

Written in the Stars: Secrets of the Mongol Empire

By Bennett Sherry

The Mongol Empire lasted from 1206 to 1368. It ruled most of Asia and Europe. By the fall of the empire, the Mongols had changed the world.

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Driving their enemies before them

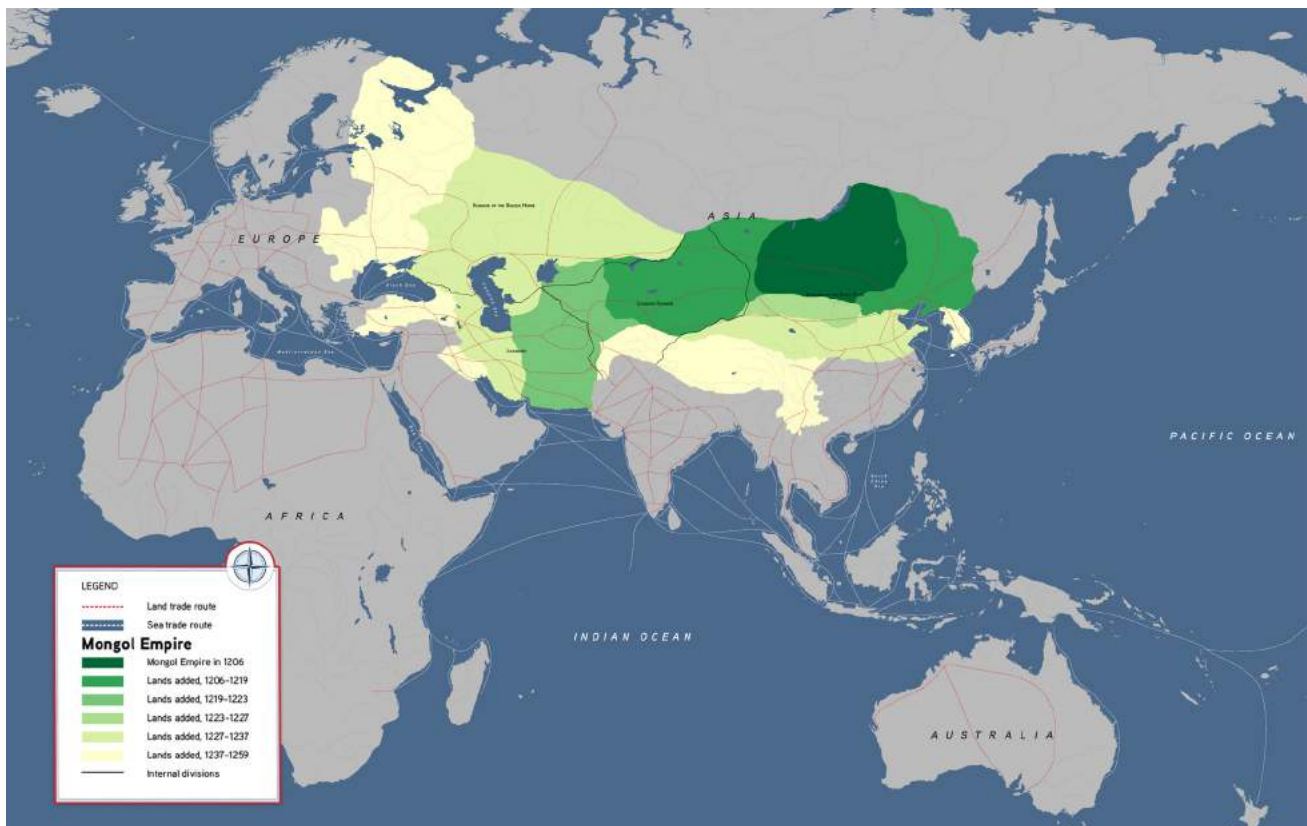
The Mongol Empire was the largest in history. Its borders stretched from Asia to Europe. The United States would fit inside of it twice! Today, there are 28 countries spread across the same land.

The empire was a tough fighting force. Almost no one could defeat them. Entire cities gave up in fear of the large Mongol armies. They had a strong leader called Genghis Khan. He believed that a god named Tengri wanted him to take over the world.

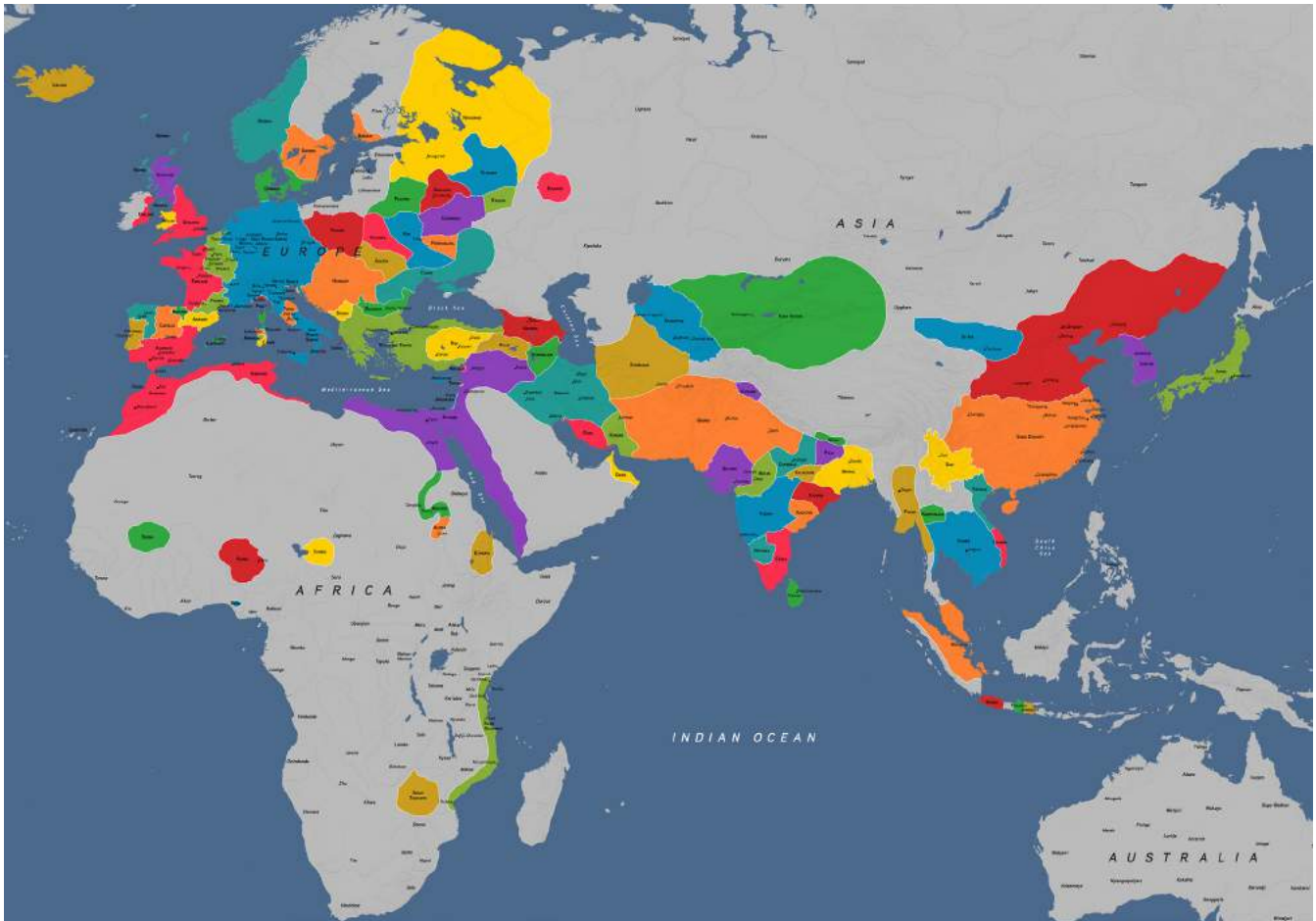
Yet there is more to the Mongol Empire than war. It also created important trade routes. These routes carried goods and ideas. They helped people learn about medicine and science.

The world conqueror

The Mongols were once many tribes. In the early 1200s their population was low. They were not ruled by a single leader. Most tribes grazed animals on grasslands north of China. Today, this area is known as Mongolia. Trading ports were far away. They sold only a small amount of goods to their neighbors. So how did these tribes become the world's largest empire?



Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)



Map of Afro-Eurasia in 1200, just before Genghis Khan launched his conquests. Notice the many tribes in Mongolia, surrounded by larger states to the south. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

Solving this question is like solving a murder mystery. We need a motive, a weapon, and an opportunity. The motive was climate change. A terrible drought struck Mongol lands in the late 1100s. A drought is a period with very little rain. The tribes moved south to find food. They attacked the farming communities they found there. As for weapons, the Mongol people did not yet have a huge army. But they were great horseback riders. This helped them win their battles.

The first Mongol ruler was Genghis Khan.¹ He was another powerful weapon. When he was born, he was named *Temujin*. Temujin was a strong leader. He won many battles. By 1206, he united the Mongols as one people. A team of chiefs renamed Temujin. He became *Genghis Khan*. His name means “universal emperor.”

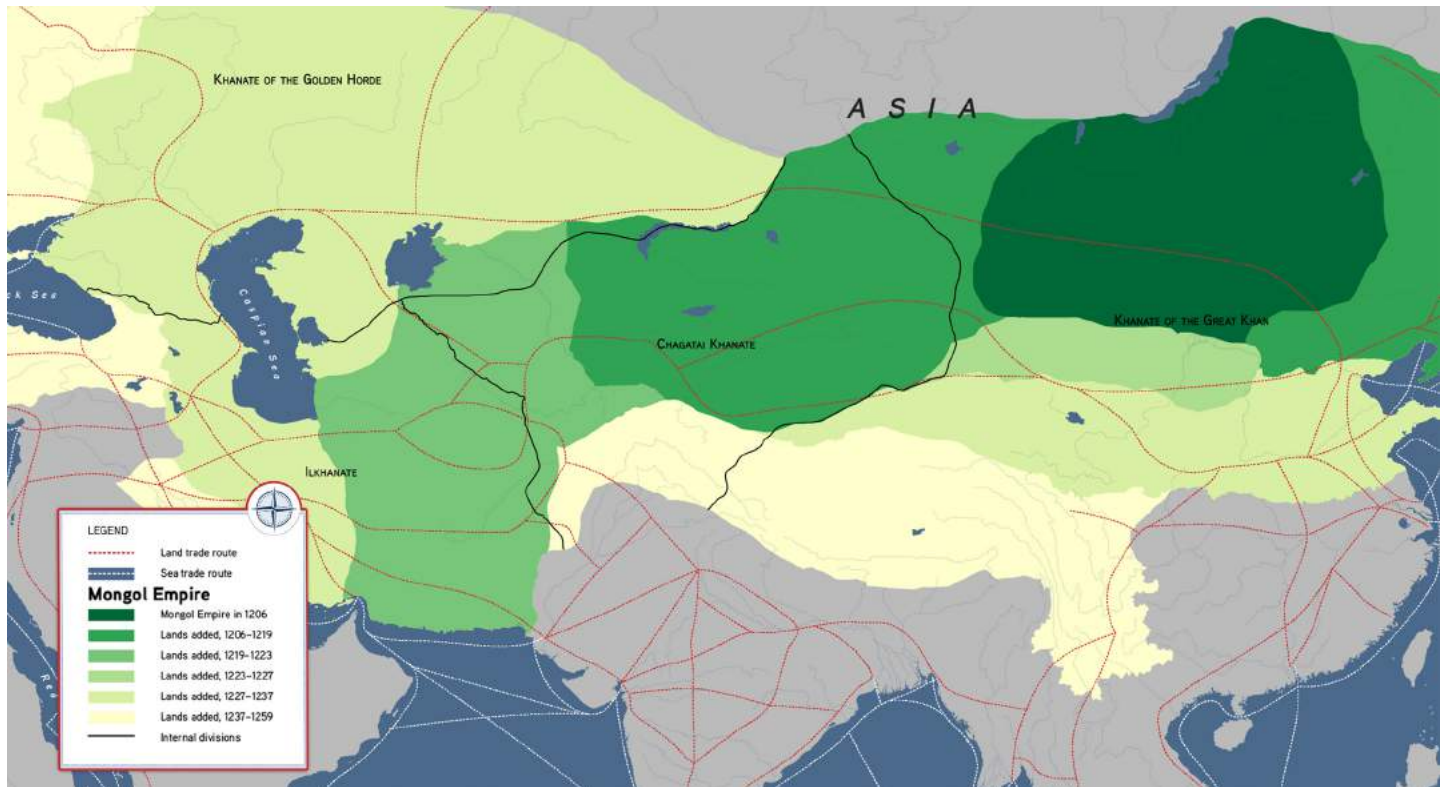
Genghis Khan became very powerful. He took more and more lands. Soon, the Mongol Empire became too big for one ruler. Over the course of the 1200s, the empire was divided into four states. These states were known as khanates and were ruled by khans. They were:

1. The khanate of the Great Khan, centered in Mongolia and China
2. The Chagatai khanate, in Central Asia

¹ In English, alternative spellings of the name *Ghengis* include Chinggis, Chingis, Jenghiz, and Jinghis. “Khan” is a title meaning “ruler.”

3. The Ilkhanate, in southwestern Asia
4. The khanate of the Golden Horde, the western part of the Mongol Empire

For a time, the Great Khan ruled over the others. Then the khans started to fight with each other. This weakened the empire. Genghis Khan died in 1227. His followers ran most of Eurasia for another 100 years. Genghis' son Ögedei Khan was the second leader of the Mongol Empire. His grandson Kublai Khan was the first Mongol to rule over China.



Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

The networks of Mongol rule

The Mongol Empire controlled the Silk Road. It was a famous system of trade routes. The Silk Road stretched across Asia and into Europe. The Mongols made trading safer and cheaper. Knowledge and goods could travel freely across the routes. Merchants and traders had a good life.

The Mongols took over all of China in 1279. China was the world's center of manufacturing. It made silk, ceramics, and other goods. As a result, more items traveled from east to west. The trade routes became bigger and better.

Information also moved along Mongol trade routes. Scholars traveled from the Middle East to Europe. They brought knowledge of math and medicine. They also brought the Arabic numbering system. These are the digits of 0 through 9.

The Mongol Empire allowed many religions. People could mostly worship as they pleased. Monks and missionaries traveled the trade routes. They taught people about their gods. Merchants brought their religions with them, too.

Mongol leaders moved many experts across Eurasia. Their cities were built by thousands of designers and builders. Foreign doctors worked in the Mongol courts. As did scientists. The khans even sent Muslim workers into China. However, the experts were not always free. Mongol rulers often took people against their will. Many thousands were forced to follow the khans back to their cities.

Genghis Khan took astronomers from other lands. Astronomers study stars and planets. The Mongols worshiped a sky god. They believed the heavens held stories of the future. The Mongol rulers built observatories. An observatory is a building used for studying the sun, moon, planets, and stars. These advances helped the science of astronomy.

The Mongols quickly adopted technologies of conquered peoples. They learned to use new weapons. They adopted their science and medicines. These areas of study made great advances under Mongol rule.

The verdict of history

So, were the Mongols good or bad? The answer depends on your point of view. Mongol armies acted with great force. They killed millions of people. Entire cities and centers of learning were destroyed. You would not like the Mongols if you were one of the many people they enslaved.

The Mongols also did great things. They created a 100-year-long period of peace. Asia and Europe were more connected than ever. New ideas and new goods traveled easily. Skills and tools made their way to west, too. Some historians even believe the Mongols brought gunpowder to Europe.

These new connections also brought disease. Expanding trade spread the bubonic plague across the world. This disease was known as the Black Death. It killed nearly everyone who caught it. In Europe, as many as 50 million people died.

The Black Death weakened the Mongol Empire. So did a civil war among the khans. In 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty fell to the Chinese Ming dynasty. In a dynasty, the rulers come from the same family. The khanates began their decline. They were replaced by new states over time. By 1368, the Mongol Empire was over.



A French illustration of Kublai Khan's court. Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.



[The Mongol siege of Baghdad in 1258](#). Bibliothèque nationale de France, public domain.

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Bennett Sherry

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

Image credits

Cover image: Horoscope of Prince Iskandar, grandson of Tamerlane, the Turkman Mongol conqueror. This horoscope shows the positions of the heavens at the moment of Iskandar's birth on 25th April 1384. This is a fly leaf from the personal horoscope of Iskandar Sultan (died 1415), grandson of Timur, who ruled the province of Farsin, Iran. He is best known for his early military career and his patronage of the arts and sciences. Apart from being a horoscope, this manuscript is an exquisite work of art and an exemplary production of the royal kitabkhana 'publishing house' or 'workshop'. The manuscript of 1411 is lavishly illustrated and reflects the efforts of a whole range of specialists: astronomers (among them Imad ad-Din Mahmud al-Kashi), illuminators, gilders, calligraphers and craftsmen, and specialists in paper-making. The manuscript was bought in Iran in 1794 by John H. Harrington, who had started his career as a clerk in the East India Company. In 1932, it was auctioned at Sotheby's and bought for £6/15d by Sir Henry Wellcome who added it to his collection of Oriental books and manuscripts. Wellcome MS Persian 474. Public domain. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ua87equq/images?id=ce8jsnzs>

Approximate extent of the Mongol Empire, showing the internal divisions of its four parts—the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Khanate of the Great Khan (later known as Yuan), and Ilkhanate. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1200-layer-2>

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