



## ČENGĪZ KHAN

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**ČENGĪZ** (Mong. Chinggis) **KHAN**, probably born in 562-63/1167 in northeastern Mongolia, the founder of the Mongol empire, the most extensive land empire known to history. For our knowledge of his early life we are dependent on a single Mongolian work, the *Secret History of the Mongols*, most of which was written probably in 1228 or 1240, within a short time of Čengĭz Khan's death. This is supplemented by the account in Rašīd-al-Dīn's *Jāme' al-tawāriḵ*, which is based on a lost Mongolian official chronicle, the *Altan debter* (Golden book). Separation of fact from fiction, myth, and legend is not easy, but it is possible to reconstruct the main outlines of Čengĭz Khan's life and career with a fair degree of confidence.

Čengĭz's father, Yesügei (Yesükāy), was a minor Mongol chieftain murdered by the enemy tribe of the Tatars when his son, then known as Temuchin (Temūčīn/Temūjīn), was nine years old. Čengĭz's mother, brother, and two half-brothers were abandoned by Yesügei's followers, who had no use for a child chieftain, and their life for the next few years is represented as having been very hard. A notable event of this period, according to the *Secret History* (tr. Cleaves, pp. 22-23), was the murder by Čengĭz and his brother of one of their half-brothers (the inclusion of this story may be regarded as evidence that the *Secret History* is not an uncritical panegyric). Gradually, however, the young Čengĭz, evidently exhibiting remarkable qualities of leadership even at this early stage in his life, began to attract young warriors from other clans and tribes, who became his *nökör* (*nowkar*; followers or comrades). Some of these were later, during the expansion of the Mongol empire, to become great



generals.

The other basis on which Čengĭz founded his growing power was an alliance with one of the most important steppe rulers, Toghril (Toğrel, also known as Ong Khan), Khan of the Kereyits (Kerāyet). Toghril had been Yesügei's *anda* (sworn brother). Over a number of years Čengĭz was able, by using his allies (notably Toghril and his own *anda*, Jamuqa) and discarding them when they had served their turn, to achieve supremacy over all the nomadic Mongol and Turkish tribes—Kereyits, Naimans (Nāymān), Merkits, and so forth—of Mongolia. Apart from the rulers of the various tribes (and with the notable exception of the Tatars, many of whom were massacred), the bulk of the defeated tribe's manpower was incorporated into the growing Mongol army. Čengĭz's supremacy was recognized at a *quriltay* (*qoreltāy*, assembly of princes and notables) held in 1206. After this Mongol expansion and the great conquests began; whether as a means of preserving the newly won unity, because of climatic conditions, or as a result of the adoption of an ideology of world rule, is uncertain and much disputed (see, e.g., Khazanov, p. 235; Gumilev, p. 119; Rachewiltz).

Čengĭz's principal target was China, which at that time was divided into three realms, Hsi Hsia (Pinyin: Xixia) in the north-west, the Chin (Jin) dynasty (1115-1234; ruled by the Jürchen [Nü-chen/Pinyin: Nü-zhen] of Manchuria) in the north, and the native Chinese Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1279) in the south. After several expeditions against the Hsi Hsia, the Chin empire was first invaded in 1211. Campaigns there continued until final conquest, which was not achieved until 1234, seven years after Čengĭz Khan's death.

In the meantime Čengĭz had turned his attention westwards. In 1218 the Central Asian empire of the Qara Khitay, which had briefly been ruled by one of Čengĭz's old enemies from Mongolia, Küchlüg (Küčlok) of the Naimans, was overrun. This brought the Mongols face to face with the empire of 'Alā'-al-Dīn Moḥammad, the K̅vārazmšāh. Whether Čengĭz had determined to attack the lands of Islam at this stage is not clear, but the K̅vārazmšāh himself resolved any doubt by executing a Mongol ambassador who had come to protest at the murder and plunder of a caravan of merchants from Mongolia on the order of Inaljuq Ghayir (Īnāljoq Gāyer) Khan, the governor of the Khwarezmian frontier city of Otrār (615/1218). This made war inevitable. The Mongols invaded Transoxania in 616/1219 in a carefully coordinated three pronged attack. The K̅vārazmšāh, for reasons which remain hard to fathom, failed to



meet the Mongols in battle, instead distributing his vast army uselessly in small packets, as city garrisons. He fled, pursued by a Mongol detachment, and died on the Āšūrāda island in the Caspian. The great Transoxanian cities, Bukhara and Samarkand, fell and were sacked. But their fate was mild compared with that meted out to Khorasan at the hands of Čengīz Khan's youngest son, Tolui (Tūlī). According to the contemporary historians the province was devastated, its cities razed to the ground, and its people massacred in the millions. Heravī alleges in his local history of Herat (pp. 63, 80) that 1,747,000 men (in addition to women and children) were killed by the Mongols in Nīšāpūr, and 1,600,000 in Herat; while Jūzjānī puts the latter massacre at 2,400,000 (*Ṭabaqāt* II, p. 121, tr. Raverty, II, p. 1038). Such statements should not be taken too literally, however. It is by no means easy to raze a city to the ground, even with the aid of 20th-century destructive technology; and as for the statistics of the massacres in Herat, Balḵ, or Nīšāpūr, it may be doubted that anyone was counting. What cannot be doubted, however, is that the death and destruction was on a scale quite beyond contemporaries' previous knowledge or experience. It would seem that Čengīz was determined not only to wipe out in blood the slight represented by the murder of his ambassador, but also to remove any risk of the K̄vārazmšāh's empire ever posing a political threat to his own. It is possible also to speculate that at this stage in their career of conquest the Mongols, nomadic pastoralists as they were, lacked appreciation of the virtues and potential profitability to them of cities and settled agriculture. The effects of Čengīz's invasion on the agricultural base of Persian society in Khorasan may well have been even more serious, in the long run, than deliberate Mongol destruction in the cities. *Qanats* were left to decay as peasants fled the onslaught, and irreparable damage to irrigated land could, through neglect as much as through deliberate destruction, occur quite quickly. The Mongols were hardly the rulers to see and remedy this danger in time.

While in the Hindu Kush Čengīz Khan received a visit from the Taoist sage Ch'ang Ch'un (Chang Chun), whom he had caused to travel across Asia from north China because he had heard (inaccurately) that the Taoist possessed knowledge of an elixir of life. One of Ch'ang Ch'un's disciples left an account of the journey which sheds a most revealing light on conditions in Asia in the immediate aftermath of Čengīz's campaigns of conquest (see A. Waley, tr., *The Travels of an Alchemist*, London, 1931). Čengīz left the Islamic world to return to Mongolia in 620/1223. His last campaign was against the Hsi Hsia. During it, in late summer 624/1227, he died.



Čengīz Khan had laid the military foundation of an empire which was to continue expanding for a further half century. The Mongol army was certainly his most impressive creation: organized in the usual steppe fashion on a decimal system, it was a virtually invincible force of cavalry archers (later supplemented by a siege train when cities in China and Persia had to be dealt with). The size of the army is much disputed. It was certainly very large, at least by the European standards of the day, though possibly not when compared with the forces at the disposal of the K̄vārazmšāh or the Chin and Sung emperors. Since all male adult Mongols were as much soldiers as herdsmen or hunters, Čengīz was able to mobilize an unusually high proportion of his available manpower.

Čengīz's achievement, though hardly positive from the point of view of Persia, was by no means wholly a military and a destructive one. It no longer seems possible to ascribe to him the creation of a written legal code, the "great *yāsā*." Mongol law in this period appears to have had a much more customary and ad hoc character than such a belief would imply. But he had certainly formed the nucleus of an imperial administration that was to stand his successors in good stead. In this he welcomed the assistance of peoples with greater administrative experience than the Mongols had had, notably the Uighurs of the Tarim basin and the Khitans of Qara Khitay and north China: signs of many Khitan and Uighur governmental institutions, as well as personnel, may be discerned in the administrative machinery of the early Mongol empire. It was indeed from the Uighurs that Čengīz borrowed a script for Mongolian, previously an unwritten language.

Čengīz Khan did not leave a coherent, stable government in the former lands of the K̄vārazmšāh. Eastern Persia fell under the rule of a series of Mongol viceroys, who had first of all to cope with the erratic if at times effective counterattacks of Jalāl-al-Dīn, son and successor of the K̄vārazmšāh. Eventually, in the 650s/1250s, a relatively coherent Mongol kingdom, the Ilkhanate, was set up under Čengīz's grandson Hülegü (Hülāgū; [Figure 1](#)). Mongol rule in Persia, under both Čengīz Khan and his descendants, was a period of singularly oppressive government, made more unacceptable by virtue of the fact that a major part of the Dār-al-Eslām had been brought under the rule of infidels. Little alleviation was to be felt until the accession in 694/1295 of the reforming Muslim convert, Ġāzān Khan.

The name of Čengīz Khan is spelled in a bewildering variety of ways in Western sources. The original Mongol form is Čingis, which in sources written



in the Arabic-Persian alphabet appears in the Turkicized form Čingīz (spelled cynggyz or cynkkyz), whence Čengīz (modern Pers. pronunciation Čangīz). The standard modern English spelling is Genghis, after the Mongol form, but Jenghiz, Jinghis, Chingiz, and Chingis are also found (*Encyclopaedia Americana* XII).

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