

## The Mongols

The Mongols are remembered chiefly as the nomadic warriors who more than once have overrun the civilized and urban world that existed beyond their steppe grasslands. Genghis Khan, perhaps, is the best known Mongol conqueror who united the various tribes and created a vast empire that included parts of China and the Middle East.

The Mongol tribes comprised mainly of the Naimans, Keraits, Uirats, Merkits and Jalair who occupied the vast plains of Central Asia. They were mainly split into two groups; the sheep herding pastoralists of the grasslands and the poorer hunting-fishing clans of the forest fringe. All Mongol males were hunters and warriors and remained so until the age of sixty. Everyone learned to ride in childhood and was adapted in using the bow while on the horseback.

Archery skills were very advanced although other military skills may have been inferior to many of their foes. For the bulk of the Mongol army, military training revolved around hunting. The most important hunt was the annual 'nerge', a massive expedition in search of game to provide meat for the long Mongolian winter. In it, a large ring of horsemen will gradually draw together forcing the trapped animals into a small space. The leader would shoot the first arrow signaling the start of the slaughter. The tactics of the 'nerge' were applied to Mongol warfare.

While their neighbors were influenced or converted to Buddhism, Islam or Christianity, the Mongols remained mainly Shamanist. The shamens were their spiritual leaders who communicated to the spirit world through prayer and ritual on high places. Few details are known about their animist beliefs which seem to revolved around a multitude of spirits. They recognize a supreme god identified as the 'Everlasting Blue Sky'.

The Mongol society had its ruling clans and military elite which were very fragmented until Genghis Khan came along. He was a natural leader and fine general who united all the tribes. In 1206, he was proclaimed the Great Khan of all Turkish and Mongol tribes who lived in felt tents in eastern Asia. Thus, the Mongols became a single entity and turned its attention to its rich neighbors. His troops raided the rich but peaceful Hsi-Hsia kingdom of western China and forced the king to recognize the lordship of Genghis Khan. They raided but faced stiff opposition from the Chin State. The Mongols were more successful in the west. They had dramatic victories over the Persian kingdoms and reached the Middle-East and Europe.

As Genghis Khan's empire grew, his army became decreasingly Mongol in the ethnic sense. Turkish warriors greatly outnumbered Mongols whose role was that of a leading elite. Military disobedience or lying to a superior were serious crimes. The tactical organization of the Mongol army reflected age-old Turco-Mongol tradition. They relied on horse archery and were known to their foes as the 'devil's horsemen'.

After Genghis Khan's death, his empire did not disintegrate like many of his predecessors. He left behind the foundations of an administration and a

legal code. His family the Golden Clan, generally managed to agree on the succession issue. His equally famous grandson, Kublai Khan, conquered China and founded the Yuan dynasty in 1292.

Some historians view Genghis Khan as a savage who led the Mongols on a worldwide rampage of death and destruction while others look upon him as a genius who took the Mongols from primitive obscurity to the pinnacle of world power.

1. In what way are the Mongols remembered today ?
2. What did all Mongol males have to learn in their childhood ?
3. What is the annual 'nerge' ?
4. Who were the shamens ?
5. Who ruled the Mongols before Genghis Khan came ?
6. Did the Mongols conquer China under Genghis Khan and why ?
7. What happened to the Mongol army as the empire grew bigger ?
8. How did the Mongols maintain discipline in the army ?
9. According to the passage, what prevented the empire from falling apart after Genghis Khan's death ?
10. In your own words, why do some historians view Genghis Khan as a savage