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Genghis Khan: Incomparable Nomad Conqueror

Genghis Khan was also gifted with great shrewdness. His military code specified that a man who was physically stronger than his comrades was not to be placed in command of them "because he could not feel hunger and thirst as they did and would thus reduce their efficiency."¹¹ To curb drunkenness among his troops, Genghis Khan decreed in his code that a man could get drunk only three times a month. "Twice is better than three times; once is better still, and the best of all is never to drink," he added, "but who can find a man who will never get drunk?"¹² The Mongol leader was equally shrewd in dealing with his enemies. His armies became famous for their tricks, such as pretending to retreat and then returning with fresh horses to engulf their surprised pursuers or tying branches on their ponies' tails to raise a cloud of dust that made it seem they had more men. Perhaps this helps explain the frequently exaggerated estimates of Mongol troop strength in some contemporary reports. The following story, probably legendary,

suggests the ingenuity attributed to Genghis Khan. In 1207, before he had learned siege tactics, the Mongol leader was having trouble taking the Tangut town of Volohai. In apparent despair, he is supposed to have said that he would leave if the defenders gave him one thousand cats and ten thousand swallows as tribute. Puzzled, they did so. The Mongols then tied "cottonwool" to the tails of the birds and cats, lit them, and released them to fly or run back into the town. While the defenders were fighting the fires, the Mongols overran the city.¹³

Despite these forms of deception, as well as his use of merchants as spies (also an old nomad custom) and the spreading of what today is called "disinformation," the major reasons for the success of the nomad chieftain were the speed and skill of his soldiers and their unwillingness to give up. They were as tireless in pursuit as they were savage in victory. Both demoralized any enemy. One student of Mongol history has suggested that Mongol military tactics, particularly their emphasis on endurance, speed, and the use of flanking movements to encircle their enemies, were natural outgrowths of the tactics of any hunter on the Asian steppelands. Stalking deer silently taught them how to stalk men; using a line of beaters to head off and terrify a circle of game taught them how to outflank their foes. They surprised their enemies, human or animal. In both cases, they generally killed them after capture. This was the way of the steppe, and they were steppe hunters.¹⁴

Whether this was the reason for their success or not, there is no doubt that Genghis Khan and his people ride out of history as some of the most successful warriors of all time. He was driven by a desire for power, and his armies have a record of accomplishment on the battlefield easily equal to those of Alexander the Great or any of the Roman caesars; his system of military government and command may have been unmatched until the twentieth century. All this, of course, must be balanced against the savagery of his troops, especially during the western campaign. Some scholars have tried to excuse or explain the brutality of the Mongols by pointing out that their cruelty was not "wanton," only the product of their culture. Genghis Khan did not kill his opponents out of blood lust, they argue, but only as a matter of policy. One scholar, David Morgan, wrote that Genghis Khan's principle in destroying some cities was

similar to the one used by President Truman when he decided to drop the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945: if the inhabitants of several cities were massacred, those in other cities would be less likely to resist.¹⁵ Such arguments as these mean little to those who have been destroyed but they do begin to raise the question of whether or not the career of Genghis Khan has any "redeeming historical value" for anyone other than the military historian. When you subtract the savagery and military success, what is left?

At least two things are left. First, however brutally he may have done it, Genghis Khan did unify the Asian steppelands and in doing this he opened a corridor of cultural, commercial, and technological interchange between East Asia and Europe that had been closed since the fall of the Han dynasty in China and the Roman empire in the West some 700 years earlier. Marco Polo was only the most famous European who traveled this corridor during the century and a half that it was open. Christian missionaries went east while silk and spices once again moved overland to the West. There were only two periods in world history before the western voyages of exploration when the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian continent were linked economically in a "world system" of trade and commerce. The second and most important of these two periods was due to the work of Genghis Khan. It was only, in fact, because this overland route was closed by the decline of the Mongol Khanates during the fifteenth century that men such as Prince Henry the Navigator and Columbus began to look for a sea route to the East—and we all know where that led.

There is a second reason for reserving a place in our histories for Genghis Khan. He does give us an insight into the values of the nomads, and this understanding itself, while interesting to us, was a matter of life and death for the inhabitants of most urban civilizations for the first four thousand years of recorded history. Genghis Khan disliked cities, or the agricultural and urban economy that we generally regard as one of the essentials of civilized life. There is a famous story (this one not legend) that, during his last campaign in China, one of the Mongol generals suggested that Genghis Khan exterminate the 10 million Chinese under his control. After all, they were unsuited to warfare, and most were poor horsemen. The Great Khan initially liked the idea of turning northern China into a pasture, until his patient and trusted Chinese advisor Yelü Chucai

explained to the conqueror that he could tax the 10 million and get much silver, silk, and grain each year by doing so. After thinking about it for a moment, Genghis Khan agreed.

Nomads saw cities not as bases for control of the countryside and further conquest but, first, as obstacles and, second, as sources of wealth. The cities that Genghis Khan did not destroy he allowed to exist only because they could supply him with tribute. The Mongol ruler saw his empire not as a great world state but as a resource for his people, so that they could continue to enjoy the morally superior life of the steppes for uncounted generations. The cities in the south would supply them with money and slaves so that they could enjoy unhindered the free and open life of "the generations who live in felt tents." It did not work out quite that way. Although the great Mongol empire grew under the leadership of his sons and grandsons, Genghis Khan's nomads eventually split into separate groups, and each one was attracted by the lure of the sedentary, urban civilization over which it ruled. Grandson Kubilai Khan became a Chinese emperor, while grandson Hulegu became a Persian prince.