without an heir, the throne plunged into chaos. Between 1307 and 1333 the Yuan saw nine emperors, several assassinated and several reigning only months, the bloodletting culminating in the **War of the Two Capitals** (1328). This civil war gets its name because it was fought between two rival factions, each from a different Yuan capital. One

side operated from Dadu (modern Beijing), where officials proclaimed Tugh Temür as emperor. The other side operated from Shangdu (Xanadu, the summer capital), backing the young Ragibagh as emperor. **Tugh Temür** would win the throne, but the victory settled nothing. The throne would change hands twice more in quick succession before the boy-emperor **Toghon Temür** came to power in 1333, and by then the dynasty had hollowed itself out. Decades of palace murder had stripped the court of capable leadership, drained the treasury, and taught the Mongol nobility that the throne was a prize to be seized rather than an institution to be served.

In the 1340s, this weakened state met every disaster at once. Repeated flooding of the Yellow River wrecked the northern farmland, bringing famine and plague, and the court's attempt to cover its mounting costs by printing paper money triggered ruinous inflation. A government that could no longer feed, pay, or protect its subjects was blamed for heaven's wrath, and in Chinese eyes the Mandate of Heaven was visibly slipping from Mongol hands. Across the country a desperate and resentful population began to stir, and the secret societies that preached deliverance from foreign rule found their ranks swelling, setting the stage for the **rebellion** that would finally end the Yuan Dynasty.

## 7: Red Turban Rebellion



### SIDES:

#### 1. YUAN DYNASTY

- **GREEN** = Imperial Army

#### 2. MING DYNASTY

- **RED** = Red Turban Rebels

**OVERVIEW:** Between 1351 and 1368, a peasant uprising cloaked in millenarian Buddhism and Song loyalism brought an end to the Yuan dynasty, driving the Mongols out of China.

### **Detailed Information:**

By the 1340s, the Yuan was in decline. Decades of factional bloodshed had drained the treasury, and Kublai's rigid caste system bred deep resentment, placing

**Mongols** at the top, the **Semu** (caste of Central Asians and Persians) below them, the northern **Han** beneath that, and the conquered **Southerners** of the former Song Dynasty at the bottom, taxed heavily and barred from high office. The civil service exams that were the Chinese path to power were long suspended, locking out a generation of educated men, while reckless money-printing gutted the currency through hyperinflation.

When the Yellow River burst its banks in catastrophic floods, the government conscripted some 150,000 laborers under brutal conditions to redirect it. Among them moved agents of the **White Lotus Society**, a banned sect preaching the coming of the **Maitreya Buddha**. Its leader, **Han Shantong**, buried a one-eyed stone figure at the worksite and spread a rhyme that its discovery would herald the empire's fall; when the diggers unearthed it on cue, the **Red Turban Rebellion** erupted in 1351, named since the rebels wrapped red cloth around their heads to identify themselves as a unified army.

The uprising spread faster than the Yuan could contain it and soon splintered into rival warlords. In the middle Yangtze, the fisherman **Chen Youliang** founded the **Dahan dynasty** around a fleet of towering warships, while the salt smuggler Zhang Shicheng seized the wealthy Suzhou region. Other discontents joined in: in the southeast, a long Muslim uprising known as the **Ispah Rebellion** convulsed the great port of Quanzhou for years, as Persian and Arab garrison troops turned on the

dynasty and one another. The Ispah Rebellion finally burned itself out in 1366, when Yuan loyalist forces retook Quanzhou and unleashed brutal reprisals on its foreign Muslim community.

**Zhu Yuanzhang**, a former peasant and novice monk risen through the Red Turban ranks, took Nanjing in 1356 and made it the base from which he destroyed his rival warlords one by one. Chen Youliang fell first, killed by an arrow through the eye when his great fleet was shattered at the Battle of Lake Poyang in 1363, and Zhang Shicheng was captured and put to death in 1367.

By 1368, Zhu Yuanzhang had proclaimed the **Ming dynasty**, its name meaning "bright" or "radiant" and echoing the Manichaean and White Lotus currents of light and a coming savior, marking him as that promised deliverer. He took the reign name **Hongwu** ("Vastly Martial"), sent his armies north, and the last Yuan emperor Toghon Temür abandoned Dadu and fled to the steppe.

## 8: To the Present Day



### **Detailed Information:**

When Toghon Temür fled north in 1368, the dynasty did not consider itself ended. On the steppe it lived on as the **Northern Yuan**, its khans still claiming the Mandate of Heaven and the title of Great Khan. But the Ming pursued them hard, and a crushing defeat at **Buir Lake** (1388) shattered Northern Yuan prestige. The line of legitimate Great Khans descended from Kublai grew weak and contested, and through the 1400s real power drained away from the Genghisid khans into the hands of tribal strongmen. The steppe divided into two: the eastern Khalkha Mongols and the western Oirats.

Power passed first to the western Oirats. Under **Esen Taishi** they came to dominate Mongolia in the mid-1400s, and in the **Tumu Crisis of 1449**, Esen captured the Ming Zhengtong Emperor on the battlefield, a humiliation China never forgot. The crisis takes its name from the Tumu Fortress (Tumubao), a postal-relay station northwest of Beijing where the Ming army was caught and destroyed. As Esen was no descendant of Genghis, when he claimed the title of Great Khan for himself in 1453, he broke the ancient steppe principle that only those with a blood connection to Genghis could hold it. Within two years he was dead, killed in the infighting, and Oirat dominance collapsed.

In 1480, the eastern Mongols were reunified under **Dayan Khan**, a descendant of Genghis who broke Oirat power. Almost every later Mongol noble

house traces its descent to him. His grandson, **Altan Khan** of the Tümed, raided all the way to Beijing in 1550 and forced trade concessions from the Ming, but his most enduring legacy was religious. In 1578 he met the Tibetan lama Sonam Gyatso and gave him the title “**Dalai Lama**,” combining the Mongolian word ‘**dalai**’ meaning "ocean," with the Tibetan **lama** (“master”), indicating a teacher whose wisdom was as vast as the sea. Sonam Gyatso is counted as the third Dalai Lama, the title being applied backward to his two predecessors in the reincarnation line, who became the first and second, years after their deaths. What followed was the **mass conversion** of the Mongols to **Gelug Tibetan Buddhism**, the reformist "Yellow Hat" school that stressed monastic discipline, celibacy, and rigorous study, in contrast to the older "Red Hat" orders that were more tolerant of tantric ritual, married lamas, and local folk practice. This reshaped Mongol society, bringing monasteries, a celibate clergy, and a new spiritual authority that would later carry real political weight.

Altan Khan's own great-grandson, known as Yönten Gyatso, would be chosen as the **fourth Dalai Lama**, recognized as the reincarnation of Sonam Gyatso after his death in 1588, and he remains the only non-Tibetan ever to hold the office. Each Dalai Lama since has been identified as the reincarnation of the last, a child accepted after divine rituals and recognition tests, who is raised to inherit the title. The line continues to the present day in Tenzin Gyatso, the

fourteenth Dalai Lama, who has lived in exile in India since fleeing the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959. The shared name "Gyatso" is not a genetic familial surname but a religious name, itself the Tibetan word for "ocean." The Buddhist legacy in Mongolia can be seen today at the **Erdene Zuu Monastery**, probably the earliest surviving Buddhist monastery in Mongolia. It was built in 1585 from the rubble of Karakorum, Genghis's old imperial capital.

The last "Great Khan" of the Mongols would be **Ligdan Khan** of the Chahar, reigning from 1604 to 1634. With the Manchus growing powerful to the east, his heavy-handed attempt to reassert authority over all Mongols backfired, and rival groups allied with the Manchus instead. In 1632 the Manchu leader **Hong Taiji** led a great campaign against him. Ligdan, unwilling to give battle, fled west with his followers toward the Tibetan plateau. He died of smallpox in 1634 along the way, and the next year his son Ejei surrendered to the Manchus. In 1636, Hong Taiji formally proclaimed the establishment of the **Qing dynasty**. In 1644, a peasant rebellion led by **Li Zicheng**, drawn from the famine-stricken and overtaxed masses of the collapsing Ming, captured Beijing and drove the last Ming emperor to hang himself. The Manchus swept through the Great Wall, seized Beijing from the rebels who had just toppled the Ming, and went on to conquer all of China. The **Khalkha Mongols** of the north, the core of present-day Mongolia,

would try to continue on while being caught between the Oirats in the west and the Qing to the south.

Those western Oirats were united by **Erdeni Batur** in 1634, founding the **Dzungar Khanate**, the last great nomadic empire of the steppe. The name came from the Mongolian *zүүн gar* meaning "left hand," marking the Dzungars as the left wing of the Mongol army. The Dzungars pushed outward, launching the first of many campaigns against the Kazakhs to their west in 1635. This long struggle to resist them became a defining chapter in Kazakh national memory.

Under **Galdan Boshugtu Khan**, the Dzungars conquered the Tarim Basin and turned east against the Khalkha Mongols. When Galdan invaded Khalkha territory in the late 1680s, the Khalkha nobles, urged by their Buddhist head Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, chose **submission** to the Qing at the assembly of Dolonnor in 1691. With this, the Qing now controlled Outer Mongolia (the lands that are now the modern Mongolia) in addition to Inner Mongolia that the Manchus had absorbed back in 1636. The Qing then campaigned against the Dzungars directly. The **Kangxi Emperor** (the third Qing ruler, known like all his line by his reign-era name) defeated Galdan Boshugtu Khan at Jao Modo in 1696. This decisive Qing victory was part of the **Dzungar–Qing Wars** (1687–1758). The campaign of 1755–1757 was so brutal that it resulted in the near-extirmination of the Dzungar people, an event many historians now call a genocide.

The Qing dynasty would be the last imperial dynasty of China, lasting until 1912, when the abdication of the child emperor Puyi brought more than two thousand years of imperial rule to an end. In the upheaval of its collapse, Outer Mongolia declared its independence under the **Jebtsundamba Khutuktu** as a Buddhist theocratic monarchy. This Mongolia would be swept away by the chaos brought by a revolutionary Russia. In the **1921 Revolution**, Mongolian nationalists led by **Damdin Sükhbaatar**, backed by the Soviet Red Army, ousted the occupying Chinese forces and the White Russian warlord **Ungern-Sternberg**. In 1924, the country was refounded as the **Mongolian People's Republic**, the world's second communist country and a Soviet satellite. Soviet influence was enforced through direct political purges, the violent suppression of religion, forced collectivization of agriculture, and military protection against Japanese expansionism. Mongolia **adopted the Cyrillic alphabet** on March 25, 1941, and it became the official state script on January 1, 1946. This replaced the **traditional Mongol script**, a visually distinct writing system adapted from the Uyghur alphabet in the 13th century that is written from top to bottom, flowing in vertical lines from left to right. Inner Mongolia would stay within China and is recognized as an autonomous region of the People's Republic, home to more ethnic Mongols than Mongolia itself.

When the Soviet Union fell, Mongolia made a peaceful transition to multiparty democracy in 1990, emerging as the independent nation it is today. The cultural memory of Genghis Khan, long muted under Soviet influence, returned to the heart of national identity. He endures as the father of the nation, his likeness on its currency as well as on vodka bottles. The post-Soviet era brought a religious revival to both Tibetan Buddhism and the indigenous **Mongolian shamanism** (the ancient faith of Tengri, the eternal blue sky) that venerates Genghis Khan as a deity. In 2006, a seated statue of Genghis Khan flanked by equestrian statues of Ögedei, Kublai, Muqali and Bo'orchu was unveiled on the steps of the Government Palace overlooking **Sükhbaatar Square**, the central plaza of Ulaanbaatar (the Capital of Mongolia). In Inner Mongolia, the **Mausoleum of Genghis Khan** in Ordos stands as the center of his cult, though it is not his grave but a cenotaph, an empty monument whose coffin holds only ceremonial relics rather than his body. Built in the 1950s in traditional Mongol style on the site where his portable "eight white yurts" shrines had long been kept, it is still tended by the **Darkhad**, the hereditary clan descended from Genghis Khan's funeral guards, said to have tended the shrine since the 13th century.

In 2008, the Mongolians would build a massive 40-metre (130 ft) tall **equestrian statue of Genghis Khan** to mark the empire's 800th anniversary. It is part of the **Chinggis Khaan Statue Complex** located outside of Ulaanbaatar. The

statue sits on top of a 10-meter-tall base building that features 36 columns, symbolizing the 36 khans spanning from Genghis Khan to Ligdan Khan. The complex houses an on-site archaeological museum, as well as a panoramic observation deck offering views over the Mongolian steppe.

Mongolia is known for its musical tradition of **khoomei**, or throat singing, in which a single performer produces a deep drone and a whistling overtone at the same time. It is practiced across Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, and neighboring Tuva, and is inscribed on UNESCO's list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The grasslands of Mongolia are dotted with multiple UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the **Deer Stone Monuments of the Khangai Ridge**, Bronze Age standing stones carved with flying stags, and the **Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai**, whose rock carvings trace twelve thousand years of steppe life. They are reminders that Mongolia's identity rests not only on its great conqueror but on a nomadic heritage far older than his empire.