

KHAN & KHAN
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There came into the world a blue-gray wolf
whose destiny was Heaven's will.
His wife was a fallow deer.
They travelled together across the inland sea
and when they were camped near the source of the Onan River
in sight of Mount Burkhan Khaldun
their first son was born....

Thus begins the Secret History of the Mongols, a text composed in the Mongolian tongue and for centuries hidden from view among noble families and considered lost until a Chinese version was, at length, discovered and deciphered. It tells the story of Genghis, the great unifier of the Mongol clans and their first all-powerful khan, whose reign extended from the year 1206 to 1227. His fame in Asia is comparable only to that of his illustrious grandson Khubilai two generations later. Using especially the Secret History for Genghis, the Travels of Marco Polo for Khubilai, and a recent work for them both, let me attempt this evening to tell the tale of these two men who have been both devastatingly demeaned and lavishly romanticized. Both were khans of their people, but, oh, how different they were!

Let us begin with Genghis, whose reputation, it seems, was not always quite so horrid as it has become in the popular imagination. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the 14th-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer has the squire say of him, using a variant of his name:

This noble king was known as Cambus Khan
And in his time enjoyed such great renown
That nowhere in that region up or down
Was one so excellent in everything:
Nothing he lacked belonging to a king.

Chaucer goes on to call Genghis “wise and brave, compassionate and just.” Similarly, during the 18th century, Voltaire, in the dedicatory introduction to his play “The Orphan of China,” notes, with respect, that the Mongol khans “did not change the manners of the conquered Chinese nation; on the contrary, they protected and encouraged all the arts established in China, and adopted their laws: an extraordinary instance of the natural superiority which reason and genius have over blind force and barbarism.” Far from being bloodthirsty barbarians in Voltaire’s eyes, the Mongols were really, unlike the Inquisition or the rulers of 18th-century France, men of the Enlightenment, simply before their time.

Genghis (or Chingis) was not originally called by that name, let alone was he born a khan, or king. He was Temujin, a simple country lad, born on the endless grassy steppes of central Asia, raised in a culture of hunters and herders where there were far more animals than human beings. He grew up, not in a house of any sort, but in a *ger* or yurt, an easily movable dwelling made up of staves around which are tied walls composed of felt, the tightly pressed

cloth made from the wool of sheep. [If you put the word “yurt” into your browser, you can actually watch a video of its construction.]

The nomadic world of the young Temujin, located along the Onan River, where the steppe meets the Siberian forest, not far from the sacred mountain called Burkhan Khaldun, was impoverished, wild and violent. Scores of clans fought each other, seeking to increase their possession of horses, livestock, and women. Plunder, not conquest, was usually the goal.

The central object of their culture was the horse. Small boys learned to ride; girls and women could gallop as well. In battle the horse, usually a gelding, bore riders skilled in felling game or destroying their enemies with arrows shot with deadly accuracy. Remarkably, the horse also served as the source for both food and drink. Horse meat was a staple of the diet and mare’s milk was drunk with gusto, especially when it had been fermented into a powerful alcoholic drink called airak. Since there was no agriculture because the steppes did not support it, the young Temujin must have gone from his mother’s milk directly to a diet of what the horse could offer, supplemented by the meat of sheep and goats from the herd. In no way could it be predicted that this simple son, growing up in a primitive environment, would one day master an empire far larger than that of ancient Rome at the height of its glory.

When Temujin was only nine years old, his impoverished father, unable to purchase a bride for his son, sought to have him labor for the daughter of a relative--like the biblical Jacob--until the girl would finally be his. But during the journey, father and son stumbled upon a wise old man who was prepared to give his daughter, named Borte Ujin, to Temujin for no more than the price of a single horse. Upon departing, the Secret History tells us, the father exhorted the old man: “You should know that he is frightened by dogs. Don’t let the dogs frighten him, my friend.”

In due course, Temujin was able to marry Borte only to have occur to him what happened all too often in those lawless days: his wife was stolen from him by a marauding band from the Merkid clan, whose chiefs then pursued her husband vigorously but were unable to catch him. Having escaped, and, as he would often later at anxious times, usually before a battle, Temujin ascended the sacred mountain and began to pray. The Secret History reveals what he did next: "Temujin turned toward the Sun and took his hat in his hand. He loosened his belt and threw it over his neck. Then, striking his breast with his hand, he knelt nine times to the Sun, sprinkling offerings of mare's milk in the air...." Throughout his life Temujin would remain a worshipper of what was called "The Eternal Blue Sky." At the crest of the sacred mountain he could get closest to the source of all strength. Later he would also employ professional shamans to help him divine his success or failure.

It was not long thereafter that Temujin was able to recapture his wife in a successful battle against the Merkid clan. Their reunion was dramatic: "When she recognized Temujin's voice, Borte leaped from the cart and ran to him, finally seizing the reins of his horse. When Temujin looked down to see who had stopped him he recognized Borte Ujin. In a moment he was down from his horse and they were in each other's arms embracing." Yes, even in a society where women were essentially property, there could be romantic love.

By and by, the boy who feared dogs proved himself to be a warrior par excellence. Bit-by-bit, he gained the leadership of his own clan and then, battle-by-battle, also domination over the clans and tribes of what is today Mongolia. He made alliances and broke alliances; plundered and looted to create wealth for his family and favorites. Soon there was no one in the steppes who could challenge him. All that was lacking now was official status. The Secret History relates what then occurred at a khuriltai, a meeting of all the

chieftains, held by the Blue Lake in the Gurelgu Mountains. On that occasion, we learn, the Mongolian yurts stretched out for miles in every direction. Court shamans pounded their drums, wrestlers and archers displayed their skills, singers performed traditional songs. To the man who was now the most powerful among them, to Temujin, they said the following:

“Temujin, if you will be our Khan
we’ll search through the spoils...
for the young virgins and loveliest women,
for the finest geldings and mares.
We’ll gather all these and bring them to you.
When we go off to hunt for wild game,
we’ll go out first to drive them together for you to kill...
If we disobey your command during battle,
take away our possessions, our children, and wives...”
Having given their word,
having taken this oath,
they proclaimed Temujin Khan of the Mongols
and gave him the title Chingis Khan.

Without rivals among his own people, Genghis now made war with the surrounding peoples: The Merkid to the north, the Tatars to the east, the Kereyid to the south, and the Naiman to the west. There followed other conquests in an expanding circle, part way into China on the east, beyond the Gobi Desert to the South, into the Altai Mountains in the west. His policies became widely known: If you were a loyal Mongol follower fighting for the khan, you were treated well: you received your proper share of the spoils; if a

fallen warrior, your widow and orphans were provided for by the state; but if you were a fighter belonging to a tribe or nation that resisted or rebelled, the penalty was death. Surrounding peoples were given the option of submission and tribute. But if they failed to submit or later reneged, the consequence was execution of all males above a certain age, their young women parceled out to the victorious warriors, their homes destroyed, and the remainder of their population reduced to slavery.

Genghis was not only himself a fierce warrior; he was also an innovative organizer of his army. He structured his forces into captained units of a thousand men, each divided, in turn, into hundreds and tens. Under his leadership the Mongols no longer fought impulsively, but in a highly disciplined, and hence effective, fashion. For his body guard Genghis selected the elite of his army, placing them as watchmen by night and day around his yurt. In return for their service, he distributed offices and titles to the men whose actions had proven their loyalty and skill.

Genghis created a Great Law, integrating tribal customs into uniform practice. Disruptive old ways of doing things were abandoned. It was no longer permissible to kidnap women or sell them to the highest bidder; unlike foreigners, Mongols could no longer be enslaved. Torture was forbidden. Internal disputes could now be settled peaceably by an appointed judge. Most remarkably, Genghis did not impose his own animism upon those under his control. He freely tolerated the variety of religions that had found converts among his own people or were to be found among the conquered. There were Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, all of whose spiritual leaders were exempt from taxes. This at a time of gross intolerance in Europe. Yet Genghis remained firmly committed to his own faith. According to the Secret History, having accepting his title, he then proclaimed:

Now, thanks to Eternal Blue Sky
my power has been increased by Heaven and Earth.
I've straightened out the lives of the entire Nation
and they are controlled by the reins in my hands.

However, effective governing and victories over enemies did not obviate distrust within his own inner circle. When a powerful shaman, claiming to be commanded by the Eternal Blue Sky, urged Genghis to eliminate his brother Khazar as a potential rival to his power, Genghis stood ready to put him to death. But at the last moment a remarkable thing happened. We learn that when Hogelun, the mother of them both, heard of Genghis intent,

even though it was the black of night,
she had a white camel harnessed to her black cart
and she set out traveling through the darkness.

She arrived just as Genghis was about to murder his own brother.

Unable to control the anger she felt,
Hogelun sat down before Genghis,
crossing her legs beneath her,
brought out her two breasts from beneath her coat,
laid them on her two knees, and cried:
"Do you know these breasts?
These are the breasts you suckled from!
These are the source of your life,

and like the mother of the wolf
I ate the afterbirth,
I cut the navel cord for you both.
What could Khazar have done to deserve this?

The powerful Genghis was unable to withstand his aging mother's rebuke, and his brother Khazar's life was saved.

As his empire grew, swift communication within it became a necessity. For this purpose Genghis established a system of regularly spaced stations where swift riders could rest and change horses as they rode from the capital at Karakorum in central Mongolia, not far from the present-day capital of Ulaanbaatar, to the far corners of his rule. It was a sort of very early pony express.

Genghis now looked for conquests beyond Mongolia, toward China, or, as it was then called, Cathay in the east, and toward the Muslim and Christian lands in the west. At times, treaties were concluded and daughters of rulers became wives of hitherto opponents; frequently, the approaching Mongolian armies simply frightened villages and towns into a submission that saved their lives but resulted in heavy tribute. The final alternative was to attempt armed opposition to the khan. That was nearly always the wrong choice. At this stage Genghis was able to recruit armies that ran into the many thousands, skilled horsemen who could destroy their opponents at a distance without ever needing to engage in hand-to-hand fighting. The Mongolian warriors would travel lightly to the site of battles; they used no supply train, preferring to carry a limited amount of food in their saddle bags and to gather more edibles from hunting or from the local populations along their path. The army's wounded

were attended by Chinese physicians who had been captured or gone over to their side.

It was when they encountered walled cities that the Mongolian troops faced a new challenge. How could archers, however skilled, defeat an enemy that was so well protected? In response, they devised two effective solutions. The first was to surround the besieged city and then retreat, leaving spoils from captured villages behind. Once the city's gates were opened and its soldiers eagerly looting the besiegers' camp, the Mongol warriors returned with a vengeance, entered the city and destroyed the defending army. The second tactic relied on Chinese engineers that the Mongols had forced into their ranks. Using wood from cut-down trees, workmen created a variety of catapults that could hurl heavy and sometimes flaming boulders from a distance beyond the reach of the arrows that the defenders shot at the besiegers from the city walls.

The climax to Genghis Khan's military career came in the year 1214, when his armies besieged the Chinese city of Zhongdu. The ruler, known as the Golden Khan, decided to submit to Genghis, presenting him with huge quantities of gold and silver, silk and satins, three thousand horses, and--to top it off--also one of his royal princesses to add to what by now was best called a harem. But once the Mongol forces withdrew, the Golden Khan reneged--a fatal mistake. The following year Zhongdu became a smoldering ruin, its treasures piled onto carts and sent off to Mongolia. As a result of this and other plundering, the standard of living in Mongolia rose immensely. Although the Mongolians still preferred to dwell in yurts and to maintain many of the old ways, they reveled in the new luxuries: the lacquered furniture, the silk and perfume for their ladies, the beautiful metal fittings for their horses. Genghis did now allow the construction of some real buildings, but they served as warehouses for the loot, not for domicile.

No less than his successes in the east were Genghis's victories in the west where he subdued city after city in Muslim lands: Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tbilisi--to name only three. These were lands not only rich in goods, but also in high culture, in literacy and literature at a time when nearly all Mongolians remained unable to read. Taking advantage of this situation, Genghis spared the lives of the learned: astronomers, physicians, engineers, teachers--also the religious leaders of the Muslim countries of central Asia, be they imams, priests or rabbis.

Genghis Khan's success was rooted in a deep confidence that he was destined to be a successful conquerer, that the Eternal Blue Sky had somehow chosen him and hence he could only win and never, at least in the long run, lose. On the occasion of one of his sieges he is said to have spoken:

Commanders, elders, and common people, know that God has given me the empire of the earth from the east to the west. Whoever submits shall be spared, but those who resist, they shall be destroyed with their wives, children and dependents.

For all of his successes, Genghis Khan was, of course, unable to avoid his own mortality. Death came, ironically, from injuries he suffered when the horse he was riding, having been attacked by a bevy of wild horses, threw him to the ground. Not surprisingly, what followed his death was a protracted struggle by various members of his family to succeed him. In competition with each other, sons and grandsons gained new victories. As Mongol armies conquered westward, they sacked Baghdad and Damascus. They rampaged through Hungary and up to the very walls of Vienna. But the empire that Genghis had created did not remain whole. As in the case of Alexander the Great, whose

generals, after his death, split up his conquests, so too did Genghis's grandsons eventually split up the vast realm among themselves. From their midst one soon emerged as the the most successful. He was Khubilai Khan and to his story we must now turn.

According to the Secret History, when he was 66 years old and near death, Genghis proclaimed to those around him:

The acts of my grandson Khubilai are the sign of a great leader.
All of you must listen to what he says and follow him some day.
What crime would it be if some day in the future
he were to make everyone's life as happy as mine.

At this point the Secret History breaks off and we turn for our principal source of information to a non-Mongolian document, the travel memoirs of an Italian young man who ventured into the empire of Khubilai Khan together with his father and uncle and remained there for seventeen years. He is, of course, Marco Polo.

The trip from Venice to Khubilai's court, then located in Shangdu, to the north of Khanbaliq, the city that would become known as Beijing, took no less than three and a half years, a long and wearying experience. The purpose of Marco, his father, and his uncle, was trade. By now the famous silk road connected east and west and offered rich rewards for merchants who were willing to risk its dangers in order to bring silks and spices to the west. Remarkably, Khubilai became attached to the young Italian and sent him on sensitive diplomatic and intelligence missions. Scholars today believe that the

report of his experiences, if exaggerated numbers are taken with a grain of salt, is more accurate than was earlier thought.

Marco Polo's book of travels gives ample evidence of his own amour propre. In the prologue he tells us of himself:

The Great Khan, seeing that Messer Marco brought him so much news from each country he was sent to and conducted his business so successfully, entrusted him with every mission of particular importance or to distant lands. He carried out his commissions with great success and brought back word of many novelties and curiosities. And the Great Khan was so well satisfied with Messer Marco's handling of his affairs that he held him in high esteem, showed him great favor, and kept him close by his side....

The court of Khubilai Khan that Marco Polo describes could not be more different from the yurt, however finely decorated, in which his grandfather had dwelled. Within Shangdu (also known as Xanadu), this Italian traveler tells us, there stands

a vast palace built of marble and other ornamental stones. Its halls and rooms are covered with gilded images of birds and animals, trees and flowers and many other things, so skillfully and ingeniously worked that it is a delight and wonder to see.

Centuries later, its remembrance reverberated in a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree...
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree

The Great Khan, as Marco describes him, was “the most powerful man, whether measured in subjects, lands or treasure, who exists in the world or ever did exist from the time of our first father Adam down to the present moment.” He was a man of extraordinary girth, plagued by gout, so heavy that a horse could not bear him and elephants were required to perform that task.

Khubilai’s toleration of diverse religions and cultures followed in the footsteps of Genghis. Marco tells us that on one occasion, when it came time for the Easter holiday, he summoned all the Christians in the city and asked them to bring him the book containing the four Gospels. He then floated incense over the book with great ceremony and kissed it devoutly. Supposedly, he acted similarly on the principal feasts of Saracens, Jews, and idolaters. Although Khubilai did not adopt the Christian faith, Marco is convinced that he believed it to be “the truest and best, because he says that it commands nothing that is not full of goodness and holiness.” In fact, Marco is certain that the Great Khan would have converted, were it not that the Mongolian nobles of his court would have been displeased.

Unlike his predecessors, Khubilai was not himself a great warrior. As a rule, he left fighting to his well organized army, preferring to spend his time feasting and enjoying his women in the palace. According to Marco Polo, he had four lawful wives, each of whom had numerous ladies-in-waiting. He also had an abundance of concubines. How they were chosen is a story that recalls the biblical book of Esther. It seems that every two years or so, Khubilai would send envoys to a particular province with orders to select for him the most

beautiful girls. Judges would then peruse and examine every part of every girl in order to determine a numerical score for each of them. At length, those scoring the highest were brought to the palace, judged once more, and the top thirty or forty selected for the khan's own chamber. Each of the chosen was then assigned to a wife of one of the barons whose task it was to determine whether she was a virgin, in perfect health, that she slept peacefully without snoring, that her breath smelled pleasant and sweet, and that there was no unpleasant odor emanating from any part of her body. Marco informs us that the men whose daughters were taken to the palace bear no grudge but regard it a great honor for the family. By contrast, "sinful women"--that is to say, prostitutes--were officially banned from the city, although they were allowed in its suburbs, where they served traveling merchants requiring rest and recreation after their long journeys.

During Marco's time with the Great Khan, his benefactor built a new capital at Khanbaliq, the later Beijing. Here he lived fully like an Oriental emperor. The furnishings of the palace glistened with gold and silver; the food was of the finest. When the waiters served a meal to the Khan and his barons, all those in attendance had their mouths and noses masked with fine napkins of silk and gold, lest their breath or body odor contaminate the emperor's food or drink. We learn that Khubilai quenched his thirst with an especially tasty milk, the product solely of mares whose color was pure white.

The Great Khan was yet more efficient an administrator than his grandfather. He established an office of "keeper of lost property," an early example of a "Lost and Found." He spread the use of paper money, an invention that had already been authorized by Genghis but one that gained widespread acceptance only under Khubilai. Marco mentions it repeatedly and describes it in detail. The notes were made from the bark of mulberry trees

pressed into sheets and cut up into different sizes according to denomination, the largest being worth the most. Each of the bills was stamped with the emperor's seal. When they wore out, they could be exchanged for new ones. On his travels, Polo invariably mentions whether a particular province had adopted the paper money or still relied on precious metals for value. Counterfeiting was an offense punishable by death.

It may be surprising to learn that Khubilai created a system of public schools open to everyone including even peasants, and, in 1271, founded a National University--not so long after the first universities in Europe. He employed Chinese printing techniques, almost two centuries before Gutenberg. And he created hospitals where skilled physicians practiced both Chinese and Western medicine.

The posting stations, originally created by Genghis, were further developed and extended by Khubilai. They could now be found along all of the main roads. And they included lavish sleeping arrangements for the messengers who had access to some 300 or 400 fresh horses awaiting exchange for their swift but exhausted predecessors. Like the biblical Joseph, Khubilai laid up extra produce from good agricultural years in order that it might be allotted to the poor whenever their harvests failed. Similarly, if a herder's cattle died from a plague, the Great Khan would send him replacements from his own herds. And when members of a family fell into unanticipated poverty because of severe illness or some other cause beyond their control, Khubilai would bail them out--a Mongolian social safety net of sorts. Such charity, however, ran counter to old Mongolian traditions, which held that if you were poor that was God's curse, which you must have brought upon yourself. By means of such social welfare, we may suppose, Khubilai managed to reduce resentment for his autocratic regime.

As he ruled China, Khubilai became more and more Chinese in his habits, probably even learning basics of the Chinese language. Members of the family accused him of forsaking his Mongolian heritage. As a foreigner, some said, he tried to be more Chinese than the Chinese. He ordered portraits made of the royal family that looked more like Chinese mandarins than Mongol warriors. And yet at the heart of his new capital at Khanbalik, he built a “Forbidden City,” closed to all but the ruling Mongolians. Here there were yurts, not permanent buildings. Within them wives of the Mongolian nobility gave birth to their offspring; here the children were taught in Mongolian fashion. As much as they struggled to seem Chinese to the outside world, in their Forbidden City the descendants of Genghis Khan were determined to preserve their ancestral ways.

During the period of his rule, which ended with his death in 1294, Khubilai’s chief military concern was the native Chinese Song Dynasty, which continued to rule in the south of China. Suffering from internal dissension and corruption, its leadership was too weak to withstand the Mongolians and in 1279 Khubilai was able to replace Song sovereignty with the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty, which continued to rule for some 89 years until it too was defeated by the more powerful Chinese Ming in 1368. Thus what Genghis had built in Mongolia and Khubilai expanded in China came to its end, clearing the way for condemnation, romanticization, and historical analysis.

As for the adventurous Marco Polo, when he finally arrived back in Venice in 1295, he reportedly could scarcely speak Italian—except with a Mongolian accent. But he soon readjusted to his old environment, and he had returned home with rich treasure.

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