
The Lighter Side of Khan

Christopher Sheline

When reflecting on history's greatest kings, emperors, philosophers, and military leaders, few have reached the immense prestige and influence of Genghis Khan (r. 1206-1227). Through his wisdom, charisma, and military ingenuity, Khan built one of the largest empires the world has ever known. However, along the road to immortality, Mongol methodology took on varying forms including psychological and economic warfare. As a result, scholars from as early as the late medieval period into the modern day have depicted Khan as a barbarian, crude and harsh in his ways. Myths and legends arose from these stereotypes, often heavily diminishing or even completely ignoring the many humble and noble characteristics of Genghis Khan. Rather than a bloodthirsty barbarian, he was a cunning warrior, an efficient administrator, and a prudent lawgiver that sought to create a peaceful and unified world.

The Myths and Legends of the Great Khan

Myths surrounding Genghis Khan include dramatically exacerbated kill counts, to degrading religions and their ceremonial sites, and even terrorism. There are varying tales of his death that include dying in battle, in bed, or from falling from his horse. In some cases, misinterpreted information even goes back to the original biographers of Khan. Intended to serve a particular purpose to a given community, each myth or legend is typically the production of a biased, prejudiced, or simply misinformed author. Westerners, especially, accepted the stereotype of Khan as a barbaric plunderer who operated with the single aim of slaughtering and destroying other tribes and civilizations to feed his unquenchable desires, which is perhaps the biggest of all myths. The belief that Khan was a brutal barbarian most often grew from those whom the Mongols conquered. They wished to discredit Khan and told a tale that drastically contradicted reality. Hence, Khan became the crazed killer, or "saber wielding maniac" when the opposite was true.

One popular myth alleges that Genghis Khan killed over one million seven hundred thousand people in a single hour or thirty thousand people per minute.¹ This death count originated from the estimated population of a Persian city called Nishapur, which Khan sacked in retaliation for the death of his son-in-

law at the hands of a Nishapur. The sack lasted over ten days, far longer than one hour, and Khan was not even present. Furthermore, while a massacre did occur at Nishapur, the death count remains questionable.² There is no reliable information to support the claim that this siege was any more severe than countless others throughout the thirteenth century.

Also unwarranted is a myth that suggests Khan was religiously prejudiced and disregarded other cultures' beliefs—particularly Christians and Muslims. An example of this myth occurred with an alleged eyewitness account of Khan reacting to a mosque in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, a common stop on the silk trading route. Genghis Khan approached the mosque inquiring as to whether it was the home of the Sultan; the mosque was the largest building in the city. However, when he discovered that it was, in fact, a house of worship, he turned away and said nothing.³ The religious belief of the Mongols, especially Khan, was that one God existed within the Eternal Blue Sky that stretched from horizon to horizon in all four directions. This was primarily a form of Shamanism. Clarifying this, Jack Weatherford, Professor of Anthropology at Macalester College and author of *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, stated, “[The Mongols] believed that God presided over the whole earth, and could not be cooped up in a house like a prisoner, nor, as the city people claimed, could his words be captured and confined inside the covers of a book.”⁴ For this reason, Khan disregarded religious structures and texts. He entered said mosque with the sole purpose of collecting money and lecturing the Bukhara elite.

Despite the Mongols' beliefs, they enforced religious tolerance, and in no way discriminated against others. The Bukhara mosque demonstrated a common practice of the Mongols entering a city and beginning to plunder. This is why Khan sought the Sultan and did not respect the mosque. Furthermore, he did not destroy or prohibit the city from practicing what it chose. The society's elites provided the source of treasures that would sustain the Mongolian army, thus showing submission to Mongolian rule. This was Khan's intention, not religious degradation. However, despite Khan's religious flexibility, he disrespected many “houses of God” and unintentionally promoted the myth of religious degradation.

To believe that any one of these myths have merit is to assume that there was little to no formal governing authority, political administrations, codes of law, empathy, honorable principles or motives. If the Mongols were simply crude and godless barbarians, they could not be capable of any of these relatively sophisticated developments when in fact they had them all. This fact directly conflicts with how the Mongols were portrayed, at least through the mid-twentieth century.

Chinggis Qan: The Early Life

To understand why Khan was successful as a leader, and why he chose his particular methods and goals, it is critical to understand his motivations and background. Genghis Khan took on many names throughout his life. His true name was Temuchin or Temujin, and he originally arose from Northeast Asia as a Mongol warlord.⁵ Allegedly, his most famous pseudonym, “Genghis Khan,” was a European mispronunciation of the more culturally accurate Chinggis Qan and Jenghiz Khan. A large portion of his success is the result of his prolonged hardship prior to his reign.

Temujin was born to the noble family of Yesugei and Ho’elun, head of the Khamag Mongol confederation.⁶ While still a young man, Temujin’s family betrothed him to a woman from another tribe named Borte. His father, Yesugei, fell ill and passed away after the Tartars, an enemy tribe, poisoned him.⁷ The Tartars were of similar ethnic origin and a neighboring tribe. Temujin also suffered through the kidnapping of his beloved Borte, which meant that his first-born was likely illegitimate. After receiving word of his father’s death, Temujin returned home and, after enduring further hardships as a slave until his daring escape, took a leadership position among the Mongols. He replaced his father as head of the Khamag at age thirteen. The aforementioned hardships provided him with one goal, to unify his people under one banner and eliminate the constant conflict between the many Mongol confederations. These facts are critically important when uncovering the reality of Chinggis Qan and the Mongols.



Figure 1. *Battle between Mongols and Chinese* (1211), c. 1431. Artist unknown.

In 1206, the Mongols, along with Turkish tribesmen, gathered and prepared to embark on one of the most influential campaigns in world history. At this time, Temujin took the name of Chinggis Qan, Qan—or Khan—meaning king or ruler. Under his leadership, they poured out of Mongolia to conquer northern China and Korea.⁸ By 1216, the Mongols succeeded in their mission and moved into Persia and, “By the end of 1221, Genghis Khan had crushed the Islamic Khwarizmian Empire in Transoxiana and invaded the Ukrainian steppes.”⁹ This created the largest empire in recorded history.

Brutal Barbarian versus a Skilled Strategist and Leader

During the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan cemented his reputation as a military leader due in part to his understanding of Sun Tzu, a leading eastern military philosopher. Sun Tzu urged that the ultimate goal of offensive strategy is to unite “All-under-Heaven intact,” as a means to resolve conflicts.¹⁰ With this unity, there would be no occasion for war. The fact that Khan aimed for such a goal demonstrates his desire for peace and order, as well as his motivation to develop one sovereign leadership. Based on his early life experiences, Khan certainly had reasons to desire such a goal. To realize peace, unity, and order an individual must devote themselves to the people’s welfare—practice benevolence and righteousness.¹¹ Clearly, Genghis Khan agreed with Sun Tzu and the idea of mass unity. So much so, that Khan expanded on this principle by aiming to unite the entire world. It is relevant to point out that the goal of unity is peace and part of his “moral” philosophy. This speaks to the true character and leadership methods of the Great Khan.

One of the most important factors that encouraged Khan’s success was that he was humble. He valued the advice of everyone, from his officers to his living relatives—even his wives. His soldiers valued his humility because it made them feel appreciated and respected by their leader. Those two aspects are crucial in every leadership environment. Many of history’s greatest leaders, including Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, and perhaps even Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden shared this practice. Each of these men recognized the value of enduring their subordinates’ hardship and listening to their concerns. And although Khan was born of noble blood, he shared the hardships of battle with his men. Genghis Khan courageously led his men into battle, risking his life in each conflict. He utilized unusual tactics, weapons, diplomatic methods, and even various forms of technology to accomplish his goals. The Battle of Liegnitz in 1241 demonstrated this and influenced Mongolian tactics even after Khan died.

Fought in a wide-open plain near Legnickie Pole, in what is today southwestern Poland, the Battle of Liegnitz pitted Henry II the Pious, Duke of Silesia, against the Mongolian Empire. Henry's army consisted of a combined European force of Poles, Moravians, and the famed Knights Templar sent by the Pope himself. They sought to stop the Mongolian invasion of Europe and uphold feudal nobility. This collection of soldiers, particularly Knights Templar, emphasizes the threat the Mongols posed to Europe as well as their military prowess.



Figure 2. *Battle of Legnica (Liegnitz), 1241*. From *Legend of Saint Hedwig*, c. 1353. Medieval illuminated manuscript.

One of Henry's first moves was to send his cavalry brigades to attack the Mongol center, to which the Mongols responded by encircling the brigade and showering them with arrows.¹² Without having adequate support, the brigade quickly broke and fell back. Not learning from his original error, Henry decided to commit the main body of his cavalry again to the Mongol center. The Mongols responded by feigning a retreat, luring Henry, his contingent, and the Silesian cavalry into giving chase.¹³

A feigned retreat was a classic Mongol tactic, as it consistently deceived their enemy and the maneuver worked perfectly at Liegnitz. Richard A. Gabriel, Professor of War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada and author of

many biographies of history's greatest military leaders including Scipio Africanus of Rome and Hannibal, states, "The feigned retreat was a proven Mongol tactic designed to separate the enemy cavalry from its infantry and disperse their tightly packed formations."¹⁴ The Mongol light cavalry ambushed the Silesians with arrow fire and used firepots to obscure the battlefield behind Henry. This tactic embodied another Sun Tzu philosophy regarding the importance of moving when it is advantageous and when it creates situations of dispersal.¹⁵ The Mongols took advantage of the mass confusion and sent their heavy cavalry to surround the knights and shoot them down at close range. At the same time, the light cavalry darted in and out of the smoke peppering the infantry with arrows.¹⁶ With the horses shot out from under them, the Knights Templar fell helpless to Mongol lances. Nearly the entire European army perished.

Again consistent with Sun Tzu, Khan leveraged a critical mode of communication both on and off the battlefield that became common throughout the Mongolian domain. The Mongols used flags and banners to relay signals, each producing an efficient and often immediate response. This blended the army into a harmonious entity, even during the height of battle.¹⁷ The Battle of Leignitz and the clever methods of communication demonstrate deceptive and ingenious methodology. This produced many one-sided Mongol victories and is precisely why the Europeans depicted the Mongols as brutal barbarians rather than the skilled warriors and efficient tacticians they were.

One of the most profound realities of Mongol strategy is found within the psychological component. Despite having moral intentions, Khan often sought to make others perceive him as a threat. He hoped that they would surrender without a fight, and avoid scenarios like Leignitz. For example, when Khan approached a city, he gave the people a choice to surrender or die.¹⁸ Unfortunately, cities did not always surrender, which forced his hand. When this happened, it strengthened Khan's resolve and reputation, and eventually encouraged others to willfully submit to Mongol rule.

Principles, Administration, Religion, and Law

Khan built the Mongolian Empire on a variety of moral guidelines. He did not hesitate to make decisions, praised those that were loyal to him, and never broke a promise.¹⁹ He took loyalty very seriously. If an enemy soldier betrayed their leader, they died as an example. Alternatively, if an enemy soldier was loyal to his commander even when defeated, he received commendation and praise.²⁰ These actions helped Khan in his quests, as he was able to preserve good soldiers

and strengthen the depths of his army. Loyalty and ethnic unity proved to be greater bonds than the classic forced servitude, as well as the necessity to put the state and imperial interests first.²¹

The silks and spices of the Orient did not distract Khan, nor did any form of material wealth because he did not recognize or succumb to greed. Weatherford quoted Khan as saying, “I hate luxury, and I exercise moderation.”²² He only took what he needed to sustain his people. To put this into proper perspective, the Mongol Empire spanned from Korea to the Persian Gulf. It is nothing short of astonishing that Khan was able to sustain these anti-materialistic principles over such a vast territory. An elaborate and well-organized administration made it possible such that, “The Mongol state, while hardly a democracy, did have elements of a collective leadership, with Khan as chief executive, that was also a meritocracy and multinational organization that did not impose religious orthodoxy.”²³

Religion was not something that Khan restricted whatsoever. Rather, the Mongol administration consisted of people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds: “Perhaps the most striking feature of this empire was the complete religious toleration, as Christians, Pagans, Mahomedans, and Buddhists all served as councilors to Chinggis Khan.”²⁴ Each religion claimed to be the one true religion, so Khan enforced absolute religious freedom while simultaneously refusing to make his own beliefs a national cult. All religious leaders were exempt from taxation and public services. Khan understood the benefits of unifying with these contrasting religious entities if for no other reason than to gain intelligence and loyalty from the groups. In fact, the Mongols always maintained an attitude of pragmatism and toleration, rarely disturbing their subjects’ practices and beliefs unless it violated the Mongol law code.²⁵ This religious flexibility encouraged others to join the Mongols.

Khan also established a Mongol law code called “*Jasaq*,” which focused on handling problems, creating unity, and preserving peace.²⁶ Known as “The Great *Jasaq*,” or *Yasa*, in both Mongolia and China, this work codified written law passed down through generations, governing the Mongolian empire under its unwavering rule.²⁷ Even after the Mongols began converting to various other religions, particularly to Islam in the fourteenth century, the *Yasa* remained alongside Muslim law (*Sharia*). The relationship can be understood as “The *Yasa* was authoritative in political and criminal matters as well as in determining court ceremonies and protocols, while the *Sharia* prevailed in dealing with cult, personal status, and contracts.”²⁸ It is unclear how well the *Yasa* worked alongside other sets of laws, such as the thirteenth century Timurid or Uzbek laws. Nevertheless,

records indicate that Mongol India followed the *Yasa*, and that it influenced the Ottoman codex of secular law, the *qanun*.²⁹

Each nation or state recognized that the Mongols developed an efficient means of ruling an empire. As a result, various parts of the Mongol code still exist today. For example, the provincial division initiated in Yuan, China (c. 1279-1368) is still the basis for Chinese provinces, and the Mongolian imperial postal system still exists in China, Iran, and Muscovy.³⁰ The same goes for the Mongol method of using a decimal system for divisions of the army, as well as their system of military households, methods of guarding the emperor, and the Yuan garrison system.

The *Yasa* was successful because it was relatively simple, and aimed to maintain peace in a large and diverse atmosphere. Genghis Khan suppressed the traditional causes of tribal feuding and refused to base the law on a divine relation from God.³¹ This made the *Yasa* vastly different from most law codes in history, especially during the Middle Ages. Essentially, the code came from the customs and traditions of herding tribes, which meant allowing smaller groups to follow their traditional law as long as it did not conflict with the overall code of *Yasa*. It was an ongoing body of legal work and did not delve into all aspects of life.³² Instead, it sought only to control the most troublesome aspects, such as the kidnapping of women, which clearly had some personal value to Khan considering his past with Borte. In fact, most of the law seemed to develop from the hardships the Mongols suffered in the past.

The law also forbade the abduction and enslavement of any Mongol. The Tayichiud captured and enslaved Khan, making him well aware of the anguish it could cause not only to himself but also to all other tribes of the steppes. The law made all children legitimate, regardless of who mothered the child (wife or concubine), forbade the selling of women into marriage, outlawed adultery, and made animal theft a capital offense.³³ In addition, Khan incorporated an empire-wide lost and found system, in which everyone must return what they found or suffer the penalty for theft—execution. The animal aspect of the law was an effort to protect the much valued and relied upon horses that the Mongols used to propel their empire forward. Each of these developments relate to Khan's troubled past.

The law code also influenced various parts of daily Mongolian life, including hunting seasons and kill regulations. There were even laws that provided essential public service workers—lawyers, doctors, teachers—with tax exemptions, and laws designed to prevent anyone from challenging the Khan's official authority. In a manner outside hereditary obligations, the *Yasa* made it law to elect the next Khan by a *khuriltai*, a political and military council consisting of both Mongol and Turkish Chiefs and Khans.³⁴ The law also enforced group

responsibility. This made a family, entire military unit, or tribe subject to a penalty for one member's actions and promoted a just community rather than lawful individualism. The *Yasa* was so binding that not even the Khan could avoid its authority.

The Mongols were no more bloodthirsty than the societies they conquered; they were just more efficient at what they did.³⁵ Khan did not only focus on war and unity, but also how to maintain his empire once established. It is noteworthy to add that Alexander the Great's incredible accomplishments inevitably failed because he did not prepare his empire for longevity and stability after his death. To help prevent this, Kahn spent a lot of time establishing trading routes for his subjects and their lands. The true ambitions and policies of the Great Khan appear in a letter he had written to the Sultan Muhammad, who desired control of his kingdom despite the Mongolian presence. According to Alā al-Dīn Atā Malik Juvaynī, a Persian historian that served at the Mongol court in West Asia, the letter stated,

Human wisdom so requires it; that the path of concord should be trodden by either side; that the duties of friendship should be observed; that we should bind ourselves to aid and assist one another in the event of untoward happenings. That we should keep open the paths of security frequented and deserted, so that merchants may ply to and fro in safety and without restraint.³⁶

When the Sultan refused to follow its instructions, Khan killed him to preserve the peace and uphold the laws of the land.

Conclusion

Since the Renaissance and the Mongol Empire, misinformation reduced Genghis Khan to the lowest level of human history.³⁷ From what a Mongolian looked like to their mental capacity came under intense scrutiny, often by Western and Christian enthusiasts such as Francis G. Crookshank. Crookshank was a British physician who wrote *The Mongol in Our Midst* in 1924. In this text, Crookshank associated various physical and mental ailments to Mongolian heritage, which he called "the Mongolian stigmata." Unfortunately, this is why some people refer to children with Down Syndrome as "Mongoloids." The idea was to encourage their expulsion from society as a means to combat the widespread influence of the former Mongolian Empire. Nevertheless, the

Mongolians and collective Asians saw, and still see, the Great Khan as a hero.³⁸

Genghis Khan was a pioneer of his time because his skills and knowledge were far ahead of anyone else. Appreciating the guidance of Sun Tzu, Khan understood the importance of leadership, loyalty, flexibility, and virtue. Although he received much criticism for being brutal, his feigned brutality was just another well-played strategy to accomplish his goal of unity and peace. Khan taught the world that to be a great leader it is necessary to experience hardship—a Clausewitz philosophy—and that it is important to understand the pains of others. Leaders should present themselves as equals, be both a fighter and a lover, and never be interested in wealth. Most importantly, one should always keep in mind that a goal is more important than an individual is.

Centuries after his passing, Genghis Khan is still history's greatest conqueror. The quality of his leadership was the reason for his successes.³⁹ He focused on unity and preservation instead of destruction and attrition. Obviously, this is quite the opposite of the many myths and legends that still circulate today.

Notes

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2. Ibid.

3. Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (Westminster: Crown Publishing Group, 2004), 6.

4. Ibid.

5. Brian Todd Carey, Joshua B. Allfree, and John Cairns, *Warfare in the Medieval World* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2006), 115.

6. Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War* (Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, LLC, 2007), 5.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Samuel B. Griffith, trans., Sun Tzu: *The Art of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 81.

11. Ibid., 39.

12. Richard A Gabriel, 2008, "The Right Hand of Khan (General Subotai's Mongols overran Europe in 1241)," *Military History* no. 2: 42, *Air University Library Index to Military Periodicals (AULIMP)*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 26, 2014).

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Griffith, *The Art of War*, 106.
16. "The Right Hand of Khan"
17. Griffith, *The Art of War*, 106.
18. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 146.
19. Urgunge Onon, *Secret History of the Mongols: The Life and Times of Chinggis Khan* (United Kingdom: Curzon Press Limited, 2001), 231.
20. May, *The Mongol Art of War*, 34.
21. Robert E. Bedeski, (DE-576) 168563169. 2008. *Genghis Khan, Mongolia and the theory of human security / Robert E. Bedeski*. n.p.: 2008, *World Affairs Online WAO*, accessed April 26, 2014, EBSCOhost.
22. May, *The Mongol Art of War*, 130.
23. "Genghis Khan, Mongolia and the Theory of Human Security."
24. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled* (Tennessee: Da Capo Press, 1996), 18.
25. "Genghis Khan, Mongolia and the Theory of Human Security."
26. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 202.
27. Igor de Rachewiltz, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century* trans. Igor de Rachewiltz (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), 95-97.
27. Michal Biran, 2004, "The Mongol Transformation: From The Steppe To Eurasian Empire," *Medieval Encounters* 10, no. 1-3: 339, *Complementary Index*, EBSCOhost.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 67.
32. Ibid., 68.
33. Ibid., 68-69.
34. Ibid., 69.
35. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 259 - 261.
36. Alā al-Dīn Atā Malik Juvaynī, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. John Andrew Boyle (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), 368.
37. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 258 - 259.
38. Ibid., 260.
39. Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled*, 7.

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