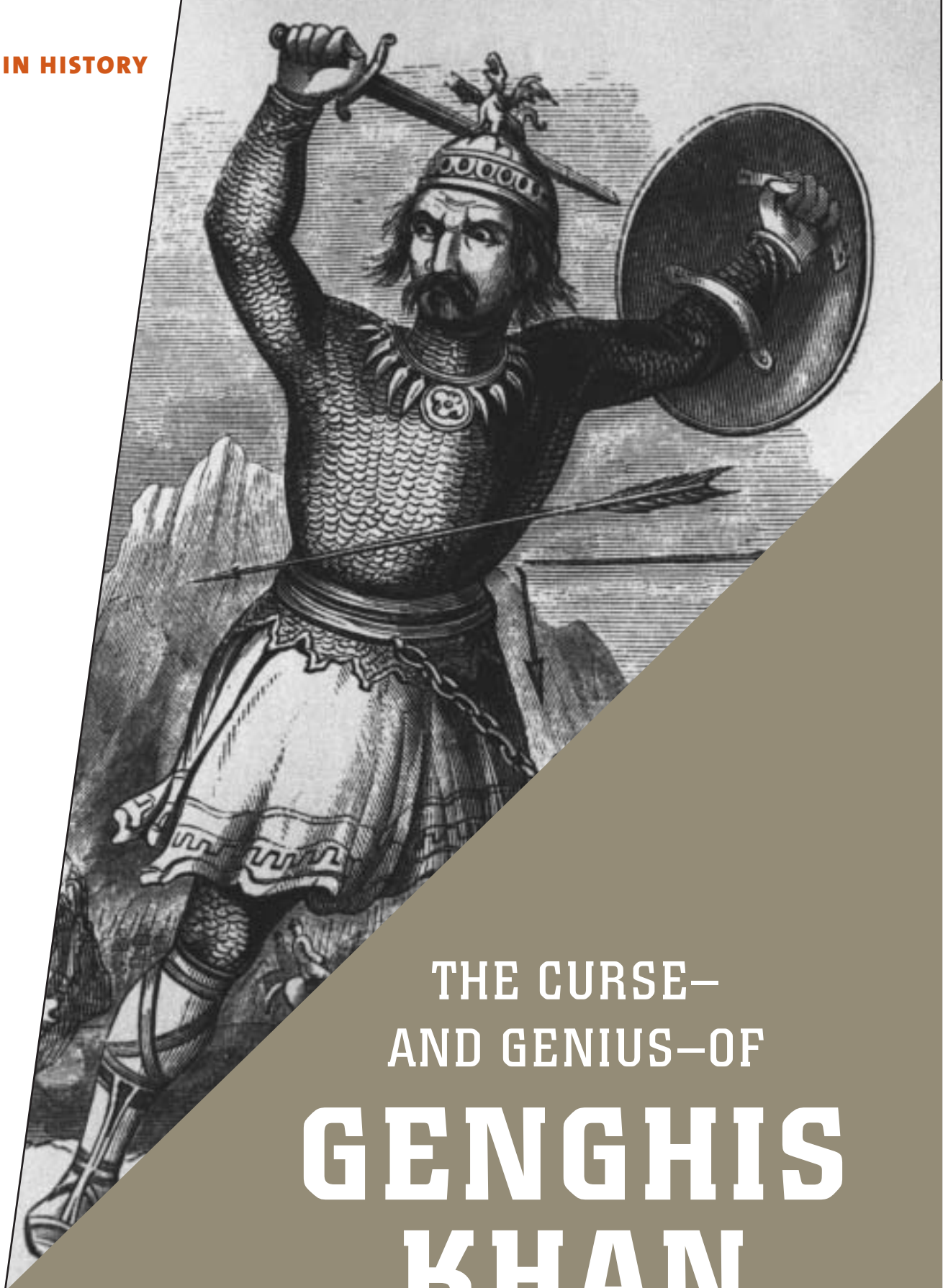


MILESTONES IN HISTORY



THE CURSE—
AND GENIUS—OF
**GENGHIS
KHAN**

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

How an unlikely Mongol nomad summoned the brutal force to conquer half the known world

Among the

great conquerors in history, Genghis Khan stands apart, in both the extent of his victories and his own remarkable story. It took Rome three centuries to forge an empire stretching from Britain to Iraq. Genghis Khan conquered a realm twice that size, from China to Iraq. Alexander the Great, his only rival in military achievements, was born with advantages that the Mongol did not have. Alexander was the prince of a powerful kingdom and inherited the finest army of his day. Genghis Khan was the child of an insignificant nomadic tribe that subsisted in the vast steppes (harsh, arid prairies) of North Asia. But he would make his tribe the core of a force that would conquer half of the known world.

Although we know him as Genghis Khan, that was actually his title—the acknowledgment among his subjects that he was their “Universal Ruler.” His name was Temujin (Tem-oo-gin), and he was born around 1162 in a Mongol encampment. At the time, the Mongols were a loose collection of kindred tribes, herders struggling in the harsh environment of the northern steppes. When they were not fighting among themselves, they faced rivals—Tatars, Naimans, Merkits and others—for water and grazing lands. This hard and violent world made the tribesmen into formidable warriors: fine horsemen

and skilled archers.

For centuries, these fierce nomads had raided south to the rich lands of China; to stop such incursions, the Chinese built the Great Wall.

Temujin's father, a chieftain among the Mongols, was killed in the ongoing feud with the Tatars. No more than 13 at the time, Temujin was considered too young to succeed his father, and the camp dispersed as the members allied themselves to other chieftains. If he could not inherit his father's position, Temujin would win it in his own right. He certainly had all the attributes of a leader: the courage of a warrior, a confidence that inspired men to his banner and a cunning that earned him victory after victory.

Temujin started out with only a small following of kinsmen and friends, but he turned that band of fierce but disorganized warriors into a cohesive, coordinated force. Applying military discipline to his soldiers, he transformed the nature of steppe warlord. On his own, the mounted archer was a formidable foe; as part of a synchronized attack, the Mongols of Temujin were unequalled and unbeatable. The other Mongol chieftains either became allies...or corpses.

But it was not enough for Temujin to reclaim his father's position or even assert his rule over all the Mongol tribes. He

intended to be the master of all the peoples of the steppes, forging them into one nation. To the vanquished tribes, he offered what seemed magnanimous terms: pledge their personal allegiance to him and enjoy all the protection and wealth of the growing Mongol Empire.

Of course, there was a brutal alternative. One Tatar tribe refused his offer, so Temujin had every male in the tribe executed by the sword. He was not one to leave defiant enemies behind, and that demonstration of his ruthlessness made the other tribes much more amenable. Temujin knew the value of terror. (One Mongol custom was to collect severed heads and build them into a pyramid.)

By 1206, he had established himself as the Genghis Khan of the steppes. He controlled a realm that bordered Persia in the west and China in the south. Both neighbors were rich and tempting.

With the combined might of the



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tribes, the Khan first moved on China in 1211. The Mongol Horde was in fact the best-organized army since the Romans, with an effective chain of command linking the smallest unit of 10 men to the division of 10,000. While China's Great Wall could deter raiding parties, it couldn't hold back such an army, and political divisions in China had weakened the country.

There now were two Chinese emperors: the Jin dynasty ruling in the north, and the Sung dynasty in the south. The Jin Empire had the misfortune to be closer to the Mongols. Its armies were no match for the Khan's. The Mongol forces consisted solely of cavalry but their tactics were devastating. When confronted by a Chinese army, the Mongols' mounted archers would attack, unleashing wave after wave of armor-piercing arrows. The Chinese cavalry might counter the attack but would be riddled with arrows for the effort. The infantry would be helpless under the archers' onslaught. Demoralized and suffering

heavy casualties, the infantry would inevitably become disorganized. Then the Mongol lancers would attack, mowing through the Chinese ranks. At that point, the battle was over and the slaughter had begun.

But the Chinese initially did have one successful defense against the Mongols: walled cities. The Mongols had no equipment and little patience for sieges. But Genghis Khan was always resourceful, tapping a number of Chinese units that had been bribed or intimidated into defecting to the Mongols. Their engineers found steady work building the siege equipment the Mongols needed. Then, there was the tactic of terror. In the customs of war at the time, any city that refused to surrender could expect no mercy if it fell—its people subject to pillage, rape and enslavement. For Genghis Khan, that threat was insufficient. When any city defied him it would be burned to the ground and its entire population exterminated.

That was the fate of the imperial capital of Zhongdu in 1215. (The Chinese eventually built a new city nearby and called it Beijing.) Such atrocities did persuade other cities to capitulate. Yet, the conquest of northern China was so vast an enterprise that it would not be completed in the Khan's lifetime. Indeed, he was diverted by a war with Persia.

If you have never heard of the Khwarezmian Empire, that was Genghis Khan's intention and the measure of his success. In the early 13th century, Khwarezmia was the greatest nation in the Islamic world, a Persian empire that encompassed modern Iran, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. Although the Mongol Empire extended to the northern border of his empire, the shah dismissed any threat posed by Genghis Khan. After all, the Mongols were thousands of miles away fighting in China (where the conquest of 120 million people would seem to be a full-



The Shrine of Hazrat Ali Mazar-i-Sharif was destroyed by Genghis Khan and rebuilt by Timurid Sultan Husain Baiqara in 1481, far left. Walls of an ancient city of Khiva, Uzbekistan. The Great Wall between Jinshanling and Simatai, above. From his original realm, Genghis Khan conquered a region from China to Iraq—half the known world at the time, shaded, right.



time job), and the shah had an army twice as large as the Khan's. In 1219, a Mongol caravan was seized by a Persian governor. When a Mongol embassy complained to the shah, he had the Mongols' translator beheaded.

That effectively ended the conversation and started a war.

The Mongol conquest of Persia is still studied in military science as a masterpiece of mobile warfare. Although at the other end of Asia, the Mongol Horde could move at a routine pace of 80 miles a day—a pace that modern armies would find a challenge. With 200,000 horsemen under his command, Genghis Khan synchronized a series of attacks that confused, bled and eventually overwhelmed the larger armies of the shah.

The shah had stationed nearly half of his forces on the Northern border, along the Syr Darya River. In February 1220, a Mongol force of 20,000 men crossed the eastern end of the river, outflanking the Persian defenses there. As the shah's main army marched to meet that threat, a larger Mongol force

forded the western end of the river. Caught between the river and the Mongols, the first Persian line of defense collapsed...and the Mongols were not taking prisoners.

The two Mongol forces united and moved toward the great city of Bukhara. The shah could anticipate the invaders' objective, and he met them with an army of 200,000 men. But the Mongols had maneuvered him into a trap. A third Mongol force, personally led by Genghis Khan, had moved through a desert and evaded Persian attention, taking the circuitous route to Bokhara. The shah thought that he was facing the entire horde—only to discover 50,000 Mongol horsemen behind him. Most of the shah's army died on that battlefield, as did his empire. Khwarezmia was left defenseless against the Mongols, and the entire campaign had taken less than six months. The Mongol Empire now extended to Mesopotamia.

Genghis Khan died in 1227 while campaigning in China, but his sons and grandsons would continue his lega-

cy of conquests: Russia, Mesopotamia and Southern China. Marco Polo would travel throughout Asia, from Syria to China, and always find himself under Mongol rule. But in time, the empire would fragment, divided among vying and weak descendants whose realms grew increasingly smaller. The Mongol dynasties of the Middle East and China lasted less than a century; over Russia, for two centuries.

The nation of Mongolia reveres Temujin as its founder, but in most of Asia his memory is a curse. The genius of Genghis Khan is indisputable, but his achievements are measured in shattered nations and millions of deaths. ■