Here Come... The Mongols!

**Directions:** Examine each of the documents below, annotate where possible, and use what you have learned to answer the three major questions for yourself on the discussion sheet.

**DOCUMENT 1: MOTIVATIONS FOR CONQUEST**

In the period from 1180–1220, Mongolia experienced a drop in the mean annual temperature, which meant that the growing season for grass was cut short. Less grass meant a real danger to the Mongols’ animals, and, since the animals were truly the basis of the Mongols’ pastoral-nomadic life, this ecological threat may have prompted them to move out of Mongolia. A second reason often mentioned is the attempt by Mongolia’s neighbors in north and northwest China to reduce the amount of trade with the Mongols. Since the Mongols depended on trade for goods that they desperately needed—such as grain, craft, and manufactured articles—cessation [halting] of trade, or at least the diminution [reduction] of trade, could have been catastrophic for them. The attempts by the Jin dynasty, which controlled North China, and the Xia dynasty, which controlled Northwest China, to reduce the level of trade that the Mongols could expect, created a crisis for the Mongols. Unable to obtain goods that they so desperately needed, the Mongols’ response was to initiate raids, attacks, and finally invasions against these two dynasties.

*Source:* “The Mongols in World History,” Asian Topics in World History online, Columbia University (adapted)

**GENGHIS KHAN**

For centuries, the Mongol people had roamed the eastern steppe in loosely organized clans. It took a military and political genius to unite the Mongols into a force with a single purpose—conquest. Around 1200, a Mongol clan leader named Temujin sought to unify the Mongols under his leadership. He fought and defeated his rivals one by one. In 1206, Temujin accepted the title Genghis Khan, or “universal ruler” of the Mongol clans. Over the next 21 years, Genghis led the Mongols in conquering much of Asia. His first goal was China. After invading the northern Jin Empire in 1211, however, his attention turned to the Islamic region west of Mongolia. Angered by the murder of Mongol traders and an ambassador at the hands of the Muslims, Genghis launched a campaign of terror across Central Asia. The Mongols destroyed one city after another—Utrar, Samarkand, Bukhara—and slaughtered many inhabitants. By 1225, Central Asia was under Mongol control... While driven by revenge, Genghis also loved conquest. He once remarked to his personal historian, “Man’s greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, [and] ride his [horse].”

MONGOL MILITARY INNOVATIONS

...The Mongols had developed a composite bow made out of sinew and horn and were skilled at shooting it while riding, which gave them the upper hand against ordinary foot soldiers. With a range of more than 350 yards, the bow was superior to the contemporaneous [co-existing] English longbow, whose range was only 250 yards. A wood-and-leather saddle, which was rubbed with sheep’s fat to prevent cracking and shrinkage, allowed the horses to bear the weight of their riders for long periods and also permitted the riders to retain a firm seat. Their saddlebags contained cooking pots, dried meat, yogurt, water bottles, and other essentials for lengthy expeditions. Finally, a sturdy stirrup enabled horsemen to be steadier and thus more accurate in shooting when mounted. A Chinese chronicler recognized the horse’s value to the Mongols, observing that “by nature they [the Mongols] are good at riding and shooting. Therefore they took possession of the world through this advantage of bow and horse.”...

Source: Morris Rossabi, “All the Khan’s Horses,” Natural History, October 1994

TERROR TACTICS

“One of the local Iranian leaders foolishly decides to kill off one of the emissary that the Mongols have sent, and in doing that he evokes the anger of the Mongols, who want to use him as an example, and they used this retaliatory technique often of killing off entire towns, wiping them out as examples. And so they build these fantastic towers of skulls where they pile up all the dead bodies as an example, and then all the other towns immediately give way.”

Source: Sheila Blair, Professor at Boston College, “Islam: Empire of Faith,”

DOCUMENT 2: MONGOL INGENUITY

...Organization was the key to the success of the great Mongol armies. The cavalry, first devised by Genghis Khan, consisted of 10 squadrons. Ten squadrons formed a quran of 1,000 men. Daily drills taught the warriors to move as units and respond quickly. In combat, bowmen formed a front line to unleash a hail of arrows at the enemy. The archers would then fall to the rear to allow well-armed units to charge and overrun the enemy. As Kublai Khan turned his sights on the heavily fortified Chinese empire, he drew on another of Genghis’ strategies: siege warfare using catapults. The Mongols applied these techniques with greater force and in greater numbers than ever before in history. This approach would prove useful in overpowering the great Chinese cities in the years ahead....

Source: Duane Damon, “From Genghis to Kublai,” Calliope, A Cobblestone Publication
LASTING INFLUENCE

... Though much of what the Mongols wrought (brought about) on their westward march was destructive, some benefits were reaped from their forays (raids) into Europe and conquests in Muslim areas. By example, they taught new ways of making war and impressed on their Turkic and European enemies the effectiveness of gunpowder.

As we have seen, Mongol conquests facilitated (aided) trade between the civilizations at each end of Eurasia, making possible the exchange of foods, tools, and ideas on an unprecedented scale. The revived trade routes brought great wealth to traders such as those from north Italy, who set up outposts in the eastern Mediterranean, along the Black Sea coast, and as far east as the Caspian Sea. Because the establishment of these trading empires by the Venetians and Genoese [of Northern Italy] provided precedents (examples) for the later drives for overseas expansion by peoples such as the Portuguese and English, they are of special significance in global history....


DOCUMENT 3: UNDER MONGOL CONTROL

A common misconception is that the semiliterate Mongols came out of the steppes of Mongolia, quickly conquered far more advanced civilizations, and left the government in each area in the hands of the conquered. While Chinese bureaucrats still did their jobs and the local Persian rulers stayed in power as long as they did not cause the Mongols any trouble, the situation was much more complex....

The Mongols used qualified people wherever they were needed. It was not unusual to have Arabs serving in Russia or Persians in China. Still, the Mongols preferred not to tinker too much with systems that worked well. When Yelu Qucai (1189–1243), the great minister and governor of northern China, demonstrated how much wealth the region could produce for Ögödei Khan, the Mongols kept his system in place....

In smaller provincial territories, many local rulers maintained their position, serving as the local daruqachi or shahna [governor]. As long as they paid tribute, provided troops when called upon, came before the khan to pledge their loyalty, and kept good order in their territories, they remained in their positions. For the Mongols, it made good sense, as the local rulers knew the customs of their people....

Source: Timothy May, “Tak ing Control,” Calliope, A Cobblestone Publication

RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

“In addition to his administrative changes and the enlargement of territories under Mongol control, Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan) introduced other innovations. Perhaps one of the more important was his policy of toleration towards foreign religions. He sought to ingratiate himself to religious leaders who might then influence their people to accept Mongol rule. His principal interest was to use religion to help him govern. He did not appear to be devoted to a specific foreign religion. …He did not condone any religious persecution. His descendants generally… persisted in this policy of religious toleration… [In the capital of Khara Khorum, his son Ögedai Khan permitted the building of] two mosques, Buddhist and Daoist temples, and a Nestorian Christian church within the city.”