

GREAT PEOPLES OF THE PAST

# The Mongols



Produced by the Cartographic Division



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

GILBERT M. GROSVENOR, CHAIRMAN  
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PAINTING FROM 15TH-CENTURY PERSIAN MANUSCRIPT  
BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS

OUT OF THE HEART of Asia they rode, as invincible as a force of nature. In huge columns of men and beasts, they poured across the Eurasian steppe: slow and menacing when moving en masse, swift as lightning during an attack. They were the Mongols, the dominating military force of the 13th century. War was their profession, as well as their destiny.

Horsemen without equal, they were undeterred by the vast expanses of uncharted terrain that elsewhere daunted the medieval mind. Traveling at the rate of a hundred miles a day, Mongol scouts could gather intelligence at a speed unrivaled in their time. Fully deployed, however, the Mongols moved slowly. Their armies, which

might total more than 100,000 fighting men, were divided into *tumens*, or divisions of 10,000 soldiers. With perhaps four times that number of family members in tow, each would have equaled a midsize medieval city in population. When the great khan went to war, as depicted here, his *tumen* traveled well behind those of the strike force.

Large as they were, Mongol armies prevailed over even larger forces in China, the Middle East, and Europe. History had rarely seen their like in battle; they combined cunning with advanced training, logistics, and weaponry. With technology borrowed from Persians, Arabs, and Chinese, they became terrifyingly efficient at siege warfare, and city after city fell before their onslaught.

**THE KHAN'S GUARD**  
Mongol janissars rode in high saddles with short stirrups, giving them leverage for powerful thrusts.

**WEAPONS OF WAR**  
The cavalry used lances and sabers as well as bows and arrows. Toward the end of the Mongol era both soldiers and horses were protected by leather armor.

**REMOUNTS**  
On the move, each warrior had as many as five horses—the one he was riding plus four remounts with the livestock. Mongols changed mounts every day to conserve the animals' energy.

**MONGOL CAVALRY**  
Ready to advance to the front on a moment's notice and fire a deadly hail of arrows, the Mongol cavalry flanked the baggage train and was grouped

in units of a hundred. Far ahead, a screen of outriders constituted the army's early warning system.

**CALL TO ARMS**  
In battle huge kettledrums on camels were used to herald every Mongol charge.

**COLLECTING FUEL**  
Children and elders collected animal droppings for heat and cooking fuel. Camel dung in particular was valued for its clean burn.

**WAR AND PEACE**  
Always on display near the khan's tent was a standard of horsetails. If the tails were white, the Mongols were at peace; if black, at war.

**FLYING THE COLORS**  
Signifying royalty, gold was the background for the khan's banner, while a blue-gray wolf represented the son of the blue sky.

**WOMEN'S TASKS**  
Though their primary duty was to milk thousands of animals a day, Mongol women sprang into action on the battlefield after their men, killing enemy wounded and collecting arrows.

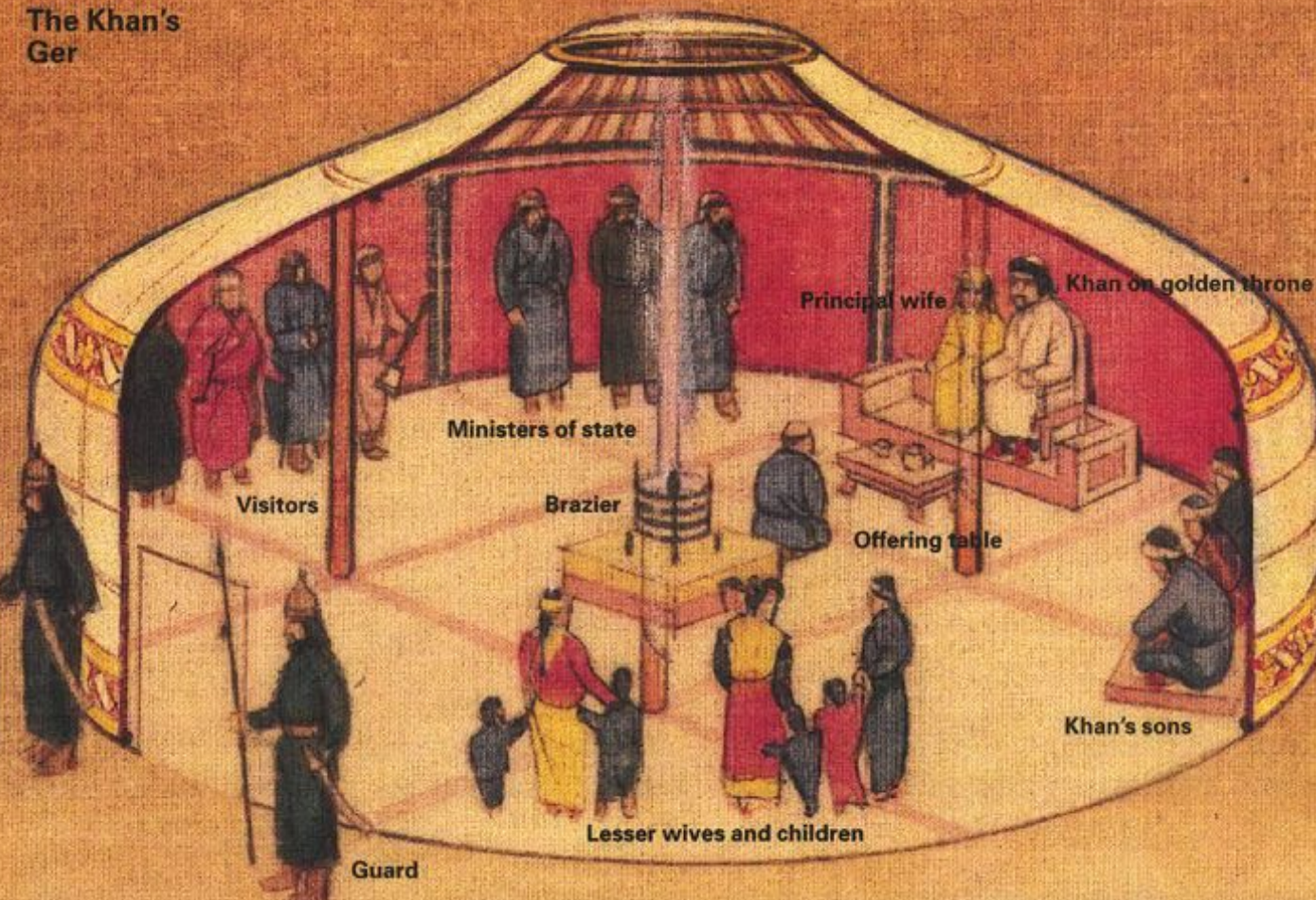
**PORTABLE GERS**  
While most of the Mongols' felt tents, or gers, were taken apart for transport, the khan's ger and those of his wives and generals were hauled fully assembled on wagons over the rugged terrain.

**GREASING THE WHEELS**  
Battered by rough terrain, wagon wheels were constantly lubricated with animal fat.

**ROYAL ENTOURAGE**  
In the royal entourage the khan's favorites were held in particular esteem.

**THE GREAT KHAN**  
Riding high-backed, the golden-robed khan was kept apprised of conditions ahead by scouts who relayed information with swift-riding messengers and an elaborate system of flag signals.

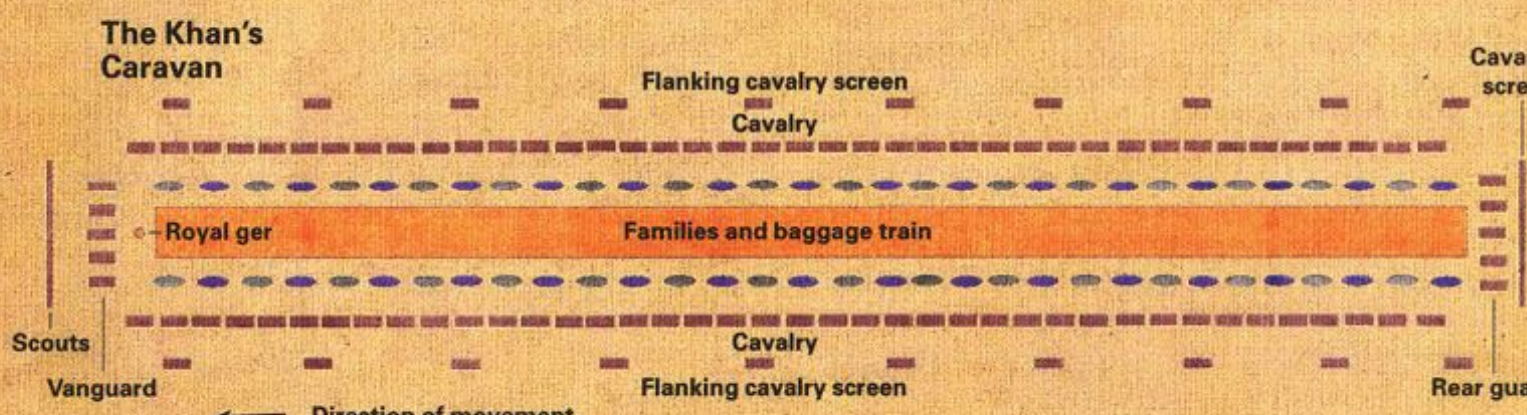
**BEASTS AND BURDENS**  
Oxen pulled most of the loads over rocky terrain; camels over sand or grass.



## On the Road to War With the Great Khan

Portable court, the khan's golden ger was a strictly governed administrative center when it was set up for the night after a day of trundling across the steppes. In the anonymously written *Secret History of the Mongols*, Genghis Khan reportedly prescribed a rigid protocol for all activities within the royal confines, including the serving of *koumiss*, fermented mare's milk, a Mongol staple. The ger was always positioned so that its door faced south, and visitors were always made to stand on the west wall. "Entering into and going from the palace-tent," said Genghis, "must be regulated by the night-guards."

Justifying privileges for his most trusted bodyguards, he declared: "The night-guards watch over my golden life." A city on the move, a 10,000-man Mongol *tumen* might extend 50 miles across the countryside. Along with their families and about 40,000 remounts, the horsemen brought with them an even larger number of livestock, including pack animals and huge herds of sheep and goats. Stopping four times a day to milk their animals, the armed force might move no more than five miles in 24 hours. In war, *tumens* coming from different directions could eventually converge into an army of 100,000 or more.



- **Baggage train:** Logistic support includes 75,000 oxen and camels, 2,000 soldiers, 10,000 infantry, 40,000 family members.
- **Cavalry:** Armed horsemen, 10,000 in units of 100, surround the caravan in a screening formation.
- **Remounts:** Fresh horses are available for hard-riding cavalrymen.
- **Domestic herds:** Milk, meat, and wool are provided by 100,000 sheep and 10,000 goats.

Painting: William H. Bond; artist: David W. Woodall; researcher



**1206**  
**Temujin Elected Great Khan**  
At a *kuriltai*, or great assembly, in 1206 Temujin is proclaimed Genghis Khan—"strong ruler" or "oceanic ruler" over all the Turk-Mongol peoples in an Alaska-size expanse of desert and steppe. From the nomad groups represented at his enthronement,

Genghis forges a mighty army. Surrounded by his most loyal supporters—those destined to become his greatest generals—he divides his forces into units under the command of fealty-oath-taking tribal chieftains. Mobilized by his charismatic new leader, Genghis's army is forged into a fighting machine capable of conquering the world around it.

**1208-1218**  
**Early Victories**  
In 1209 Genghis easily defeats the Tangut kingdom of Xi Xia on China's north-west frontier, making it his vassal. In 1211 he begins a campaign to destroy the Jin empire of northern China. He takes Zhongdu, its capital, in 1215. In 1218 the Kara Khitai empire is forced into a fighting machine capable of conquering the world around it.



**1226**  
**Storming a Tangut City**  
With all of western Turkistan now under his thumb, Genghis turns a wrathful eye once again toward the kingdom of Xi Xia, whose king had refused to supply troops for the Mongol march west. Following a ferociously fought war, Tangut rulers and intellectuals—along

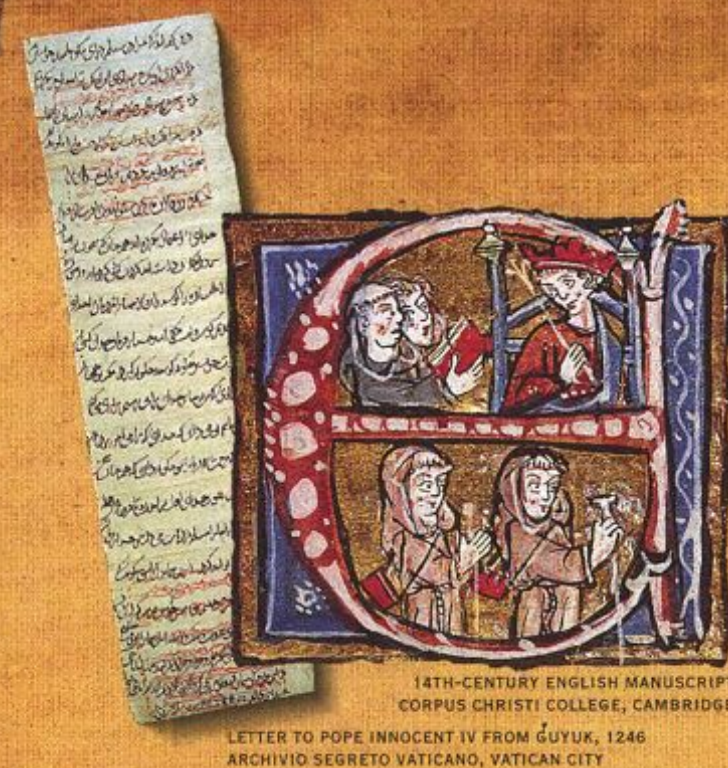
with most of the citizenry—are put to the sword. So utter is the destruction of the Xi Xia state, whose founders were of Tibetan stock, that it virtually disappears. Near the end of the assault on its capital city of Ningxia, an ailing Genghis dies on August 15, 1227.

**1229**  
**Ogodei Elected Great Khan**  
The Mongols accept Genghis's chosen heir, Ogodei—the most event-tampered of his four principal sons. In his first years of rule Ogodei completes the conquest of the Jin, declares war on the Southern Song empire, and starts a new campaign of terror across western Asia.



**1241**  
**Invasion of Europe**  
After defeating Russia in 1238, the Mongol army stuns Europe with a two-pronged attack into Poland and Hungary in April 1241. Even the Teutonic Knights are no match for the Mongol cavalry. Austria is spared, as the invaders retreat to the steppes upon news of Ogodei's death in Mongolia in December.

PANEL FROM 15TH-CENTURY PERSIAN TRIPYCH NATIONAL MUSEUM, WARSAW



LETTERS TO POPE INNOCENT IV FROM ÖGÜZ, 1246 ARCHIVO SEGRETO VATICANO, VATICAN CITY

**1245**  
**Europeans Visit the Khans**  
Reacting to the Mongols' assault on Europe, Pope Innocent IV sends Giovanni da Pian del Carpin to establish diplomatic ties with the great khan. Guyuk, whose enthrone ceremony Cargini attends, sends the Franciscan missionary home

with a demand: "Come, Great Pope . . . and pay homage to us." Sent by the king of France, William van Ruysbroeck arrived in 1253 just after Mongke took power and wrote of life at court.

**1259**  
**The Siege of Baghdad**  
Mongke, deciding to impose iron control over the Muslim world, sends his brother Hulagu against Baghdad. Besieging the city, he breaches the walls and kills the caliph—thus ending the 500-year-old Abbasid caliphate. All the inhabitants of the city except Christians are slaughtered.



**1260**  
**Mamluk Victory**  
The Mongols suffer their first major defeat near Ain Jalut against the Mamluks, the slave dynasty of Muslim Egypt. The Mamluks are supported by Bakhtai, Genghis's younger brother and khan of the Golden Horde—a recent convert to Islam. The Mongols hold most of their ground, but the relentless drive through the Middle East has been stopped.



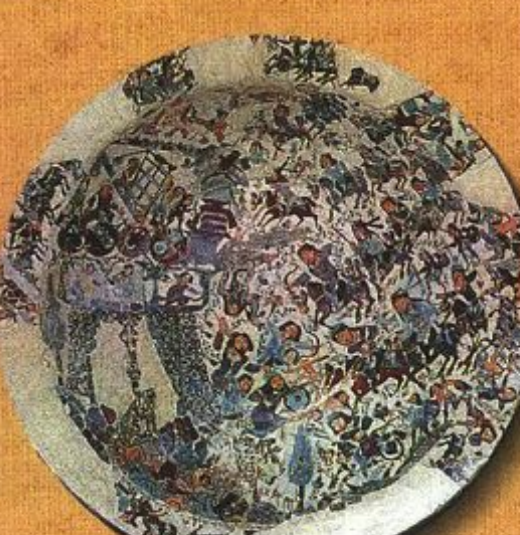
ILLUSTRATION FROM 15TH-CENTURY PERSIAN MANUSCRIPT NATIONAL MUSEUM, WARSAW

**1274 & 1281**  
**Invasion of Japan**  
Kublai demands fealty of Japan but is answered with disdainful silence. After an aborted naval assault in 1274, Kublai builds more ships. In 1281 two Mongol fleets attack Kyushu and are caught in a typhoon—called *kamikaze*, or divine wind, by the Japanese. Most of the khan's 150,000-man army drowns or is killed in battle.

1200

**The Once and Future Khan**  
Named Temujin when he is born sometime in the 1160s, Mongolia's great warrior-king is thrust into adulthood at age nine by the death of his father, a Mongol tribal chieftain. While still in his teens he begins to win the allegiance of disgruntled Mongol warriors and fame for his hard-riding raids against neighboring nomad tribes. He soon

gains enough support among the Mongols to be named their khan. By 1209 he has nearly consolidated his rule over the region's rival tribes. In the process, he almost annihilates the powerful Turkic tribe known as the Tatars, a name Europeans later modify to "Tartars" to identify the Mongols.



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**1221**  
**Muslim Resistance to Mongols**

In 1218 a caravan of traders sent out by Genghis is executed on the frontier of Khwarezm. When the shah of that Muslim empire then kills a Mongol ambassador seeking justice, he brings down upon himself, his people, and much of Central Asia perhaps the bloodiest string of massacres known to history. Beginning at Utrar and Bukhara in 1219, a ceramic battle plate depicts a raid led by his lieutenants.

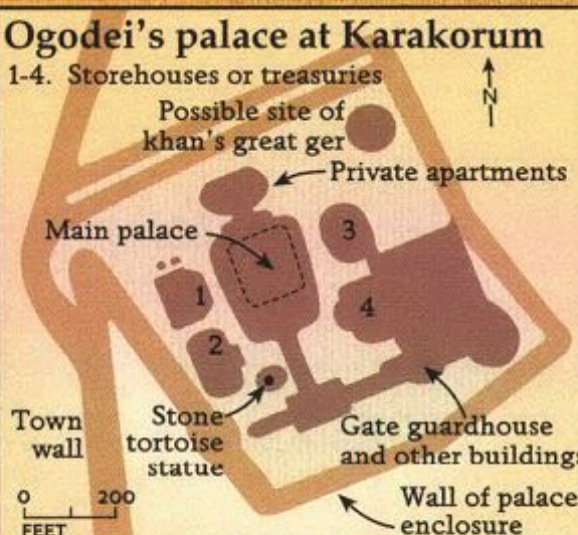
1225

**1227**  
**Genghis Khan's Funeral Procession**

Killing everyone that crosses their path, Genghis's soldiers transport their dead leader back to Mongolia. Believed to have been buried near a mountain by the River Onon, Genghis's remains have never been found. For two years the Mongols are without a great khan.

**1235**  
**Mongol Capital of Karakorum**

Retiring from combat after the defeat of the Jin in 1234, Ogodei begins the following year to transform his father's simple base camp into a great walled city, dominated by a magnificent palace and court. Built with loot and tribute by artisans captured from plundered states, its grand halls attract ambassadors and traders from around the world.



1250

**1241-1246**  
**First Female Regent**

Ogodei's widow Toregene rules as regent during five years of rivalry over the Mongol throne between her son Guyuk and his cousin Batu, son of Genghis's oldest son. Thanks to her relentless scheming, Guyuk is elected at a *kuriltai* in 1246, with Batu defiantly absent. Guyuk's death in 1248 probably averts a family war.



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**1251**  
**The House of Tolui Seizes the Throne**

After the death of her husband in 1248, Ögüzi, Gaimish, Guyuk's widow and regent, tries to hold power for the sons of Ögüzi and his brother Chagatai. But Mongke-son of Tolui, Genghis's youngest son—triumphs in the election of 1251. When the Ögüzi princes conspire against him, Mongke has most of them executed. Ögüzi-Gaimish is wrapped in a carpet and thrown into a river to drown.



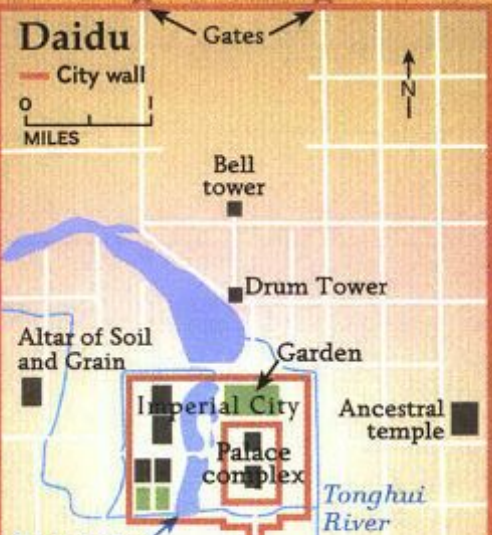
**1259**  
**Attack on a Song Fortress**

To attack the Song city of Hezhou, the Mongol army attempts to cross the Yangtze River on a bridge of boats; hundreds die in the choppy waters. Mongke's death during the campaign leads to another succession crisis. Kublai and his brother Arigh-Bokha both claim the throne. Kublai emerges victorious in 1264.

1275

**1267**  
**Kublai's Imperial Capital of Daidu**

In 1267 Kublai begins building his new Chinese capital, Daidu, next to the old Jin capital of Zhongdu. (Today Beijing.) Years earlier, as Mongol commander in northern China, Kublai had built and ruled from Shangdu; the city immortalized in verse by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as Xanadu.



**1269**  
**Kublai Commissions a Mongol Script**

Mongols had no written language of their own and borrowed scripts from other cultures, such as Uyghur. Finding that script problematic for transcribing Chinese sounds, Kublai in 1269 commissions a new script based on Pinyin. Known as *Yüghür* but is used only for Kublai's reign on bronze passports that guarantee unimpeded passage for diplomats and others through Mongol lands.



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**1294**  
**The Death of Kublai Khan**

Following the death of his favorite wife and the son he had chosen as successor, Kublai becomes a recluse. By the time he dies in 1294, even nominal control over the other khans has all but eroded. The last great khan is buried in Mongolia. As with his grandfather, the location of his tomb remains a mystery.



# Mongol Khans

## AND THEIR LEGACY

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### 1206-1227

## GENGHIS KHAN Forging an Empire

Convinced that it was heaven's will that he should unite the world by force, the first great leader of the Mongols almost single-handedly launched an empire. Forging a powerful army from the nomad tribes of his region, he first led them against the urban societies south of the Gobi desert. After beginning a protracted campaign against the Jin empire, he then turned his attention west. The worst of his fury was spent against the Khwarizm Muslims of Central Asia, where a string of great cities



were left in ruins, their inhabitants slaughtered, their wealth plundered. While Genghis carried the campaign south toward India, his generals Jele and Subedei undertook an expedition unrivaled since the days of Alexander the Great. Circling the Caspian Sea, they left a trail of dead Georgians, Russians, Turks, and other hapless peoples. Responding to a Tangut uprising, Genghis returned east to Xi Xia, where he died near his capital—but not before ordering his soldiers to take no prisoners.

### 1229-1241

## OGODEI Storming Into Europe

The great consolidator, Genghis's chosen successor, Ogodei brought his administrator's touch to his father's vast empire. Though his younger brother, Tolui, surpassed him in bravery, Ogodei was the most able of Genghis's four principal sons. He knew how to marshal authority and to handle his willful brothers. Under Ogodei the Mongols penetrated as far west as they ever would, clamping the notorious Mongol yoke over much of Russia. His first years were occupied with quelling new assertions of sovereignty in the Muslim Middle East, invading Korea, and—most important—finishing the Mongol conquest of northern China. In 1236, when his army set off across the northern



steppes for the west, Ogodei stayed behind to supervise the building of a splendid new Mongol capital at Karakorum. Suddenly the great khan was no longer a nomad warrior but a sedentary figure soaking up plundered culture. A self-indulgent man with a fondness for alcohol, Ogodei attended to affairs of state and easy pleasures in his new palace while his armies stormed across the continent. Under the brilliant leadership of his nephew Batu, Mongol power marched westward, smashing the forces of Christendom in Poland and Hungary. Only the death of Ogodei stayed the Mongol hand, which was poised to strike Vienna in 1241.

### 1246-1259

## GUYUK AND MONGKE Rampage Through Asia

Two powerful widows tried to keep the throne in Ogodei's family, between them ruling as regents for a total of eight years—before and after the khanate of Ogodei's son Guyuk (1246-48). Challenged by his cousin Batu, khan of the Golden Horde, Guyuk marched west for a showdown but died en route. Batu's refusal to support any offspring of Ogodei's becoming khan opened the succession to the house of Tolui and the enthronement of Mongke, Tolui's eldest son, in 1251. A great general and tireless reformer, Mongke trimmed the

excesses of the Mongol court. Under his rule commerce flourished, and it was said that a maiden with a pot of gold on her head could walk the length and breadth of his realm unharmed. But Mongke too was a conqueror. He sent his brother Hulagu on a rampage through western Asia to deal the final deathblow to the Abbasid caliphate. Another brother, Kublai, led the Mongol assault against the last free bastion of Chinese civilization: the Southern Song empire. While directing a raid against Hezhou in 1259, Mongke fell ill and died.

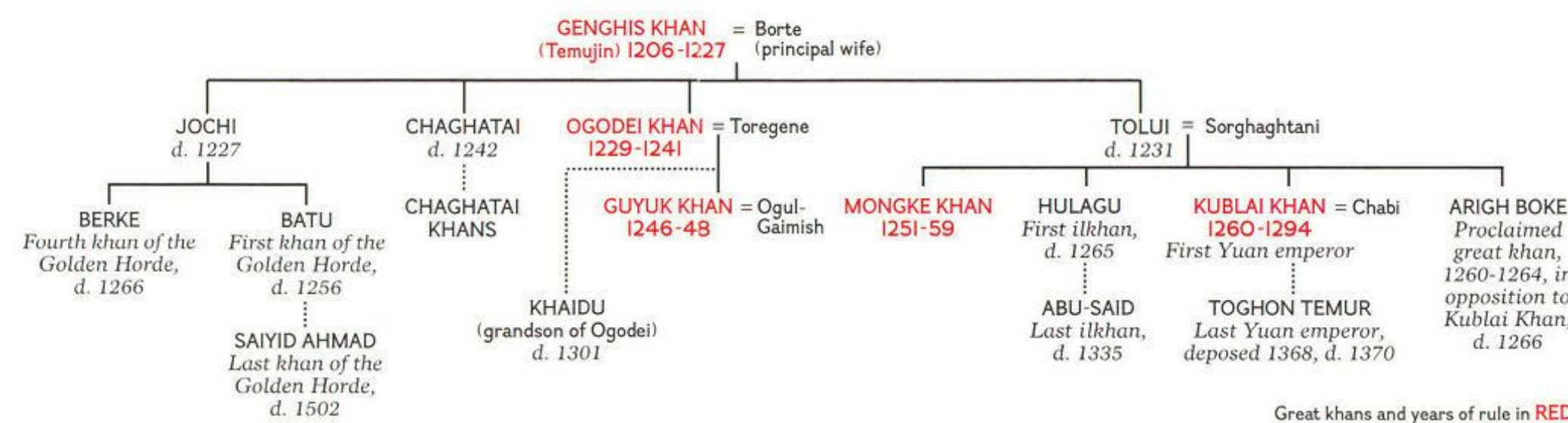
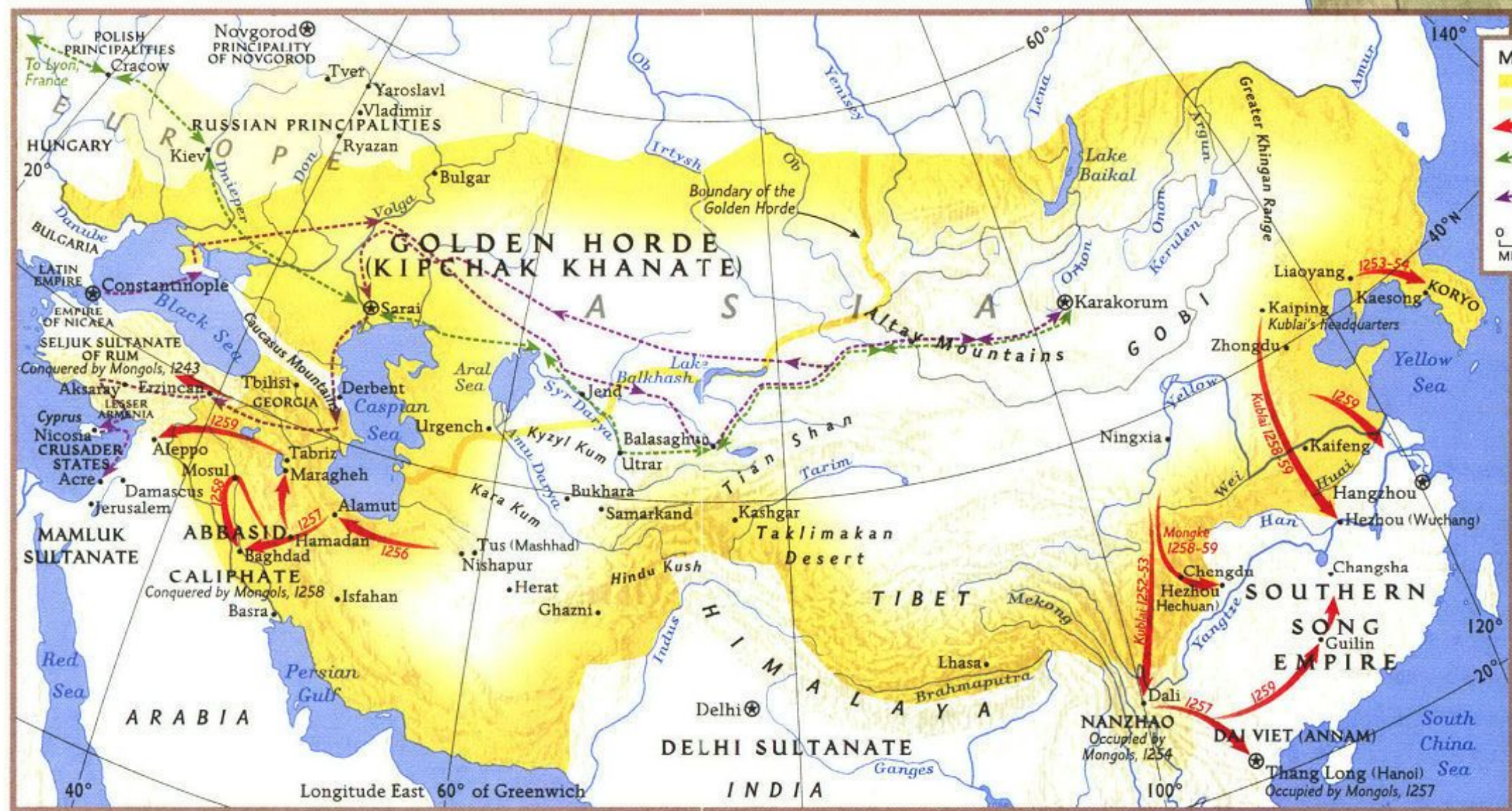
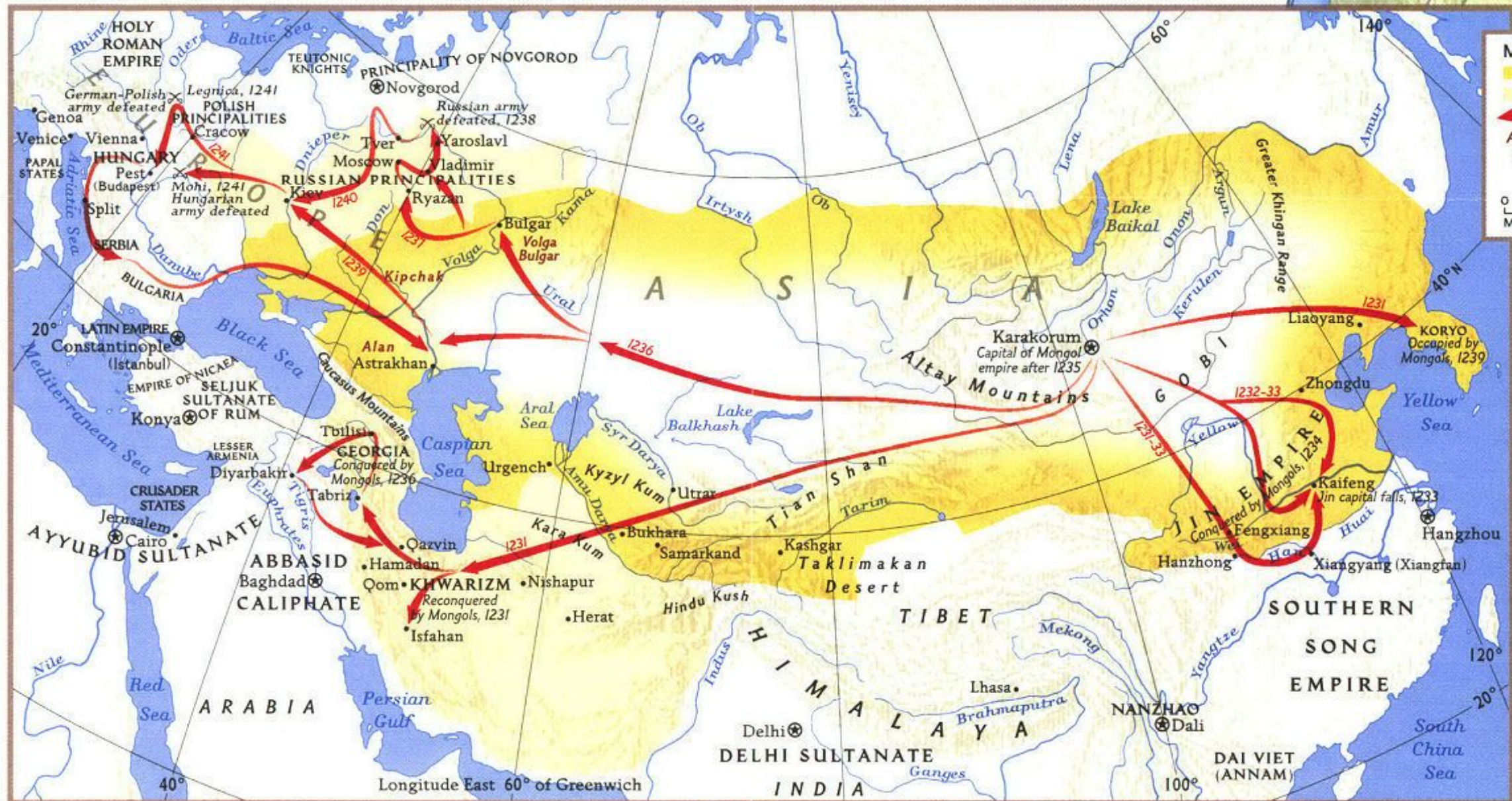
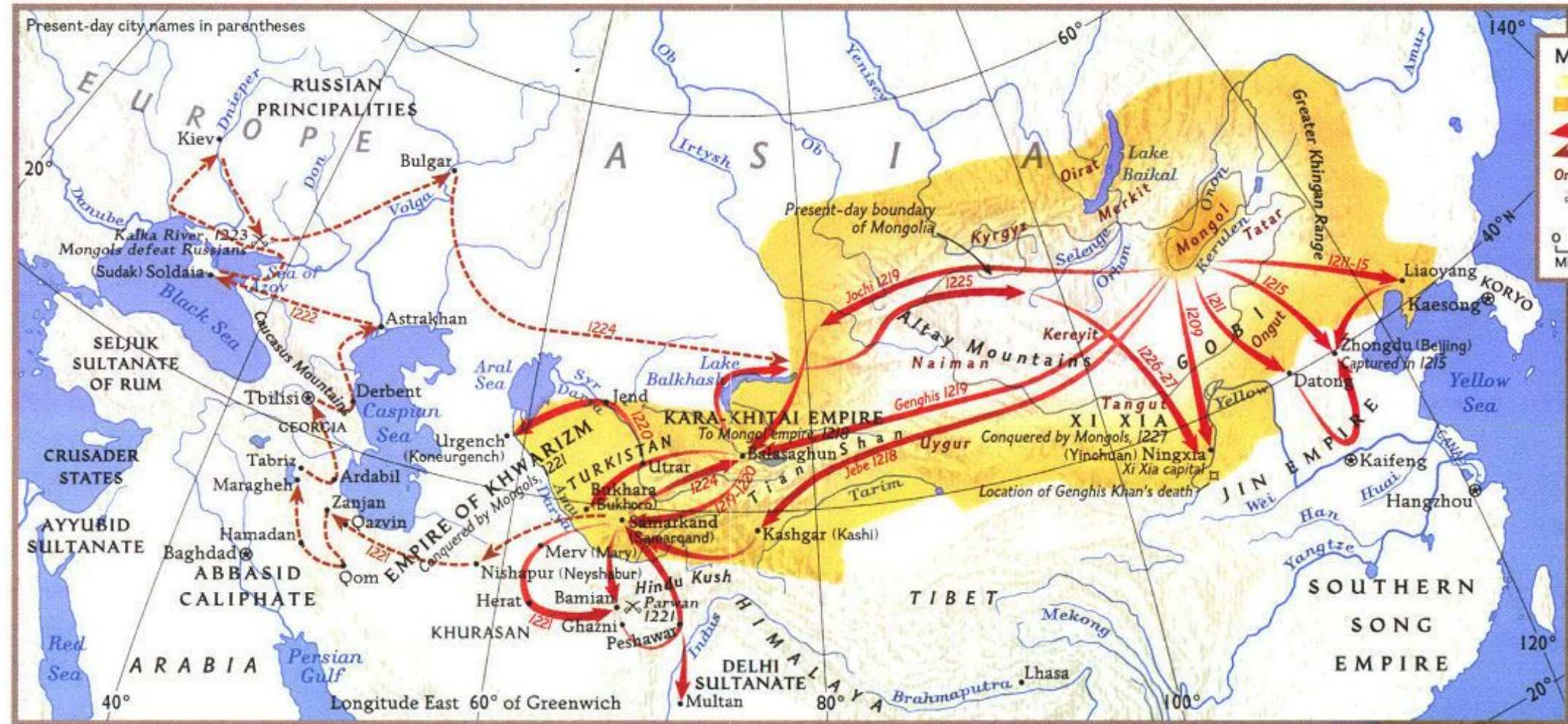
### 1206-1368

## THE GREAT KHANS Legacy of the Hordes

Genghis Khan bequeathed to his sons portions of his empire and armies to support them. By Kublai's time these lands were four nearly autonomous khanates ruled by Genghis's grandsons: the khanate of the house of Chaghatai,

the Ilkhanate of Hulagu, Berke's Golden Horde, and Kublai's own eastern kingdom, ruled under the auspices of his Yuan dynasty, which lasted until peasant uprisings spawned the native Ming dynasty in 1368.

OBSCURE TRIBES of illiterate nomads, the Mongols were the last of a long line of invaders from the steppes north of China. So apocalyptic was the Mongol climax to this warlike tradition that even Attila and the Huns paled in comparison. While the Mongol khans and their generals were drawing and quartering half of Asia, Europe quaked—but escaped subjugation with the loss of only a few armies. China remained under the Mongol yoke, in whole or in part, for more than a century, Russia for more than two. Accounts of the barbarity of the Mongols are staggering: Untold millions died by their hands. The world would not again see such wholesale massacres until the technological wars of the 20th century. When the relentless advance of Mongol conquest eventually eased, a new opportunity emerged: United under Mongol despotism, Eurasia was suddenly open as never before to commerce and the exchange of ideas.



During the time of Mongol threat to Europe, Christendom was locked in a bitter rivalry between its popes in Rome and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II. This turmoil frustrated attempts to make a unified response against the invaders.

Rabban Sauma, Nestorian Christian of Turkic stock, travelled to Europe for Kublai in 1287, seeking to enlist the Christian monarchs of Europe against Muslims in the Holy Land. Eastern counterpart of Marco Polo, he left a diary offering an eastern view of medieval Europe.

Fear of Muslims outweighed the Mongol threat in Christian Europe, which launched five Crusades to the Holy Land in the 13th century. Eastern Christians often joined the Mongols in their campaign against Muslim kingdoms.

**THE ILKHANATE**  
After plundering western Asia, Hulagu named himself the first ilkhan, or subordinate khan, and remained loyal to Mongke. From his court in Maragheh he ruled over a domain extending from Pakistan to Turkey. His great-grandson Ghazan (1295-1304) broke contact with the great khans in China and when Abu-Said, last of Hulagu's line, died in 1335, ilkhan princes ruled separately under a fractured dynasty until 1353.

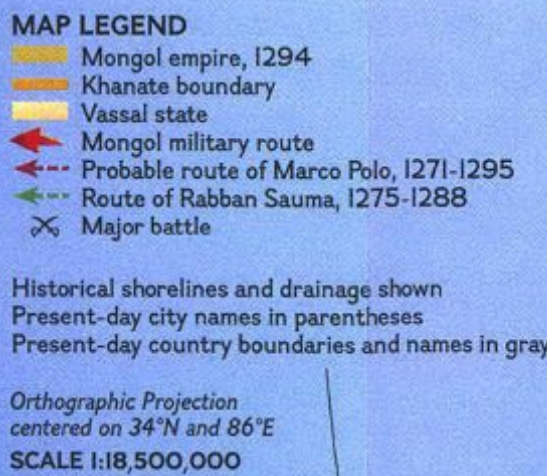
### 1260-1294

## KUBLAI KHAN Ruler of the Celestial Kingdom

A Mongol enigma wrapped in Chinese riddles, Kublai Khan was, after his grandfather, the greatest of the khans. As founder of the Yuan dynasty, he was also one of China's great emperors. Like barbarian rulers before him, he quickly succumbed to the enticements of Chinese civilization, in the process becoming one of its staunchest guardians.

From his capital at Daidu he supervised the extension of the Grand Canal, developed a postal system, reformed the Chinese bureaucracy, and encouraged the arts and sciences. But his

greatest accomplishment was uniting the Chinese nation after 370 years of fragmentation. Kublai often seemed more enamored of Chinese culture than his own, but he remained a Mongol at heart, squandering the lives of his troops and bankrupting the treasury in vain attempts to conquer Japan and kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Though his offspring would rule China for another 74 years after Kublai Khan's death at the venerable age of 79, the world empire forged by Genghis Khan was already dissolving into legend.



**THE GOLDEN HORDE**  
From their capital, Sarai, on the Volga River, the descendants of Batu ruled the Golden Horde so named for the color of the khan's gear. Russian princes were allowed to retain power as long as they paid tribute and homage at Sarai. In the 1440s the Golden Horde fragmented into several khanates, including Kazan, Astrakhan, and Crimea, and by 1502 ceased to exist. In 1783 Catherine the Great annexed the last Mongol stronghold in Crimea, where the people—long intermarried with local Turks—were known as Tatars.

**THE CHAGHATAI KHANATE**  
From their seat at Lake Balkhash, the descendants of Genghis's second son, Chaghatai, ruled over societies less developed than in Persia and China and more amenable to the rough Mongol style of administration. But internecine conflict among the Mongols themselves led to a schism between shamanists of the east and those in the west who had adopted Islam.

Neither Genghis Khan's tomb (burial place nor his burial site is known) nor his burial site is known. He was buried along the upper reaches of the Onon River in northern Mongolia, near the border with Russia.

Arriving in Kublai Khan's summer capital of Shangdu in 1275 with his father and uncle, Marco Polo served for 17 years in the khan's foreign-dominated court. As a trusted envoy he probably visited Burma and Yunnan, two recent Mongol acquisitions.

To transport rice from the Yangtze Valley to his new capital city of Daidu, Kublai put three million people to work extending the Grand Canal. To enhance trade, new roads were built from Daidu to the far corners of the empire.

Mongols learned naval warfare on the Yangtze River during their long conquest of the Song Chinese. Those skills proved useless when disastrous storms scuttled Kublai's two seaborne assaults against Japan in 1274 and 1281.

Begin by Ogodei in 1235, the conquest of the Southern Song empire took the Mongols more than four decades. Its capital, Hangzhou, fell to Kublai's army in 1276, and its last emperor died three years later.

Marco Polo left China in 1292 with a fleet of 14 ships escorting a Mongol princess to the Ilkhanate for marriage to a Mongol khan. He then traveled overland from Hormuz to Constantinople, finally reaching Venice in 1295.

In 1292 a thousand Mongol ships left China to force the submission of the recalcitrant Japanese king. The tropical terrain proved the Mongols' undoing, and a severely crippled force returned in defeat.

When the king of Annam refused passage to Mongol troops in 1281, his kingdom became a target. The Southeast Asia campaigns were disasters, however, as the Mongol cavalry was unsuited to jungle conditions.

Many of the small kingdoms and principalities of southern India and Ceylon submitted to the Mongols in the 1270s without resistance, paying tribute on demand to the great khan's seafaring generals.