

After the death of Genghis Khan his successors continued to acquire territory from China to Poland. This helped create the largest empire in world history. For easier administration the empire was divided into four regional empires: China, central Asia, Persia and Russia.

The Mongols in Persia

Sweeping into Persia in 1231, the Mongols massacred hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants, interrupted trade, and destroyed cities, some of which were never recovered. In 1258, Islamic civilization was dealt a crippling blow when Mongols defeated the Abbasids in Baghdad. Throughout Southwest Asia, the invaders destroyed ancient irrigation systems. Eventually the Mongols allowed the Persians to rule their own local territory as long as they paid tribute and maintained law and order. Mongols retained the highest government positions. Gradually the Mongols in Persia assimilated to the local culture and often adopted Islam as their religion.

The Mongols in Russia and central Europe

The Khanate of the Golden Horde demanded tribute from Russians. The Mongol invasion of Russia in 1237 was the only time in history that a winter invasion of Russia was successful. Mongol rule created a long-standing mistrust between Russia and westerners by keeping Russia isolated from the lifestyle and the technology of the Western world. The lack of Mongol concern with promoting cultural interests kept Russian areas such as Moscow culturally impoverished, isolating them from the cultural and economic wealth of the European Renaissance. Inept administration maintained Russia's economic backwardness. During Mongol rule, Russian peasants became serfs of the Russian ruling class in exchange for their protection.

Moscow finally rose to prominence when Prince Alexander Nevsky of Novgorod cooperated with the Mongols. Acting as a tribute collector for Mongols after 1228, Nevsky's government annexed those territories that did not pay tribute, adding to the territory and power of Moscow. He was granted the title of grand Prince. Nevsky became the first in a line of princes who became leader Moscow and eventually all of Russia. In 1480 Ivan III of Moscow stopped paying taxes to the Mongol leader, effectively ending Mongol presence in Russia.

Even Central Europe was not exempt from Mongol advances. In 1241 and 1242, the Mongols centered on the areas of present-day Poland, Hungary and eastern Germany, reaching the outskirts of Vienna, Austria before they were turned back.

The Mongols in China

The grand prize of the Mongol invaders was their occupation of China, where they set up a tribute empire beginning in 1260. Under the leadership of Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan and founder of the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongol capital was moved to present-day Beijing. This helped solidify the tradition of central government in China. Kublai Khan also extended the length of the Grand Canal to connect the Huang He River with Beijing in order to haul food supplies, especially rice, into Beijing. He ended the Confucian system of education and reliance on civil service exams. Although he promoted Buddhism, Kublai Khan supported the rights of Daoists, Muslims, and Christians to exercise their faith.

Distrustful of the Chinese, the Mongols brought foreign merchants and administrators to China and remained separate from the Chinese. They outlawed marriage between Mongols and Chinese and forbade the Chinese from studying the Mongol written language. Mongol women refused to engage in the Chinese custom of foot-binding. They also retained property rights, enjoyed freedom to move around publicly, and had considerable control over the household.

In addition to its presence in China, the Yuan Dynasty advanced into Vietnam, briefly occupying Hanoi but failing to conquer the country. Incursions into Cambodia, Burma and Java proved unsuccessful, mostly because Mongols did not adapt well to the hot, humid climate of those areas. Attempts to conquer Indonesia and Japan also failed. Twice, in 1274 and 1281, massive Mongol forces were turned back from a successful invasion of Japan by mighty winds known as Kamikazes. The aborted invasion of 1281 was one of the largest seaborne invasions prior to WWII. The Yuan Dynasty did occupy Korea from 1231 to 1350, requiring Koreans to pay tribute to the Khan. The Mongol domination of China ended in 1369 when the Chinese defeated them and established the Ming Dynasty.

The Mongol Peace

The Mongol Presence in Eurasia led to a period of peace and prosperity for the continent. The so-called Mongol Peace or Pax Mongolia lasted from the 1250s to the 1350s. This ensured the safety of travelers along the trade routes in Eurasia and helped increase trade between Asia and Europe along the Silk Roads. The Mongols established foreign embassies and maintained diplomatic relations with Korea, Vietnam, India and Western Europe. The Mongols also resettled people in new lands and recruited craftsmen to better the lifestyle of those they ruled.

The Mongols and the Black Death

Increased trade was a contributing factor to the spread of the Black Death. The plague had been brought unknowingly to China by Mongol invaders, whose food sacks had been invaded by infected rats and fleas. Appearing initially in China in the 1330s, the plague spread through China and central Asia. By the late 1340s, it has spread throughout Southwestern Asia and then into Europe and Africa. Mongol invaders catapulted infected bodies over city walls in areas near Asia Minor. Following the path of the trade routes, the disease spread from city to town, wiping out nearly half of the population in infected areas. Merchants in the Mediterranean compounded the problem by carrying plague from port to port.

By 1351, the plague had almost run its course in Europe. Approximately one-third of the European population had died, resulting in massive shortages of labor. Workers were demanding high wages, and when some authorities froze wages rebellions broke out. The prestige of the church declined as Europeans questioned its ability to halt the progress of the epidemic among them. Some areas in China lost two-thirds of their population. The ravages of the plague exacted a 100-year recovery period in Europe and China. In Egypt, the Middle East, and other areas of the Islamic empire, recovery took even longer. Population levels in Egypt failed to recover completely until the nineteenth century.

The Fall of the Mongol Empire

Poor administration and economic distress brought down the Mongol Empire. In Persia, the Mongols' excessive spending caused them to print relatively valueless paper money. The resulting inflation caused merchants to close their shops. When the Mongol rule in Persia ended in 1335, the Persian government returned to local rule until the Turks reinstated centralized government in the late fourteenth century.

In China, the people rebelled against the valueless paper money. The devastation brought by the Black Plague further weakened Mongol rule. The desire of the Chinese to reassert their cultural identity after long years of Mongol rule strengthened the ability of the Ming Dynasty to return China to the Chinese. Even though they were ousted by the Chinese in 1369, the Mongols remained a constant threat to the northwestern borders of China until the eighteenth century.

Directions: Fill in the graphic organizer below discussing the facts about the Mongols after Genghis Khan.

THE MONGOLS

Doc 1: The Mongols in Persia

Doc 2: The Mongols in Russia and Central Europe

Doc 3: The Mongols in China

Doc 4: The Mongol Peace

Doc 5: The Black Plague and the Fall of the Mongols

Views on China

The Middle Kingdom or Cathay as China was known was a place where most travelers wanted to visit. Two of the most important travelers in world history, Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta both visited China while it was under Mongol rule and offered their descriptions of the civilization.

“Then the traveler reaches the splendid city of Hangzhou, whose name means ‘City of Heaven.’ It well merits a description because it is without a doubt the finest and most splendid city in the world...First, then, it was stated that the city of Kinsai is about one hundred miles in circumference, because its streets and watercourses are wide and spacious. Then there are marketplaces, which because of the multitudes that throng them must be very large and spacious. The layout of the city is as follows. On one side there is a lake of fresh water, very clear. On the other side is a huge river, which entering by many channels, diffused throughout the city, carries away all its filth and then flows into the lake from which it flows out towards the ocean. This makes the air very wholesome. And through every part of the city it is possible to travel either by land or by these streams. The streets and the watercourses alike are very wide, so that carts and boats can readily pass along them to carry provisions to inhabitants. There are said to be 12,000 bridges, mostly of stone, though some are of wood. Those over the main channels and the chief thoroughfare are built with such lofty arches and so well designed that big ships can pass under them without a mast, and yet over them pass carts and horses; so well are the street-levels adjusted to the heights.”

Marco Polo

“We sailed on the river in the same way, taking our morning meal in one village, and our evening meal in another, until after seventeen days we reached the city of Hangzhou...It is the biggest city I have seen on the face of the earth. It takes three days to cross it, the traveler journeying on and stopping for the night in the city. It is laid out as we described in the Chinese style of building, everyone having his own orchard and house.”

Ibn Battuta

1. Describe the city as Marco Polo saw it.
2. Describe the city as Ibn Battuta saw it.
3. Based on their descriptions, what are some similarities between the two accounts?