

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

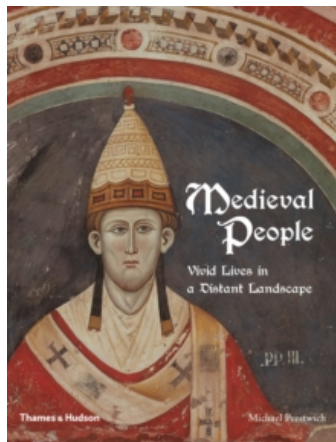
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Prestwich, M. (2014). *Medieval people*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Chinggis Khan

(Genghis Khan)

SUPREME NOMADIC CONQUEROR

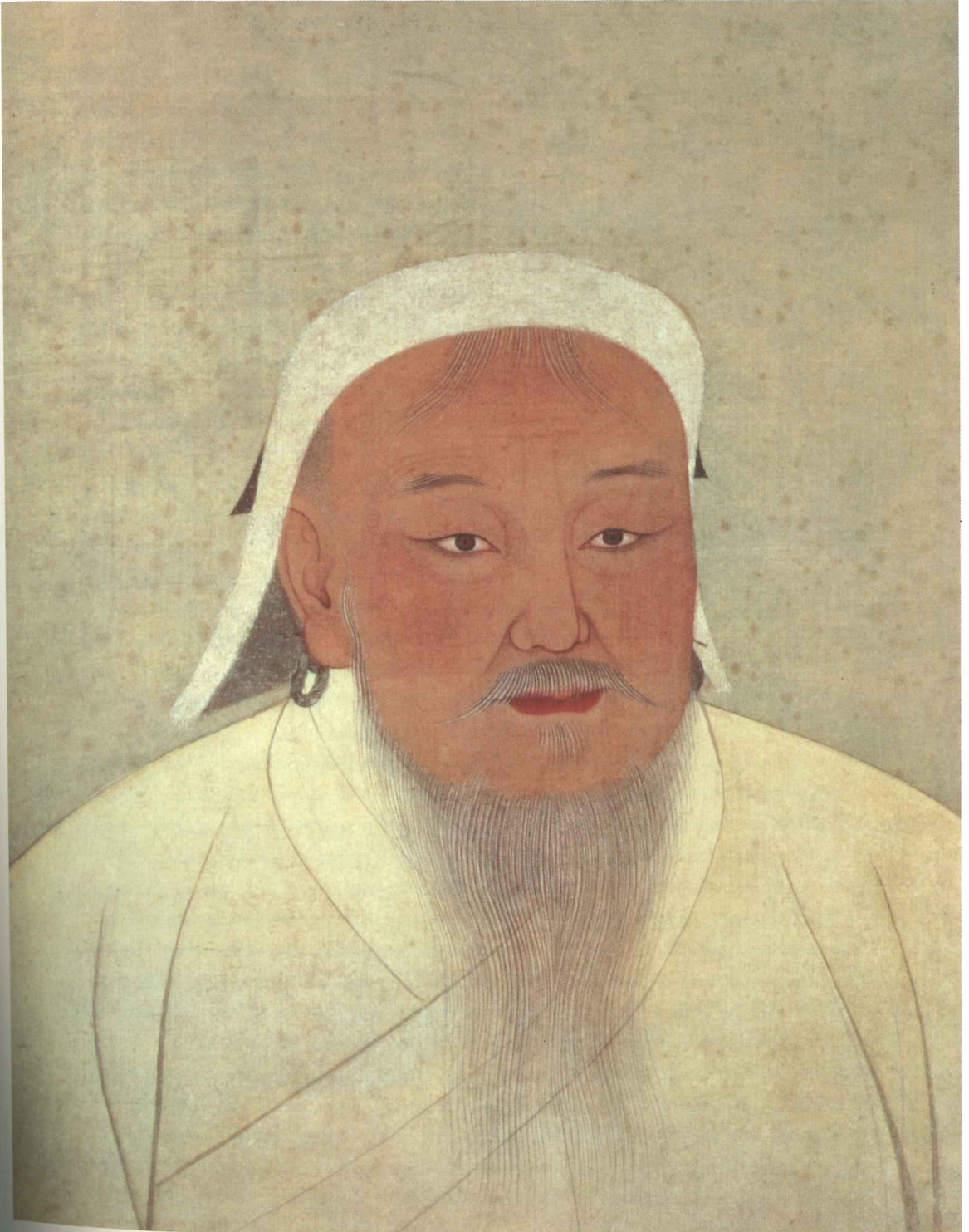
c. 1160–1227

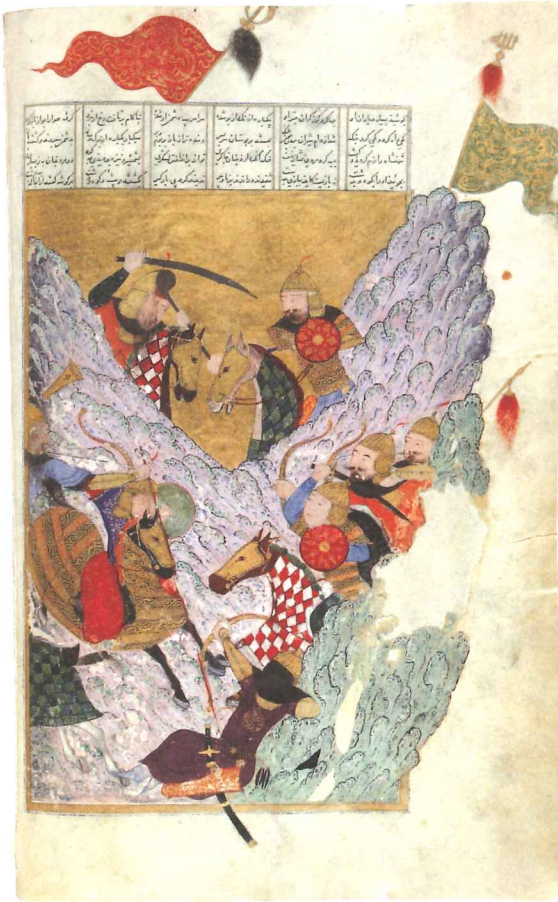
Rising from obscure origins in Mongolia, Chinggis Khan, often known as Genghis Khan, created the largest empire the world had ever seen. At his death in 1227, his authority extended from the shores of the Black Sea to those of the Pacific Ocean. The Mongols were the most formidable and the most destructive of all the nomadic peoples whose origins lay in the steppes of central Asia.

Chinggis Khan's original name was Temüjin. The story of his childhood is told in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, a work that entwines myth and reality. He was born in the 1160s. His father died, probably poisoned, when Temüjin was thirteen, and his mother was forced to leave the clan. Living in poverty, she fed the family on wild fruit and roots. Temüjin and his brother, Khasar, killed their half-brother in a squabble over a fish they caught, to his mother's understandable irritation. Captured for a time by a rival clan, Temüjin managed to escape. Eventually, his tribe recognized his ability and chose him as their khan in 1189. He then led them in a complicated history of triumphs, betrayals and double-dealing against other steppe peoples, such as the Naimans, the Merkids and the Tatars. If people resisted him, he 'struck the breath from their bodies with the whip of calamity and the sword of annihilation'. At a gathering in 1206, the union of all the Mongol peoples under the supreme rule of Temüjin was confirmed. It was then that he took the title of Chinggis Khan.

Mongol expansion under Chinggis Khan at first took the form of raids intended, above all, to win gold, precious cloths and women. In 1211, his horsemen defeated the formidable army of the Jin of northern China. Two years later, the Mongols advanced in three huge hosts which ravaged Jin territory before departing with astonishing loads of booty. In 1215, the Jin capital, Zhongdu (now Beijing), was besieged and captured. His ambitions were not confined to China. To the west of Mongol territory lay the empire of the Qara-Khitai, which collapsed swiftly before his onslaught. Beyond that was the Muslim Kwārazmian empire, which stretched from the Indus valley to the Persian Gulf. The Mongols invaded in 1219, and in the following year Samarkand and Bukhārā were among the cities taken and pillaged. At the latter, Chinggis Khan told the citizens: 'If you had not committed great sins,

A fourteenth-century Chinese portrait of Chinggis Khan, painted on silk. It is taken from a page in an album depicting several emperors.





Chinggis Khan fighting Chinese troops in a mountain pass, as shown in a fourteenth-century Persian manuscript.

God would not have sent a punishment like me upon you.' His ablest general, Sübe'etei, continued the campaign by attacking the kingdom of Georgia, crossing the Caucasus and defeating a Russian army, before returning to Mongolia. In the last year of his life, Chinggis Khan once again turned his attention to China, and the Tangut people of the north. After he had their ruler suffocated, he stated: 'While we eat, let us talk of how we made them die and of how we destroyed them. Let us say: "That was the end, they are no more."'

The scale of the destruction the Mongols wrought was massive. At Nishapur, in Persia, orders went out that not even cats and dogs were to be left alive. Four hundred skilled craftsmen were taken prisoner and led away, while all the other inhabitants were killed, their skulls left piled up in gruesome heaps. One estimate is that in China the death toll reached a barely credible eighteen million. Not only was there horrific slaughter in cities both in the Middle East and in China, but the irrigation systems vital to agriculture were also destroyed. Scientific analysis suggests that the Mongol invasions led to such widespread abandonment of cultivation in China as to have had a noticeable effect on CO₂ emissions and hence the global climate.

Mongol armies were very large, with virtually all the male population expected to fight. They were well organized, divided into units of ten thousands, thousands, hundreds and tens. The elite core was provided by Chinggis Khan's household troops, mostly drawn from the tribes who had been consistently loyal to him during his rise to power. Men from defeated peoples, such as Naimans and Merkids, were divided between different units to ensure that their loyalty was to Chinggis Khan rather than to their tribe. The troops were almost all mounted, and armed with short, powerful, composite bows; every man was obliged to provide his own equipment. The *Secret History* states that Chinggis Khan had an army of 30,000 when he fought the disloyal former companion of his youth, Jamuqa, and that in 1206 his commanders led 96,000 men. This would have been a huge force. Other sources give much larger numbers, even up to 800,000, but these cannot be credited.

The Mongols were skilled tacticians. Their nomadic way of life was good training for war. For them, 'the bowl of war to be a basin of rich soup'. The speed of their mounted troops meant that they could avoid hand-to-hand fighting. They were able to manoeuvre rapidly, to split up at times of danger and to recombine when the hammer-blow of a charge was needed. They would break up enemy formations with flank attacks, followed by encirclement, or by feigning retreat. They employed every kind of trickery, such as tying straw dummies onto spare horses to give the impression that their army was far larger than it actually was. Chinggis Khan and his commanders were quick to realize that they needed siege engines to capture cities, so they drew on Chinese and Persian expertise. Chinggis Khan was also well aware of the importance of logistics, telling Sübe'etei, 'Spare your soldiers' mounts lest they become too lean, husband your provisions lest they are used up.'

Chinggis Khan had the political skills to hold a vast empire together. His sons were important in this, but so also were the commanders and officials whose loyalty he obtained by a mixture of threats and rewards. Many decrees were issued, and probably a full codification of laws. A courier system linked the empire together. Merchants were under special protection, for the Mongols realized the benefits of allowing trade to flourish. Religious toleration was needed in such a disparate empire. The Mongol faith was a form of shamanism, but although Chinggis Khan often took the advice of shamans, his respect for them was limited. He declared of one, after he had been brutally killed, that 'he was not loved by Heaven and his life, together with his body, has been carried off'. He took little interest in other religions, thinking the mosque at Bukhārā was the sultan's palace.

Chinggis Khan was devoted to hunting, and to women. The Persian writer Juvaynī explained that he 'had much issue, both male and female, by his wives and concubines', even suggesting that 'the children and grandchildren of Chinggis Khan are ten thousand'. Genetic analysis has shown that a particular form of Y-chromosome is to be found in populations stretching from Uzbekistan to the Pacific. This originated some 1,000 years ago in Mongolia, but its spread came with the growth of Chinggis Khan's empire. It may well be that Chinggis Khan and his sons were responsible for the dissemination of a gene which is now to be found in some 8 per cent of the male population in much of Asia.

There are few individuals who have changed the world as much as Chinggis Khan. Even after his death, Mongol expansion continued. Under his son Ögedei, they threatened western Europe in 1241. By the end of the thirteenth century, Mongol domination of the world, from Asia Minor to China, seemed assured.