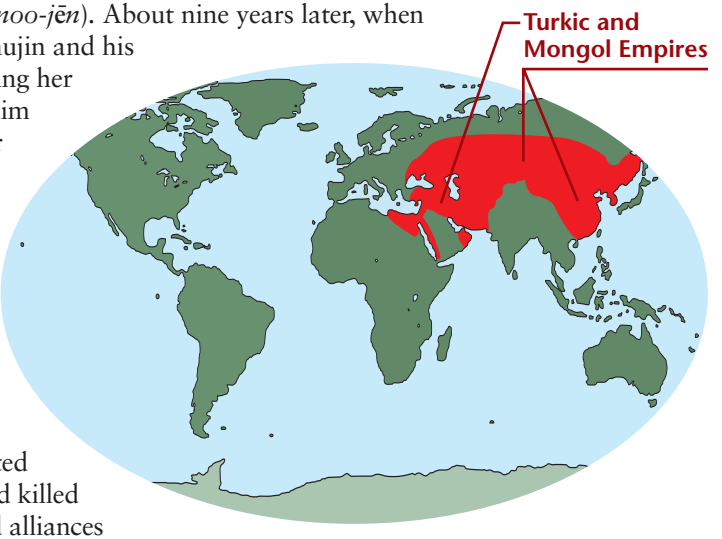
CHAPTER 15

Nomadic Conquests and Eurasian Connections, 1000–1400

Temujin Is Proclaimed Genghis Khan

In this fourteenth-century illustration, Temujin is proclaimed Genghis Khan as his sons (on the right) and supporters look on. Genghis Khan and his successors created a vast empire that connected cultures across Eurasia.

Around 1162, in the harsh Mongolian region northwest of China, the wife of a Mongol chieftain bore him a son named Temujin (*TEH-moo-jēn*). About nine years later, when members of a rival tribe poisoned his father, Temujin and his mother were left without status or support. Raising her son in great hardship, Temujin's mother taught him that he was divinely destined to avenge his father and become a great ruler. Later, when captured by foes and confined in a heavy wooden collar, Temujin managed to overpower his guard and escape to a nearby river, where he hid until a friendly tribesman released him from the collar. This incident further convinced the young Mongol that he was destined for greatness.



Temujin grew to be a formidable warrior, single-minded and opportunistic in pursuing power. Returning to his tribe, he eventually asserted himself as its leader, vanquished its neighbors, and killed his father's murderers. He won battles and forged alliances with other Mongol tribes, overcoming their fierce independence to unite them into a powerful military machine. Then, after they proclaimed him "Genghis Khan" (*JEN-gis KAHN*), or "universal ruler," he led them on a quest to conquer the world.

Genghis Khan and his followers were part of a wide array of nomadic herders who had long lived in Central Asia. For ages these peoples, most of whom spoke Turkic or Mongolian languages, had lived sparse lives tending cattle and sheep, moving about in search of grazing grounds and sometimes raiding or invading settled societies to their east, south, and west.

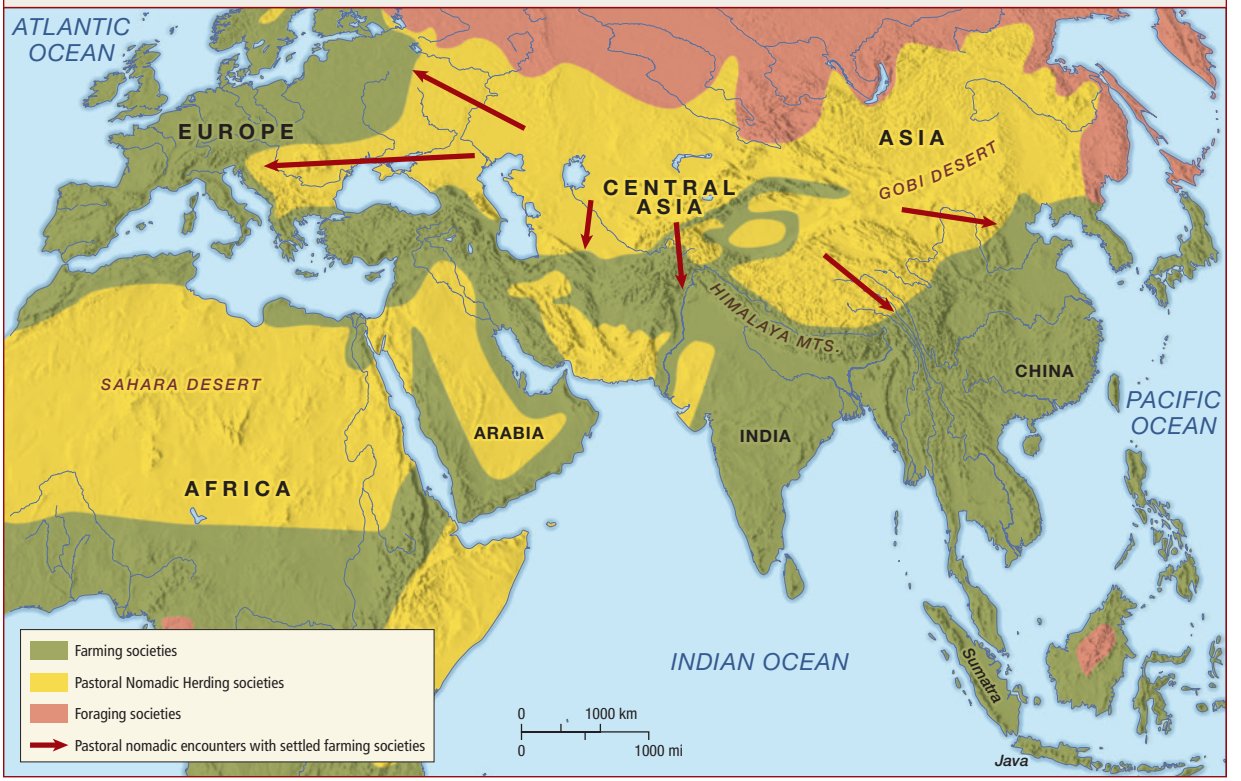
In the tenth through fourteenth centuries, however, Central Asian nomads made a momentous impact on the wider world. Some took control of northern China, forming empires and dynasties there. Others, known as Seljuk (*SELL-jook*) Turks, conquered Islamic Southwest Asia, embraced the Islamic faith, and sparked a series of consequential conflicts with the Christian world. Then the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan and his heirs, overran much of Eurasia, creating the largest land empire the world had ever seen. In time these conquerors adopted many features of the societies they conquered, while expanding commerce and helping to spread ideas, technologies, weapons, and diseases. By conquering and connecting the cultures of Eurasia, Central Asian nomads changed the course of world history.

The Nomads of Central Asia

By 1000 C.E., agriculture had long since become the way of life for most people on the planet. Although it required tedious, time-consuming labor, farming provided greater stability and much more food than hunting or herding alone. It could thus support far more people than could these other forms of subsistence. Agriculture was the economic foundation of the large, complex, settled societies that had arisen in China, India, Persia, Southwest Asia, Europe, and several parts of Africa (Map 15.1).

FOUNDATION MAP 15.1 Areas of Farming and Herding by 1000 C.E.

By 1000 C.E., settled agricultural societies prevailed in places where climate and soil supported farming. Note, however, that in Central Asia, where climate and soil made farming unreliable, most people lived as pastoral nomads, following their herds in search of grazing grounds, and occasionally interacting with the settled agricultural societies to their east, west, and south, as indicated by the arrows. How did these connections influence the societies of both the settled farmers and the nomadic herders?



In some areas, however, conditions were not suitable for farming. These areas included the northernmost reaches of Eurasia, where it was too cold; the equatorial rain forests of Africa, where it was too wet; and the arid plains and deserts of Africa and Eurasia, where it was too dry. In these regions, where limited food supplies kept populations low, people lived as nomads, moving frequently and surviving by hunting or herding.

Central Asia connects Eurasian societies

The largest of the regions where nomadic life prevailed was the immense Central Asian expanse, extending for thousands of miles from the semi-arid steppes of southern Russia to the barren Mongolian highlands. Sparsely populated and bleak, battered by harsh winds and brutal winters, Central Asia was both a barrier that separated Eurasia's settled societies and the crossroads of the trade routes that connected them. It thus not only shaped the nomadic lifestyle of its hardy inhabitants but also helped shape the commerce and cultures of the surrounding societies.

Herding and Horsemanship

A Mongol family outside its tent, or yurt.

Herding was the main way of life for most Central Asians. As pastoral nomads—herders who move about in search of fresh grasslands on which to pasture their herds—they set up camps where they found good grounds for grazing, then moved elsewhere when the forage was depleted. The nomads ate mainly meat, milk, cheese, and butter, and clothed themselves largely with fleeces and hides, supplied by their herds. To protect themselves from the winds and rain, they fashioned large tents (known as yurts) from coarse felt made of matted wool and animal hairs. They even collected the animals' manure, using it as fuel for the fires that warmed them and cooked their food.

Some Central Asians raised cattle, many kept goats, and those involved in overland trade used camels, but most of the nomads centered their livelihoods on sheep and horses. Sheep were prized mainly for their meat, milk, and wool, but also because they survived better than cattle on the sparse, coarse vegetation of the steppes. Horses were used for hunting, herding sheep, and pulling carts that carried tents and goods from one campsite to the next. Since mare's milk was preserved by fermenting it into a beverage called kumiss (*KOO-miss*), horses also supplied an important source of sustenance.

Nomadic warrior societies depend on horses

Horses were also crucial to the conduct of war. Nomadic life meant frequent movement in search of new pastures, and this movement often led to clashes with neighboring nomads or settled societies. Especially during famines or droughts, when food and adequate grazing grounds were scarce, mounted nomads fought each other for the scarce pasturelands and sometimes traveled into farming regions to raid villages and towns. Survival depended on both mobility and fighting skill.

Central Asian societies thus were warrior societies. The men spent most of their time in the saddle, learning at an early age to eat, sleep, hunt, herd, fight, and raid on horseback. They trained to ride for days without food or rest, to attack in unison, and to fight with fearless abandon. In these endeavors they were ably assisted by their mounts, sturdy steppe ponies bred and trained for discipline and endurance, with long shaggy hair that protected them from the wind and cold.

Stirrups give Central Asian warriors an advantage

The warriors also were greatly aided by the use of stirrups. Developed by Central Asians in the first or second century C.E., these rings that hung from each side of the saddle secured the feet of the riders, allowing them to stand and maneuver while moving at high speed. Mounted warriors could thus load and reload their powerful bows and fire their arrows in any direction with amazing accuracy, even while charging or fleeing at full gallop. Large armies from settled societies, vastly outnumbering the nomadic warriors, might chase them back to the open steppes, only to be annihilated during the pursuit by the well-aimed arrows of the retreating nomads.

Family and Social Structure

Family and society on the steppes were structured to meet the needs of nomadic life. Gender roles, social status, governance, and religion all showed the stamp of a culture that focused on mobility, resourcefulness, and warfare.

Women sustain nomadic societies

Women played a prominent role in Central Asian societies, managing the camps while men traveled far afield to hunt, raid, and fight. Women tended the campfires and gathered the manure that fueled the flames. They sheared the sheep and goats, and then used the fleeces, along with furs and hides brought back by men from the hunt, to make

essential items such as clothing, mats, rugs, and the large tents called yurts. Women bred the sheep and horses, helped them give birth, milked them, and used the milk to make butter, cheese, and kumiss. And, of course, women bore and nursed the children, caring for and protecting them when the men were gone. Skilled on horseback and adapted to a mobile life, the women could readily move their whole families and households on short notice. Some women on occasion traveled with the men into combat, attending to such necessities as food and other supplies.

Marriages, as elsewhere, were arranged by parents, often to enhance family status or form political ties. As a sign of prestige, prominent warriors typically took several wives, frequently maintaining a separate tent and household for each. The leading warriors also constituted a kind of nobility, but their social status depended more on military prowess than heredity. Status could improve based on acts of bravery or leadership in combat, or decline in the absence of such exploits.

Nomads combine into tribes and federations

Like other nomadic peoples, Central Asians organized into clans and tribes that were small enough to maintain mobility, with no need for complex governance systems. For political and military purposes, however, the nomads sometimes formed larger federations linking many tribes. These federations were typically led by a regional overlord called the **khan**, who exercised broad authority but was expected to consult regularly with a council of tribal leaders and gain its approval for his decisions.

Ongons (spirit houses) used by shamans to contact spiritual forces.

Central Asian spirituality centered for centuries on **shamanism** (*SHAH-mun-izm*), a form of religion in which spiritual leaders called shamans performed elaborate rituals and induced trances in efforts to communicate with spirits, heal the sick, forecast the future, and influence events. Typically consulted by tribal leaders facing major decisions, such as when to do battle or whom to select as khan, shamans often played a crucial role in nomadic cultures. Eventually, however, as Central Asians adopted various forms of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam through contact with settled societies, shamans lost much of their clout.

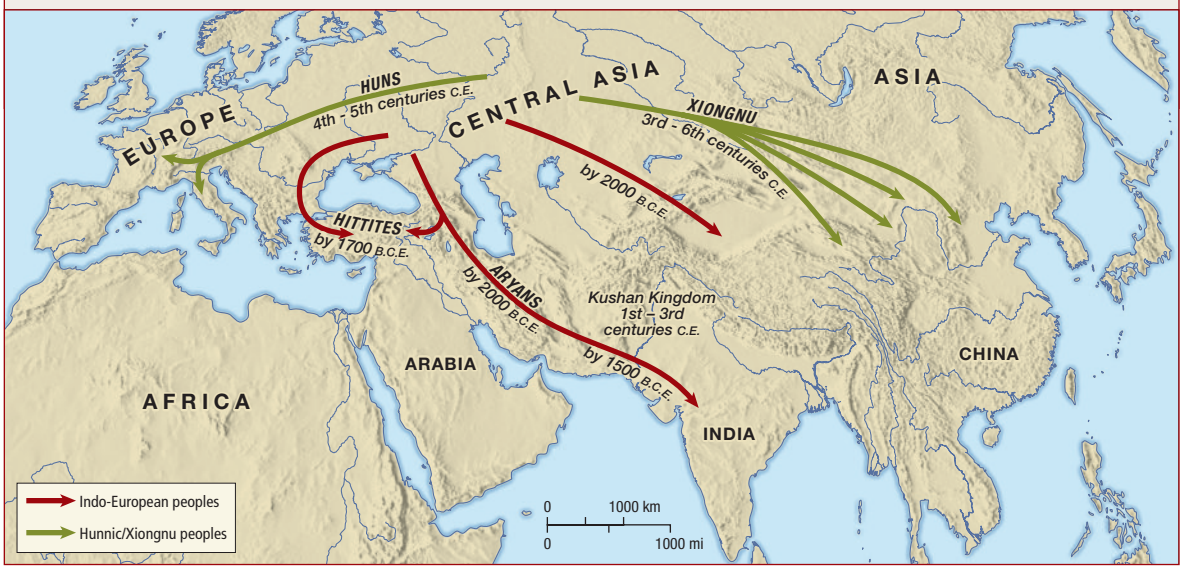
Contacts and Conflicts with Settled Societies

Central Asia was bordered on the east, south, and west by the large, complex, settled societies of China, India, Persia, Mesopotamia, Byzantium, and Europe. With numerous farming villages, thriving towns and cities, intricate social structures, organized religions, and sophisticated technologies, these wealthy, populous societies tended to see themselves as "civilized" and the nomads as crude "barbarians." The settled societies, however, often owed their origins, and many of their attributes, to contacts and conflicts with the nomads.

Cultural and Commercial Connections. Over the ages, as noted in earlier chapters, Central Asian nomads had played pivotal roles in forming, connecting, and challenging the settled Eurasian societies. The Indo-Europeans who migrated to India, the Iranian Plateau, Anatolia, and Europe in the second millennium B.C.E. came from Central Asia, imparting and imposing their languages and ways (Map 15.2). So did the Kushans, who ruled northern India from the first to third centuries C.E.; the Xiongnu and other nomads who dominated northern China from the third to sixth centuries C.E.; and the Huns whose attacks on Germans and Romans in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. foreshadowed the German conquest of the Western Roman Empire. Central Asians over the

Map 15.2 Key Central Asian Nomadic Movements Before 1000 C.E.

Over many centuries, numerous nomadic groups from Central Asia helped to forge Eurasian connections. Observe, for example, that Hittites migrated to West Asia and Aryans to India in the second millennium B.C.E., that Kushans settled in northwest India in the first through third centuries C.E., that Xiongnu penetrated northern China in the third through sixth centuries C.E., and that Huns invaded Eastern and Central Europe in the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. What major impacts did each of these groups have on the development of Eurasian cultures?



centuries had also spread skills such as ironworking and horsemanship, belief systems such as Buddhism, and diseases such as smallpox from one region to another.

Nomadic attitudes toward settled societies were mixed. On one hand, nomads disdained the sedentary lives of settled villagers and townsfolk. Nomads might be poor, and at the mercy of the elements, but from their perspective at least they were unfettered and free, neither bound to the land and a landlord like a typical peasant, nor crammed into a crowded, fetid city like urban artisans and merchants. Rugged, vigorous, and violent, Central Asians centered their lives on their horses and herds, with little desire to imitate their sedentary neighbors.

Nomads trade and interact with settled societies

On the other hand, to enhance their Spartan lifestyle, the nomads often relied on contacts with settled societies. Some nomads bartered with villagers and townsfolk, offering hides, wool, and furs from their herds and hunts in exchange for such goods as flour, grain, cotton, silk, iron, and salt produced by the settled societies. Some nomads even made their livelihoods by facilitating commerce among settled societies, forming and guiding caravans that carried commodities across Central Asia, along the ancient Silk Road and other overland trade routes.

Other nomads, however, coveting the wealth and abundance of the towns and villages, repeatedly raided them and sometimes even carried off their residents for use or sale as slaves. As long as settled societies were united and strong, they were generally able to resist the nomads by beating them in battles, buying them off with tribute, and

building barriers such as China's Great Wall. But when settled societies were divided and weak, their thriving towns and fertile farmlands made tempting targets for the nomads, especially when famine or drought drove the nomads to seek new sources of sustenance.

The Nomads in Northern China. Nowhere was the interaction between nomadic and settled societies more consequential than in northern China. Since around 2000 B.C.E., when horse-drawn chariots and bronze weapons were introduced to this region by nomads from Central Asia, contacts with pastoral peoples had played a crucial role in Chinese history (Chapters 4 and 14).

Nomads help sustain the Silk Road and spread Buddhism

Examples of this interaction are numerous. In the third century B.C.E., to protect his realm against nomadic raids, China's First Emperor linked his northern fortresses to create the first Great Wall. In succeeding centuries, many nomads served as merchants and guides along the Silk Road, the great cross-Asian trade route opened by China's Martial Emperor by around 100 B.C.E. Later, in China's Age of Disunity (220-589 C.E.), nomadic groups ruled northern China and supported Buddhism, a religion spread from India to China via Central Asian merchants and nomads.

In the tenth century C.E., as related in Chapter 14, nomadic Mongols from Manchuria known as Khitans captured several northern Chinese provinces. In the early 1100s, anxious to oust the Khitans, China's Song dynasty aided other nomads called Jurchens, unwittingly enabling them to conquer northern China and rule it for the next century.

Khitans and Jurchens adopt Chinese ways

Northern China nonetheless remained a settled society. The Khitans at first tried maintaining tribal ways, but in time they created a Chinese-style dynasty called the Liao Empire, complete with a Confucian bureaucracy, civil service exams, and Chinese writing. The Jurchens did likewise, calling their dynasty the Jin and presiding over a populous Chinese realm with a complex economy, cosmopolitan culture, and Confucian administration. In China, as elsewhere, nomads who conquered a settled society tended to embrace its institutions, though they were often still seen as alien barbarians by the people they ruled.

The Rise and Fall of the Seljuk Turks

While Khitans and Jurchens penetrated northern China, far to the west and south another nomadic expansion was under way. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, changes in the Central Asian climate, reducing the already fragile food supply, may have pushed some tribes to the brink of starvation. Forced to migrate in search of new food sources, they set in motion a series of chain reactions. When one tribe moved into its neighbors' pasturelands, it often drove them into surrounding regions, where they in turn attacked the local peoples. In time some nomadic groups, compelled by such events to combine with others, began to invade the cities and farmlands of neighboring settled societies.

Driven by such forces, Turkic-speaking tribes from Central Asia infiltrated the Islamic lands of southern Asia. One such group, the Ghaznavids from Afghanistan, penetrated northeastern Persia in the mid-tenth century. By the early eleventh century they were also moving into northwest India, ravaging that region and subjecting it to their rule (Chapter 12). But then they made a monumental mistake: they let another Turkish group from Central Asia move with its herds into Persia.

The Seljuk Conquests

These newly arriving nomads, who would dominate much of Southwest Asia for the next few centuries, were the Seljuk Turks. In the decade following 1025, with Ghaznavid consent, they entered northeastern Persia. Led by heirs of their deceased chieftain Seljuk, they had been chased from Central Asia by other Turkish tribes, who found them too belligerent even for the warlike ways of the steppes. Once in Persia the unruly Seljuks attacked their Ghaznavid hosts, defeating them in 1040 at Dandanqan (*dahn-dahn-KAHN*), a decisive battle that opened southern Asia to waves of Turkish nomads (Map 15.3).

The Seljuks then drove westward, plowing through Persia and into Mesopotamia. Recent converts to Islam, they embraced its dominant Sunni branch and attacked its Shi'ite minority. In 1055 the Seljuks captured Baghdad, claiming to have freed it from the clutches of Shi'ite warlords but actually bringing it under the control of the growing Seljuk domain.

The Great Seljuk Empire

Seljuks invade Syria, Palestine, and Anatolia

The Great Seljuk Empire, as the new realm came to be known, was consolidated and expanded by Sultan Alp Arslan, who reigned from 1063 to 1072. Bent on extinguishing Shi'ism and reuniting the Islamic world under Sunni sway, he planned to attack the Shi'ite Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. Seeking first to protect his western flank, however, he came into conflict with the Christian Byzantine Empire, whose armies he defeated in 1071 at Manzikert (Chapter 10). This victory sidetracked the Seljuks, who went on to conquer Syria and Palestine but never made it to Egypt. Instead, with Byzantine lands now vulnerable, the Turks flooded westward into Anatolia, a rich farming region that had been for centuries the heart of the Byzantine Empire.

Once in Anatolia, the Seljuks sought to make it a Sunni Muslim stronghold. They restricted Christianity and promoted Islamic immigration from elsewhere in their empire, granting special rights to those who embraced Islam. In the long run these Turkish efforts proved so successful that Anatolia, which had been a Christian bastion for almost a millennium, was transformed into a Muslim land that is today called Turkey.

Seljuks embrace Persian culture

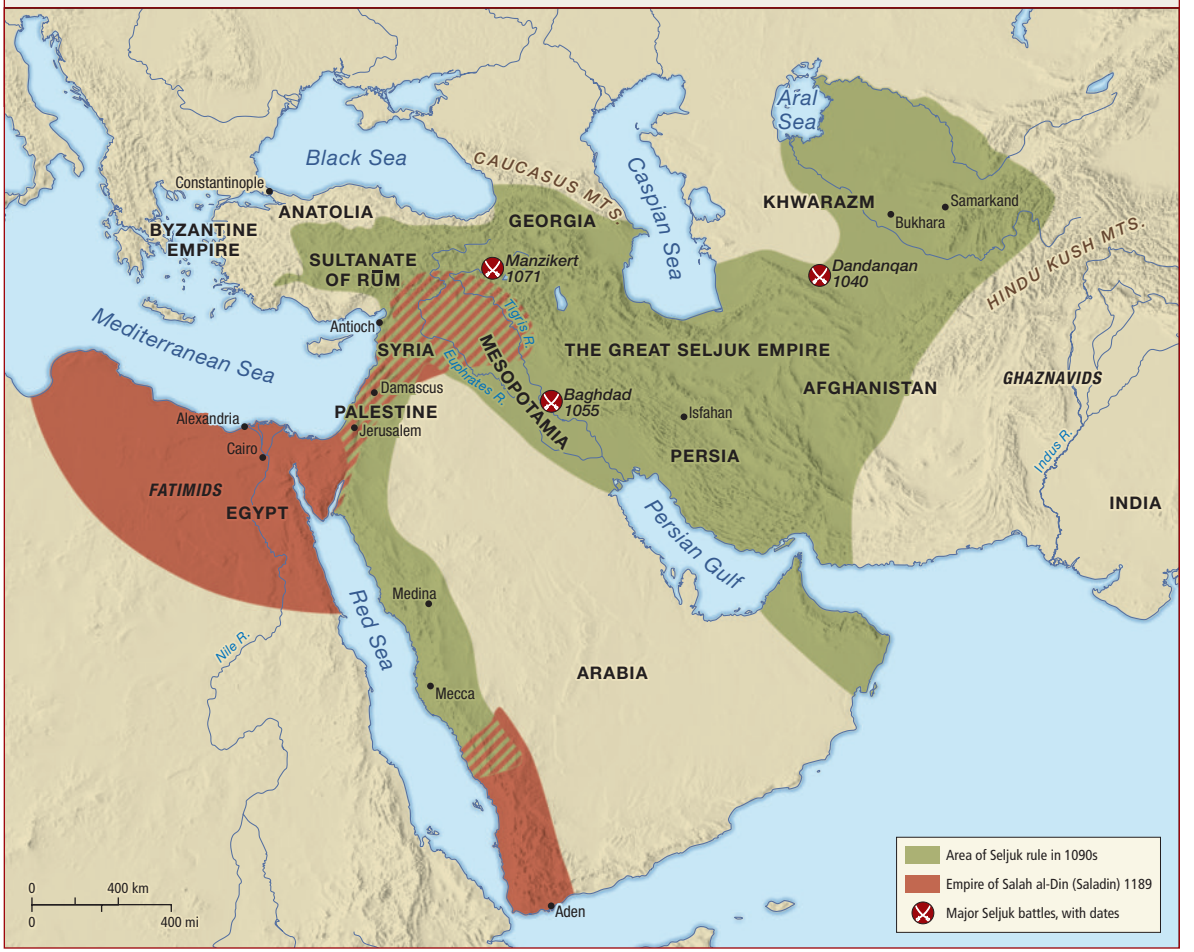
The Great Seljuk sultans nonetheless centered their empire in Persia. Like others who had earlier ruled this region, the Seljuks fell in love with the Persian culture and adopted many of its features, including its Farsi tongue. Although Arabic was enshrined in the Qur'an and used in Muslim worship, the Seljuk elite communicated in Farsi, while commoners spoke a brand of Turkish peppered with Farsi expressions. Under Turkish and Persian influence, then, Islamic culture continued to evolve away from its Arab roots, while Seljuks were transformed from nomadic marauders into settled rulers of a vast cosmopolitan empire.

Fine woven carpet from Seljuk culture.

Thus, rather than ruining Islamic culture, Seljuk rule revitalized it. In this effort the early Seljuk sultans were ably guided by a Persian chief minister, the Nizam al-Mulk (*nē-ZAHM al-MOOLK*), a superb administrator who founded a series of eminent educational institutions and skillfully adapted the structures of the long-dead Persian Empire to meet the needs of the Seljuks. A devout Sunni Muslim, the Nizam also guided Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah (*mah-LĒK SHAH*), who reigned from 1072 to 1092, into unrelenting warfare against Shi'ism.

Map 15.3 Southwest Asia and The Seljuk Turks, 1040–1189

In the eleventh century the Seljuk Turks, nomadic warriors from Central Asia, created a realm they called the Great Seljuk Empire, winning major battles at Dandanqan, Baghdad, and Manzikert. Note, however, that, once the empire began to break apart after 1092, a breakaway Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm ruled eastern Anatolia, the Great Seljuk sultans continued to reign in Persia, and a new sultan in Egypt, Salah al-Din, eventually carved out a realm embracing Palestine and Syria. How did the Seljuks help to revitalize Islamic culture?



The Shi'ite Assassins strike at Sunni leaders

This anti-Shi'ite drive met fierce resistance from a radical Shi'ite sect known as "the self-sacrificers." Founded in 1090 by a zealot called "the Old Man of the Mountain," this group terrorized the Islamic world for almost 170 years, slaying numerous Sunni leaders, including the Nizam al-Mulk. According to legend, at a secret mountain fortress its members used hashish (*hah-SHĒSH*), a mild narcotic, to fortify themselves for murder by providing a foretaste of the pleasures of paradise awaiting them if they were martyred. This sect of Shi'ite killers came to be known in Arabic as hashashin (*hah-SHAH-shēn*), or "hashish users," and hence in the West as the **Assassins**.

The Fragmentation of the Seljuk Realm

The assassination of the Nizam al-Mulk in 1092, followed quickly by the death of Malik Shah, touched off a succession crisis that split the Seljuk realm apart. In the west several smaller states emerged, while in the east the Great Seljuk sultans struggled for the next century to control what was left of their empire.

Seljuks threaten Byzantium; Christians respond with Crusades

The main successor state in the west was the Sultanate of Rūm (ROOM), a breakaway Seljuk regime that controlled much of Anatolia. Since the name Rūm ("Rome") asserted a claim to the Roman heritage, and since the realm of Rūm expanded toward Constantinople, the Byzantine ruler, as Eastern Roman emperor, saw the sultanate as a mortal threat. In desperation he sought aid from the Christian West, appealing to the pope in Rome, who responded by launching a Christian holy war, later called the First Crusade (1096–1099), which defeated Islamic forces in Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine (Chapter 16). When the Muslims finally reconquered this territory in the next century, they were led not by Seljuks but by Salah al-Din (*sah-LAH al-DĒN*), a gifted Sunni Muslim warrior also called Saladin (*SAH-lah-dēn*). He ended Shi'ite rule in Egypt, served as its sultan for two decades (1173–1193), and drove the Christian crusaders out of Palestine. The Seljuk Sultanate of Rum endured in Anatolia, but lost a key battle in 1202 to Georgia, a realm to its northeast skillfully ruled by a talented woman named Tamar.

Tamar, ruler of Georgia, 1184–1213.

Khwarazm Shahs connect Central Asia and Persia

The eastern remnant of the Great Seljuk Empire lost power in the 1150s, as its local commanders battled each other for the remains of the realm. In this struggle the commanders of Khwarazm (*khwah-RAZ-um*), a Central Asian region northeast of Persia (Map 15.3), eventually emerged supreme. Known as Khwarazm Shahs, they created a large but loose-knit empire that included much of southern Central Asia and northern Persia. Profiting from commerce along the Asian trade routes and an extensive irrigation system that sustained farming on the steppes, Khwarazm endured until 1218 when it was confronted by the Mongols, nomadic warriors whose conquests threatened to engulf all Eurasia.

The Mongol Invasions

In the early thirteenth century, as noted at the start of this chapter, Mongol warriors set out to conquer the world. Genghis Khan and his heirs, leading a coalition of tribes with a combined population of less than two million, terrorized societies from China to central Europe, overrunning realms with far richer resources and many times more people than Mongolia. Although the Mongols did not conquer the whole world, they did conquer much of Eurasia, creating a huge empire that dwarfed all previous realms. In so doing, they forged connections and fostered trade, spreading ideas and technologies that in time enriched and strengthened the conquered settled societies, fortifying them against further nomadic conquests.

The Conquests of Genghis Khan

Beginning in 1206, following the Mongol conference at which Temujin was proclaimed Genghis Khan, he and his armies set out on their campaign of world conquest. First they allied with the Uighur (*WĒ-goor*) Turks to their southwest, a people who would later

Map 15.4 Conquests of Genghis Khan, 1206–1227

After Temujin was proclaimed Genghis Khan by the Mongols in 1206, he and his armies set out to conquer the world. Notice that his empire, carved out by conquest over the next two decades, eventually extended from the Sea of Japan in the east to the Caspian Sea in the west, incorporating much of northern China and all of Central Asia. In what ways did he help lay the foundations for enhanced connections across much of Eurasia?

help the Mongols run their realm (Map 15.4). Then the Mongols moved south against the Tanguts (*TAHN-goots*), Tibetan tribes that had formed a regime called the Xi Xia (*SHĒ shēYAH*) Kingdom in northwestern China. By 1209 the Mongols conquered Xi Xia and forced it to pay tribute but did not yet destroy it.

Mongols lay waste to northern China

The Mongols then moved to their southeast, attacking the Jurchen realm that dominated northern China. From 1211 to 1215 they laid waste to this region, reducing some ninety cities to rubble. In 1215 they attacked the Jurchen capital, a well-fortified metropolis at what is now Beijing, and took it after several months of siege. After finally penetrating its walls, they went on a rampage, plundering its riches, killing its residents, and setting its buildings ablaze. The massacres and fires reportedly went on for a month.

Mongols devastate Khwarazm and Xi Xia

Genghis Khan next directed his efforts far to the west and south. In 1218 he sent emissaries and merchants to meet with the Khwarazm Shah, supposedly to seek diplomatic and commercial ties, but also no doubt to scout this realm and perhaps find a pretext for invading it. The pretext was provided when one of the shah's governors, in a reckless act of

defiance, robbed and massacred the Mongol merchants. Responding with ruthless fury, from 1219 to 1221 the Mongols devastated the Khwarazm Empire, ruining its agriculture by wrecking the irrigation system, pillaging the towns along the trade routes, demolishing Persian cities that had come under Khwarazm rule, and slaughtering the inhabitants. Then, because the Xi Xia Kingdom in northwest China had refused to help him conquer Khwarazm, Genghis Khan returned in 1226 to obliterate it and its people.

Genghis Khan died in 1227, allegedly falling off his horse in battle. By then, however, his Mongols had defeated numerous armies, plundered hundreds of cities and towns, killed millions of people, and carved out an empire extending from the Sea of Japan to the Caspian Sea (Map 15.4).

Reasons for Mongol Success

A Mongol archer on horseback.

Many factors facilitated the Mongols' amazing military success. These factors included their fighting skills and unity, the lack of a united resistance, their use of reconnaissance and terror, their adoption of ideas and techniques from their foes, and their remarkable leadership.

Fighting skills. The Mongols' skilled horsemanship gave them an immense advantage in mobility, enabling them to strike without warning, capitalize on enemy mistakes, and quickly change direction in the midst of battle. With their powerful bows and superb marksmanship they could shoot with deadly precision from several hundred yards away, decimating an opposing force before it could fight back, or fire flaming arrows over the walls of a surrounded city. With their courage and endurance they could swiftly cover great distances, maintain composure in combat, and almost always outfight and outlast their foes.

Genghis Khan's armies unite Turks and other non-Mongols

Unity and discipline. Insisting that his generals renounce tribal ties and demanding total loyalty to himself, Genghis Khan centralized his command and instilled iron discipline in his troops. As a result, even when his forces grew to 200,000 and included thousands of Turks and other non-Mongols, they were still able to fight as one and closely coordinate their actions in the course of combat.

Lack of united resistance. Animosities among his enemies, and the previous breakup of China and Persia through invasions by other nomads, enabled Genghis Khan to attack and destroy his targets one at a time. He was also occasionally aided by his enemies' foes: in northern China, for example, Chinese and Khitan residents who resented Jurchen rule helped the Mongols to end it.

Reconnaissance. Rarely did the Mongols attack until they had thoroughly scouted their adversaries. From spies, traveling merchants, and tortured captives, Mongol leaders learned about the composition of enemy forces, the layout of cities, and the design of defenses. This knowledge permitted them to plan their assaults efficiently and carry them out with overpowering effect.

Terror and intimidation. Almost everywhere they went, the Mongols' reputation preceded them, complete with reports of merciless invaders, leveled cities, and wholesale slaughter. And the Mongols cleverly fostered this fear, sparing some victims so they could spread terrifying tales and using others as human shields in subsequent attacks. Employing such methods, the Mongols sowed discord and panic among their foes. At the same time, by pledging not to kill those who offered no resistance and to protect

those who had useful skills—such as engineers, artisans, and merchants—the Mongols even got some groups to submit without struggle.

Mongols adopt ideas and techniques from allies and defeated foes

Borrowed ideas and techniques. The Mongols were quick to adopt innovations from the cultures they conquered. From Chinese and Turkish siege engineers, for example, the Mongols learned how to build catapults to heave huge rocks and flaming projectiles over fortress walls, preparing the way for assaults on cities and citadels. From their Uighur Turk allies, the Mongols learned to write, adapting Uighur script to express Mongolian words, compile information, maintain records, and communicate over long distances. From Central Asian merchants and Chinese officials, the Mongols learned how to finance and administer an empire. The most eminent such official was Yelü Chucai (*YEH-LOO choo-SĪ*), a Confucian scholar of Khitan heritage who worked for the Mongols and taught them how to govern. In one of history's most astute acts of statecraft, he convinced them that they could make a fortune by exploiting and taxing northern China's cities and farms—thus derailing a proposal to depopulate the region and turn it into grazing grounds for Mongol herds.

Leadership. A final key factor was their leader himself. Genghis Khan was a masterful military strategist, a talented diplomat, a shrewd opportunist, and a superb leader. Believing that he was destined to conquer the world, he inspired his forces to achieve unprecedented feats. Yet he was also a remorseless man who lived to fight and kill and is said to have claimed that a man's greatest joy was to conquer his enemies, plunder their possessions, ride their horses, and ravish their women. History has furnished few other figures so capable and so cruel.

The Mongol Khanates: Conquest, Adaptation, and Conversion

Mongol khanates connect Eurasian cultures

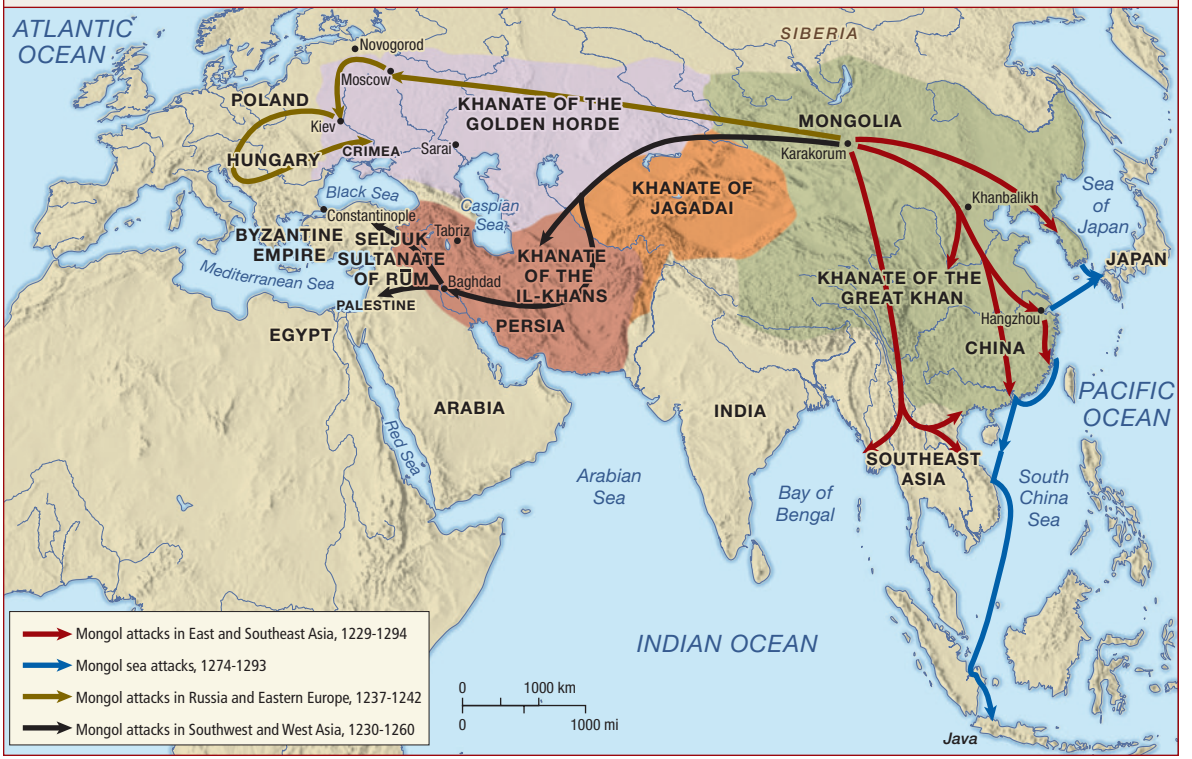
The Mongol drive for power did not end with Genghis Khan. After his death, his sons and grandsons continued to seek world domination, expanding Mongol rule across Eurasia. In the process they established four great **khanates**, vast autonomous regions of the Mongol Empire, each ruled by a khan descended from Genghis. These realms included the Khanate of the Great Khan, comprising most of East Asia; the Khanate of the Il-khans, which dominated Persia and Mesopotamia; the Khanate of the Golden Horde, which ruled over Russia; and the Khanate of Jagadai (*JAH-guh-dī*), which controlled Central Asia (Map 15.5). In adapting their rule to these regions, however, the Mongols were themselves transformed, taking on many ways and ideas of the peoples they ruled.

East Asia: Khubilai Khan and His Mongol-Chinese Empire

The richest and most populous khanate was the one ruled by the **Great Khan**. Chosen by tribal council as Genghis Khan's main successor, he was both the direct ruler of all Mongol lands in East Asia and the overlord of the other Mongol realms, whose khans were considered his vassals. As long as the empire remained intact, he was the planet's most powerful person.

Map 15.5 The Four Mongol Khanates Connect Eurasia in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

Building on Genghis Khan's conquests, his sons and grandsons further extended Mongol rule, conquering the rest of China, Russia, Persia, and much of Islamic West Asia. Notice that the four huge "khanates" they formed united much of Eurasia, creating and enhancing connections among distant and diverse cultures. How did Mongol rule help to expedite the exchange of goods and knowledge?



Genghis Khan's son Ögödei (*UH-guh-dā*), elected Great Khan in 1229, vastly expanded the whole Mongol realm, sending armies in the 1230s to invade southwest Asia and Russia. In East Asia he completed the conquest of north China, routing the last remnants of the Jurchen realm that had survived his father's devastation. Then he planned to move against the Song regime in southern China. But Ögödei died in a drinking binge in 1241, leaving his successors to continue his work.

Khubilai Khan completes the conquest of China

Ögödei's most eminent successor, as a warrior and a ruler, was his nephew Khubilai (*KOO-bih-lī*) Khan. After leading Mongol armies against the Song forces during the 1250s, this talented leader, the ablest of Genghis Khan's grandsons, was chosen as Great Khan in 1260. Over the next two decades, he defeated the Song regime and completed the conquest of China. In 1271 he even claimed the Mandate of Heaven, the divine warrant to rule China, installing himself as its emperor and starting a new dynasty called the Yuan (*yoo-WAHN*). By 1279, when the last Song forces were finally crushed,

Khubilai was master of East Asia, ruling as both the Mongol Great Khan and the Emperor of China.

Elsewhere Khubilai was less successful. In 1274 and 1281 he launched against Japan two massive naval invasions, with hundreds of ships and thousands of warriors. But these attacks failed due to Japanese resistance and terrible sea storms the Japanese called **kamikaze** (*KAH-mē-KAH-zē*)—"divine winds" they believed the gods had sent to protect Japan. In the 1280s Khubilai sent armies into Southeast Asia, but they were bogged down by the region's dense rain forests, stifling heat, oppressive humidity, and deadly tropical diseases. In 1293 he dispatched a seaborne force to attack the island of Java, but this force was decisively repelled.

Mongol rulers embrace Chinese ways

In China, however, Khubilai reigned supreme. Unlike other Mongols who disdained China's sedentary society, he embraced many Chinese ways. He moved his capital from Mongolia to northern China, ruling his realm from Khanbalikh (*KAHN-bah-LĒK*), the "city of the Khan," today called Beijing. He adopted China's administrative system, adapted to urban life, and spared China's cities from devastation if they accepted his rule. He encouraged commerce, promoted use of paper money, repaired and expanded highways, and fostered the formation of merchant corporations. He extended the Grand Canal from the Yellow River north to his capital, thus securing the transport of grain and goods along an 1100-mile waterway flanked by a paved road. He practiced religious toleration, became a Buddhist, and even took a Christian woman as one of his four main wives.

Chinese Confucians resent Mongol rule

Despite such efforts, Khubilai and his heirs were deeply resented in China. Many Chinese, regarding their culture as the world's most advanced, saw the Mongol rulers as uncouth barbarians. Chinese Confucians were offended by the Mongols' crude cuisine, their refusal to bathe, their tolerance for non-Chinese religions (such as Christianity and Islam), and the relatively high status they accorded to women. But above all, Confucian scholars resented their own loss of status: although the Mongol regime still employed them as administrators, it reduced their privileges and abandoned their civil service exam placement system, while placing Mongols and other foreigners in most important posts. Within several decades after Khubilai's death in 1294, Mongol rule in China was further weakened by struggles among his successors and by deadly natural disasters.

Southwest Asia: Mongol Devastation and Muslim Resilience

In many ways, Islamic Southwest Asia's experience with the Mongols was similar to East Asia's. In both regions, an assault begun by Genghis Khan was resumed and expanded by one of his grandsons. In both regions, the Mongols overcame strong resistance by a wealthy, cosmopolitan society. In both regions, Mongol forces were eventually turned back, but only after carving out an enormous empire. And in both regions, the Mongols adopted beliefs and practices of the peoples they ruled, but continued to be seen by these peoples as alien oppressors.

Mongols invade Persia and Anatolia

THE MONGOL ASSAULTS ON THE MUSLIM WORLD. The Mongol conquest of Southwest Asia started with assaults on Persia. Ravaged during Genghis Khan's assault on Khwarazm in 1219–1221, Persia got a respite when those armies withdrew. In 1230, however, Great Khan Ögödei sent a sizable force there to complete his father's unfinished business.

Later, after routing local armies and overrunning Persia, the Mongols dispatched armed forays into Anatolia, defeating the Seljuk Sultanate of Rūm in 1243. But at the time they lacked sufficient forces to follow up this victory. Nor were they yet ready to invade Mesopotamia, where the Abbasid Caliphs, claiming spiritual leadership of the Islamic world, reigned in the heavily fortified city of Baghdad.

Hülegü conquers Islamic Southwest Asia

In the 1250s, however, the Mongols decided to resume and expand their Southwest Asian conquests. While Khubilai led armies against China's Song regime, in Mongolia his brother Hülegü (*hoo-LEH-goo*) assembled a huge force, complete with siege equipment and Chinese technicians, to aid in his intended assaults on Muslim cities and citadels. Hülegü arrived in Persia in 1256 and was joined there by other Mongol forces in the region.

The Mongol forces first attacked the Assassins, the Shi'ite murder sect, which by this time had established numerous fortresses throughout the rugged mountains south of the Caspian Sea. One by one the Mongols stormed and demolished these strongholds. By the end of 1257, the Mongols had massacred or captured most of the sect's members, thus eliminating the cult of killers that had long terrorized the Sunni Muslim leaders.

Attackers using a catapult against a walled fortification.

But Sunni Muslims had little time to rejoice. Within weeks the Mongols were threatening Baghdad and insisting, as their price for sparing the city, that the reigning Abbasid Caliph offer them homage and tribute. When Islam's spiritual leader refused to submit, the irate Mongols routed his armies and besieged his city. In February of 1258, after holding out for several weeks, Baghdad fell to the invaders, appalling the Muslim world. Hülegü let his men plunder the city and had the captured caliph trampled to death by horses. Thus ignobly ended the once-great Abbasid Empire.

The next year, while Hülegü headed homeward with some of his troops to take part in a Mongol power struggle, the rest of his army moved west into Syria and Palestine. But the Muslim Mamluks who then ruled Egypt, themselves descended from Central Asian Turks, sent a huge force that decisively defeated the Mongols in 1260 in Palestine. Hülegü later returned to Southwest Asia but died in 1265 without regaining the initiative.

The Il-khan Conversion and Triumph of Islam. Hülegü's heirs, a series of Southwest Asian Mongol rulers known as **Il-khans** (subordinate khans), focused mainly on ruling their own realm. But the Khanate of the Il-khans, which stretched from eastern Anatolia to India's Indus River (Map 15.5), faced serious problems. In their campaigns of conquest the Mongols had ravaged the region, destroying its cities and irrigation systems, killing many of its people and wrecking its economy. As their conquests ceased and they lacked new places to plunder, they made things worse by imposing heavy taxes, effectively pillaging their own empire and ruining its recovery. The coexistence of Mongol and Islamic law created legal chaos, and a string of short reigns by inept Il-khans damaged the regime still further. So did the fact that the Mongol rulers were seen by their subjects as alien, barbaric oppressors.

Il-khans adopt Islamic ways

Eventually, however, like countless earlier rulers of Persia and Mesopotamia, the Mongols were converted by the culture they conquered. Enamored by the splendor of Islamic civilization, they fostered trade, patronized science and scholarship, built cities and schools, and gradually forsook their nomadic ways. Many Mongols became Muslims, including the Il-khans themselves.

The ablest Il-khan was Mahmud Ghazan (*MAH-mood gah-ZAHN*), who focused his brief reign (1295–1304) on rebuilding the region. He converted to Islam, instituted fair taxation, repaired irrigation systems, and returned abandoned lands to cultivation. Though a Sunni Muslim, he tolerated Shi'ites, who had been harshly persecuted under the Abbasid Caliphate.

Rashid al-Din combines Eastern and Western learning

Most of what we know of Mahmud Ghazan, and much of our knowledge of this era, comes from Ghazan's prime minister Rashid al-Din (*rah-SHĒD ahl-DĒN*), an eminent example of the cultural connections fostered by Mongol conquests. Born a Jew, Rashid became a Muslim and worked for the Mongols in places from China to Persia. As a physician familiar with Chinese medicine, he helped bring Chinese knowledge of human anatomy to the Muslim world, whence it later spread to Europe. As a historian, Rashid worked with Eastern and Western scholars to produce the first great history of the world, a monumental work with lavish illustrations (see catapult drawing from Rashid's book on page 369). As an economist and government official, Rashid promoted fiscal and administrative reforms, ably guiding the regime of Il-khan Mahmud Ghazan.

Unfortunately for the Il-khans, Ghazan's reign was cut short in 1304 by his death from an illness at age 32. Instead of consolidating his achievements, his successors indulged in the pleasures of their court, letting corrupt officials run the realm. In 1335, when the last of the Il-khans died without an heir, the empire disintegrated into provinces controlled by ambitious warlords.

As the Il-khan Empire became the first Mongol khanate to vanish, it was clear that the Muslim world had weathered the nomadic onslaught. Both Seljuk Turks and Mongols had brought death and destruction to Southwest Asia, but both had also embraced its culture and religion, and for a time provided good governance, until their realms were fragmented by conflicts among the rulers. Both had actually expanded Muslim horizons, the Seljuks by making Anatolia Islamic and using Persian culture to revitalize Islam, and the Mongols by uniting a Eurasian empire that brought East Asian medicine, scholarship, commerce, and technology to the Muslim lands of Southwest Asia.

Russia: Conquest, Tribute, and the Tatar Yoke

Although the Mongol invasion of Russia, like those of China and Southwest Asia, involved the vanquishing of a vast realm by a grandson of Genghis Khan, the Mongol method of governing Russia differed from that employed elsewhere. For one thing, the Mongols ruled Russia indirectly. Withdrawing their forces after ravaging Russia's city-states, the Mongols demanded tribute and made Russian rulers vassals of the Mongol khan. For another thing, the Mongols who ruled Russia did not adopt Russian ways. Rejecting Russia's Orthodox Christianity and settled agrarian society, they lived in the steppes, remained pastoral nomads, and embraced Islam. Still, by aiding the rise of Moscow as Russia's dominant city, Mongol rule in Russia, which lasted more than two centuries, played a key role in Russia's political development.

Batu Khan conquers Russia

The onslaught began in late 1237 when Batu Khan (*BAH-too KAHN*), grandson of Genghis and cousin of Khubilai and Hülegü, stunned northern Russia by attacking in winter, piercing the dense forests by using frozen rivers as highways for his horsemen. In December his Mongols, whom the Russians called Tatars (*TAH-tarz*), overran Russia's

Document 15.1 Russian Chronicle Account of the Mongol Attack on Kiev

In 1240, having earlier overrun northern Russia, Batu Khan and his Mongols, known by the Russians as Tatars, descended upon the great city of Kiev. This account from the Russian chronicles provides a vivid description of the Mongol assault.

In this year [1240] Batu Khan approached and surrounded the city of Kiev with a great multitude of soldiers. The Tatar force besieged it, and it was impossible for anyone either to leave the city or to enter it. Squeaking of wagons, bellowing of camels, sounds of trumpets and organs, neighing of horses, and cry and sobs of an innumerable multitude of people made it impossible to hear one another in the city. The entire country was overflowing with Tatars. . . .

Batu ordered that many wall-destroying rams be brought to Kiev and placed near the Polish Gate, because that part was wooded. Many rams hammered the walls without interruption day and night and the inhabitants were frightened, and there were many killed and blood flowed like water. And Batu sent the following message to the inhabitants of Kiev: "If you surrender to me, you will be forgiven; if, however, you are going to resist you will suffer greatly and perish cruelly." The inhabitants of Kiev, however, did not listen to him, but calumniated and cursed him. This angered Batu very much and he ordered [his men] to attack the city with great fury. And thus with the aid of many rams they broke through the city walls and entered the city, and the inhabitants ran to meet them. It was possible to hear and see a great clash of lances and clatter of shields; the arrows obscured the light and because of this it was impossible to see the sky, but there was darkness from the multitude of Tatar arrows, and there were dead everywhere and everywhere blood flowed like water.... The Tatars took the city of Kiev on St. Nicholas Day, December 6 [1240].

SOURCE: *Polnoe Sobranie Russkikh Letopisei (Complete Collection of Russian Chronicles)*, X, 115–117. Translation by Basil Dmytryshin, *Medieval Russia: A Source Book, 900–1700* (2nd. ed., New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 112–113.

major cities, putting people to the sword and buildings to the torch, spreading terror, death, and devastation. In spring 1238, the Mongols arrived at Novgorod (*NŌV-guh-rud*), a prosperous commercial metropolis, but decided not to attack, partly because the spring thaw made the swampy area unfit for a siege, and partly because the city's merchants quickly agreed to pay tribute. The Mongols had learned that they could profit as parasites, not just as plunderers.

Besides, Batu's main aim was to secure his northern flank for an invasion of Europe. In 1240 he began this quest with an assault on Kiev, former capital of Kievan Rus (Chapter 10), sacking the city and leaving behind fields full of skulls and bones (see "Russian Chronicle Account of the Mongol Attack on Kiev"). In 1241 the Mongols moved into Poland and Hungary, where they encountered European knights. Finding arrows useless against the metal armor of these mounted warriors, Batu's marksmen shot the knights' horses out from under them to win several major battles. But early the next year, when Batu learned that Great Khan Ögödei had died, he withdrew his forces to the east to influence the choice of a successor.

Europe thus was spared, but not Russia. Batu and his minions set up a new realm that came to be called the Khanate of the **Golden Horde**. From their capital at Sarai (*sah-RĪ*), amid the steppes and pasturelands north of the Caspian Sea, they commanded a domain that extended from north Central Asia into Eastern Europe. For the next few centuries the Mongols dominated Russia, forcing its city-states to furnish tribute,

soldiers, and slaves, while playing their princes off against one another. This era of Mongol domination was known in Russia as the **Tatar Yoke**.

Golden Horde rules Russia indirectly

Still, the Tatars largely let the Russians run their own affairs as long as their main leader would travel to Sarai and humbly seek the khan's formal permission to serve as Grand Prince. At first the khans alternated this office among various Russian princes, so none would gain too much power. Eventually, however, the khans entrusted it mostly to the rulers of a rising metropolis called Moscow. Henceforth, by doing the khan's bidding and acting as his agents in repressing other Russians, Moscow's rulers usually maintained the title of Grand Prince. In time this status would help Moscow become Russia's leading city, and eventually grow powerful enough to challenge Mongol rule.

Central Asia: The Struggle to Maintain the Mongol Heritage

Strife among the Mongols also threatened their empire. Discord stemmed from its size and diversity, which bred conflicts among its various regions, and from its lack of a clear succession system, sparking power struggles among Genghis Khan's heirs. As early as the 1260s, Batu's successors in the Golden Horde clashed with Hülegü's Il-khan regime, while Khubilai fought a four-year battle against a younger brother to prevail as Great Khan.

Khanate of Jagadai seeks to maintain Mongol heritage

In time the struggles among the Mongols tended to converge in Central Asia, in the lands that Genghis Khan had consigned to his second son, Jagadai. Centered among the other three khanates, the Khanate of Jagadai was the empire's hub (Map 15.5). It was also the poorest and least populated khanate, and the one that came closest to maintaining the Mongols' original nomadic warrior lifestyle.

The khanate's devotion to this lifestyle set the stage for conflicts. War and conquest were part of the Mongol heritage, and the empire's expansion had come mainly at the expense of settled societies. But the Khanate of Jagadai, largely surrounded by the other three khanates, could not expand without attacking other Mongols. At first it saw no need to do so and was content to supply the other realms with rugged Central Asian horsemen to sustain their assaults.

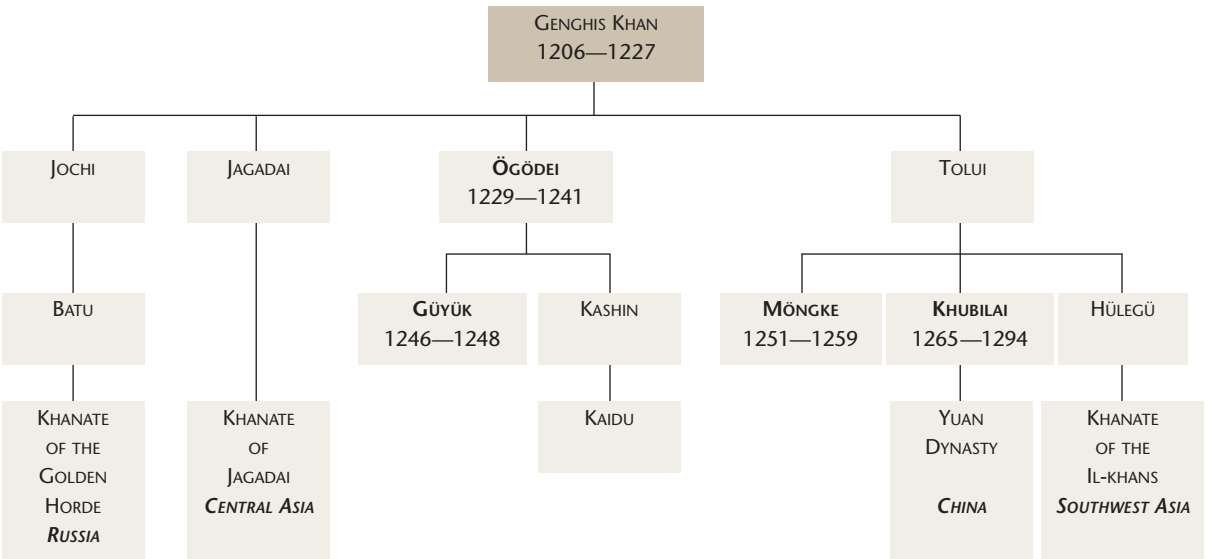
Eventually, however, after conquering settled societies, the other khanates adopted new customs and beliefs. The Il-khans embraced Islam, as did the Golden Horde, while Khubilai became a Buddhist, declared himself Chinese emperor, and moved the Great Khan's capital from Mongolia to China. Seeing such changes as a debasement of Genghis Khan's legacy, the rulers of the Central Asian khanate rallied to restore this heritage.

Kaidu combats Khubilai for control of Mongol heritage

Their leader, Ögödei's grandson Kaidu (*KĪ-doo*), was resentful that his branch of the family had lost out in the struggles for succession as Great Khan. In the 1260s he extended his sway over the Khanate of Jagadai, portraying himself as protector of the Mongol traditions. He declared that all true Mongols must live in tents on the steppes and must not degrade themselves by dwelling in cities and towns. Then, in the 1270s, after assembling an army of followers, he attacked the western part of the region ruled by the Great Khan.

Responding swiftly, Great Khan Khubilai sent a strong force to repel the attack. But Kaidu, refusing to admit defeat, stunned the other Mongols in 1277 by invading

Mongol Rulers and Khanates
Great Khans in bold



Mongolia itself. Although the next year Khubilai's armies drove back the forces of Kaidu, the Great Khan chose to continue his military efforts elsewhere rather than to stop and finish off his upstart relative. So the conflicts continued for a generation, until Kaidu died in 1301. Left without a leader, his followers reluctantly submitted a few years later to Khubilai's successor, but then fought among themselves sporadically for decades. By the 1340s, as a result, the Jagadai Khanate had split into two smaller realms.

The Mongol empire thus began to unravel, but its impact could not be undone. In conquering much of Eurasia, the Mongols wrought massive ruin, but in ruling it they forged connections that had extensive and enduring consequences.

The Mongol Impact: Connections and Consequences

The initial impact of the Mongol onslaught was widespread devastation. Across Eurasia hundreds of cities and towns were leveled, thousands of farmlands were ruined, and millions of people were killed. According to contemporary counts, the population of China dropped by 40 percent, from around 100 million to about 60 million, during the decades of Mongol invasion and rule. Russia's wealth and talent were depleted by two centuries of the Tatar Yoke. Southwest Asia was hit especially hard, pillaged first by the Seljuk Turks and then by the Mongols. Many of the region's great cities were destroyed, and it took decades for its farms to recover from the damage done to irrigation.

In the long run, however, the main impact of the Mongol era was increased Eurasian integration. By connecting distant and diverse regions under a common rule,

the Mongols promoted trade and travel from one end of Eurasia to the other, vastly enhancing the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies—as well as the spread of diseases—among Eurasian societies.

Trade and Travel: *The Pax Mongolica*

Much as Romans had created a Roman Peace, or *Pax Romana*, promoting commercial and cultural exchanges in the first and second centuries C.E., the Mongols produced a Mongolian Peace, later called ***Pax Mongolica*** (*PAHX mon-GŌL-ih-kuh*), that advanced the flow of goods and ideas among Eurasian peoples (Map 15.6).

Pax Mongolica facilitates Eurasian connections

The *Pax Mongolica* was not just a fortuitous byproduct of the Mongol invasions; it resulted from deliberate policies pursued by Mongol rulers. To manage their vast realm, the Mongols devised an effective administration, using the Uighur Turks' writing system

Map 15.6 Pax Mongolica Enhances Eurasian Connections in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries

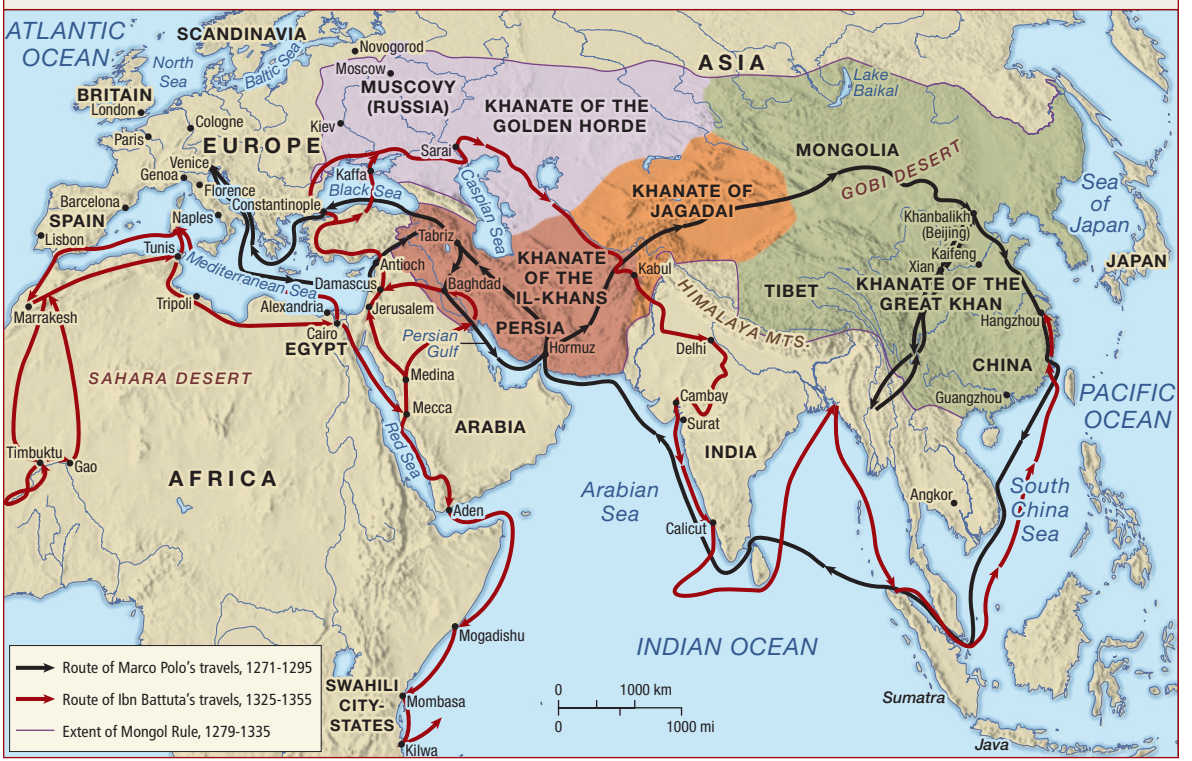
By connecting much of Eurasia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols created a Pax Mongolica, a "Mongolian Peace" that enhanced the exchange of goods and knowledge. Note the land and sea routes that linked numerous cultures, carrying cottons from India; spices from Southeast Asia; timber, furs, and slaves from Russia; silks, porcelains, and teas from China; grapes, wines, and olive oils from Europe; and horses, dates, sugar, and slaves from Islamic West Asia and Africa. Along with increasing commerce, what ideas, knowledge, beliefs, and technologies did Mongol rule help to spread?

and often employing the Uighurs themselves as civil servants and scribes. To expedite communication, the Mongols created a long-distance postal system, with an extensive network of relay stations, staffed by thousands of riders and ponies capable of carrying messages 200 miles a day. To secure interregional travel and commerce, Mongol forces protected the trade routes with groups of warriors stationed across Central Asia. To enhance diplomatic relations, Mongol rulers dispatched emissaries to distant realms and welcomed embassies from other lands. The Mongols even supplied traveling merchants and dignitaries with an embossed metal seal that served as an early form of passport, to indicate that the bearer's travel was officially approved (see photo on page 376).

Aided and protected by such policies, growing numbers of traders and travelers transported goods and knowledge across Eurasia. Merchants conveyed and exchanged cottons from India; spices from Southeast Asia; timber, furs, and slaves from Russia; silks, porcelains, and teas from China; grapes, wines, and olive oils from Europe; and

Map 15.7 Travels of Marco Polo, 1271–1295, and Ibn Battuta, 1325–1355

The *Pax Mongolica* enabled travelers such as Marco Polo (an Italian Christian) and Ibn Battuta (a Moroccan Muslim) to visit many distant lands. Note that Marco Polo traveled across Eurasia from Italy to China, where he lived for over seventeen years before returning to Europe, while Ibn Battuta's travels took him to numerous cities and places in Africa and Eurasia. How did their vivid descriptions of their travels, and of the lands they visited, help inspire others to create new connections linking Europe, Africa, Asia, and beyond?



A Mongol "passport."

horses, dates, sugar, and slaves from Muslim domains in Africa and Southwest Asia. Mongol era travelers also spread knowledge by publishing accounts of their visits to widely varied lands.

One such account was that of Marco Polo, an Italian merchant who claimed to have traveled across Central Asia to China (Map 15.7) and to have worked in Khubilai Khan's service from 1275 to 1292. Later, back in Europe, Polo published *Il milione* (The Million), a book describing an immense Chinese empire with huge, prosperous cities, printed books and paper money, flourishing canals and roads, black rocks (coal) that were used as fuel, great ships in bustling harbors, splendid architecture, and fabulous goods. At first he was dismissed as a liar, and even today some critics contend that his accounts were based not on personal experience but on tales heard from other travelers, amplified by his imagination. Nonetheless, whatever their source, his stories helped inspire a fascination with the East among the peoples of Europe. This fascination, along with accounts of Asian wealth and a growing Western appetite for eastern goods such as spices, ceramics, textiles, and teas, led later Europeans to embark on epic voyages that would transform the world (Chapter 19).

Another influential travel account was the *Rihlah* ("Travels") of Ibn Battuta (*IB'n bah-TOO-tah*), a Muslim from Morocco who between 1325 and 1355 journeyed some 75,000 miles across the Mongol khanates and beyond. He reported visiting the reigning Mongol Il-khan, the Golden Horde headquarters at Sarai, various trading towns on the Silk Road, and numerous other settlements in India, Southeast Asia, China, Europe, and Africa. His detailed recollections, dictated after his return, provided his readers, and subsequent historians, with remarkably accurate descriptions of these diverse regions and societies.

Travels of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta enhance cross-cultural connections

Exchanges of Ideas and Technologies

Eager to exploit the talents of their conquered subjects, the Mongols moved people with special skills—such as architects, engineers, miners, metalworkers, and carpenters—all over the empire. Intrigued by the diverse ideas of the peoples they ruled, many Mongol rulers also welcomed travel by scholars and religious figures.

Such practices helped to disseminate ideas and technologies. Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian communities, for example, emerged in many new places, exposing societies all over Eurasia to their religious ideas. Muslim knowledge about mathematics and astronomy spread eastward to China, where Khubilai Khan employed Persian scholars to help build a new observatory, and westward to Europe, where such knowledge eventually helped inspire a scientific revolution. Chinese expertise in medicine and anatomy was likewise spread westward by traveling scholars and officials, most notably Rashid al-Din. From China also came two enormously influential technologies: printing and gunpowder weaponry.

Mongols help spread religious and scientific ideas

By the time of the Mongol conquests, the Chinese technique of printing on paper from carved wooden blocks had spread to the land of the Uighur Turks, in Central Asia southwest of Mongolia. Allied with the Mongols, and employed throughout their empire as artisans, scribes, and officials, Uighurs then helped spread printing westward across Eurasia. Although printing was initially shunned by Muslims, who deemed that sacred texts must be recopied devoutly by hand, Il-khan officials in Persia introduced printed paper money in 1294—then withdrew it when people rioted against what they saw as

Mongols and Uighur Turks help spread process of printing

worthless pieces of paper. In the 1300s, printed playing cards and holy pictures were introduced into Europe, aided no doubt by diplomats and clerics who had seen them in eastern travels during the *Pax Mongolica*. These printed cards and pictures foreshadowed the development in Europe of woodblock artwork and movable-type printing presses during the next century (Chapter 16).

Mongols help spread gunpowder weapons

More direct was the Mongol role in proliferating gunpowder weapons. During the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.), the Chinese had learned to combine saltpeter (potassium nitrate) with sulfur and charcoal to create a powder that, when ignited, burned very quickly or exploded. This substance, later called gunpowder, soon proved useful in mining, clearing forests, building canals, and staging fireworks displays. Eventually China's warriors also used it in crude arrow weapons and in bombs that were thrown or catapulted in battle. In the 1200s such devices helped China to slow—but not stop—the Mongol assault.

Asian warriors firing arrows from tubes.

The Mongols quickly saw the value of such weapons. While fighting the Jurchens in north China (1211–1215), Genghis Khan's forces learned from Chinese allies how to build catapults and gunpowder bombs, which later Mongol armies used in their attacks on Islamic Southwest Asia. By the late 1200s, also with Chinese help, the Mongols learned to cast thick metal firepots and then pack them with gunpowder and a large rock or metal ball. Once ignited, the exploding powder propelled the projectile with enough force to smash holes in enemy walls. Thus were born the first cannons.

Others, too, were capable of copying their foes. Battered by Mongol assaults, Muslims soon learned to make gunpowder weapons, and Europeans, experienced in forging metal pots and church bells, were not far behind. By the 1300s both Muslims and Christians were using gunpowder cannons, and by century's end some European armies had handheld firearms.

Although cumbersome and inaccurate, these early cannons and firearms gradually transformed warfare. Initially gunpowder helped nomadic warriors seize the walled cities of settled societies. But guns eventually gave an edge to the settled societies, which had the resources, mines, and artisans to produce them in far greater numbers than could the nomads. In time the use of firearms neutralized the nomads' advantages—their horsemanship, courage, and speed—by enabling enemy armies to shoot at them from a distance. The Mongols thus helped to spread a technology that later contributed to their undoing.

The Plague Pandemic

The Mongols also helped to spread a disease that contributed to their undoing. In the mid-1300s Eurasia was swept by a pandemic of **bubonic plague**, a deadly contagion typically carried from rodents to humans by fleas. Unaware of how it spread, people at the time had little chance to protect themselves from this terrible affliction, which brought painful inflammations followed by chills, vomiting, fever, diarrhea, and delirium—often leading to death in three or four days.

Mongol connections help spread plague throughout China

The outbreak began in southwest China (Map 15.8), where rats and people had been beset by the plague sporadically for centuries. In the 1330s and 1340s, probably aided by traveling Mongol soldiers whose supply wagons may have harbored infected rats and fleas, the plague spread to other parts of China, where numerous people had already been weakened by floods and famines.

Map 15.8 The Plague Pandemic of the Fourteenth Century

In connecting most of Eurasia by conquest and commerce, the Mongols also helped facilitate the spread of disease. Compare this map with Maps 15.6 and 15.7, noting that the plague, having ravaged parts of China, moved westward along trade and travel routes that the Mongols used to connect their vast Eurasian empire. In what ways did the Mongols, and connections they helped develop, contribute to the plague pandemic? How did the plague help to end Mongol rule in China?

Meanwhile, aided by increased caravan traffic promoted by the Mongols, the plague moved westward across Central Asia, spread by fleas that fed on the blood of squirrels, rats, marmots, dogs, and humans. The deadly contagion ravaged not just caravans and towns along the trade routes but also encampments of nomadic herders and Mongol warriors scattered across the steppes.

Mongol connections help spread plague to Egypt and Europe

By 1346, the plague had reached the Black Sea's northern shores, where it afflicted Mongol soldiers besieging the city of Kaffa, a fortified trading port controlled by the Italian Republic of Genoa. According to some accounts, in one of history's earliest attempts at biological warfare, Mongols catapulted corpses of plague victims over the town walls into the surrounded city, evidently intending to infect its defenders. Fleeing Genoese ships, apparently harboring infected rats, carried the plague to Egypt and to Europe, where perhaps a third of the population perished in an epidemic that Europeans called the Black Death (Chapter 16).

The plague pandemic thus ravaged the peoples of Eurasia and northeast Africa, killing tens of millions and leaving behind a trail of death and devastation. It induced

widespread panic, disrupted commerce, and created chaotic conditions that contributed to the disintegration of the Mongol Empire.

The End of the Mongol Era

By the 1330s, when the plague pandemic began, the Mongol Empire was already in decline. In Southwest Asia, as we have seen, the Khanate of the Il-khans dissolved after its last ruler died with no heir in 1335. In Central Asia, the Khanate of Jagadai, torn by internal discord, split into eastern and western khanates during the 1330s and 1340s. In China, Mongol rule was beset by dynastic strife: as Khubilai's descendants vied for power, often by intrigues and assassinations, eight different emperors reigned between 1307 and 1333.

Mongols lose the Mandate of Heaven

Then catastrophe struck China. In the mid-1330s, deluged by crop-destroying floods, northern China endured a calamitous famine. In the 1340s, before the region recovered, another famine ensued. Faced with widespread starvation, the government strove to repair the dikes and dams, only to have them burst again. Meanwhile, huge amounts of paper money printed to finance the repairs deeply debased the currency. In the midst of these disasters came the plague from southwest China, ravaging much of the country and intensifying the crisis. By the 1350s many Chinese were joining mass revolts against the Mongol regime. To them the disasters had an obvious explanation: the Mongol dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

These disasters and this perception bolstered rebel leaders, especially Zhu Yuanzhang (*JOO yoo-wahn JAHNG*), a poor peasant orphaned as a youth when his parents starved to death in a famine. While other rebels looted the countryside, Zhu amassed an army of supporters. In 1356, as China descended into chaos, he captured Nanjing, one of China's largest cities, and made it his capital. During the next decade he defeated other rebels, gaining control of the entire Yangzi valley. Finally he moved north with his huge army to confront the Mongol emperor, who promptly fled to Mongolia. In 1368 Zhu claimed Heaven's Mandate as the emperor Hongwu (*HONG WOO*) and founded a new dynasty called the Ming (Chapter 21). Mongol rule in China thus came to an end.

The Mongol Empire never recovered from its loss of China. In the late 1300s, a Turkic warrior called Timur (*tē-MOOR*) Lenk tried to reunite the Mongol realm, but his ruinous attacks on other Turks and Mongols instead opened the way for new Islamic empires (Chapter 17) and for Russian independence (Chapter 25). For several centuries surviving Mongol khanates would stage sporadic raids on settled societies such as Russia and China. But armed with gunpowder weapons, knowledge of which the Mongols had helped spread across Eurasia, the settled societies with their large armies would increasingly manage to keep the mounted steppe warriors at bay. The age of the great nomadic empires was over.

Chapter Review

Putting it in Perspective

The nomadic invasions of the tenth through fourteenth centuries shook the very foundations of Eurasia's settled societies. In a remarkable series of assaults, the nomads of Central Asia, with small populations and simple societies based on herding and horsemanship, devastated the large armies, fertile farmlands, and cosmopolitan cities of their far more populous and prosperous neighbors. The Khitans, and later the Jurchens, moved into northern China, the cradle of Chinese civilization. The Seljuk Turks overran most of Southwest Asia, seizing the historic heartlands of the Islamic and Byzantine worlds. Then came the Mongols, mightiest of all the nomads, who not only overran the Jurchen and former Seljuk domains, but also conquered all of China and much of Eurasia as well.

In the long run, however, the nomadic conquests transformed the nomads and facilitated the triumph of the settled societies. Over time the victorious nomads adopted many features of the conquered cultures, including governance structures, economic patterns, and religious beliefs. Thus, by the time their empires were finally overthrown, the former nomads had themselves become more settled and cosmopolitan, largely forsaking their original tribal and itinerant ways. Furthermore, by forcibly uniting large parts of Eurasia under their rule, the Seljuk Turks and Mongols fostered connections that in time would strengthen the settled societies. Indeed, by expediting the growth of east-west commerce and the spread of technologies such as gunpowder and printing, the nomadic conquests eventually enhanced the wealth and power of both the Muslim and the Christian worlds.

Reviewing Key Material

KEY CONCEPTS

khan, 358
shamanism, 358
Il-khans, 369
Golden Horde, 371
Assassins, 362
khanates, 366
Great Khan, 366
kamikaze, 368
Tatar Yoke, 372
Pax Mongolica, 374
bubonic plague, 377

KEY PEOPLE

Genghis Khan, 355
Alp Arslan, 361
The Nizam al-Mulk, 361
Salah al-Din, 363
Tamar of Georgia, 363
Yelü Chucai, 366
Ögödei, 367
Khubilai, 367
Hülegü, 369
Mahmud Ghazan, 370
Rashid al-Din, 370
Batu, 370
Kaidu, 372
Marco Polo, 376
Ibn Battuta, 376
Hongwu, 379

ASK YOURSELF

1. Why did the peoples of Central Asia rely mostly on herding and horsemanship rather than on farming? What was the impact of this reliance on their societies and governance?
2. How and why were the Seljuk Turks able to conquer most of Southwest Asia? How were they transformed from destructive marauders into rulers of a cosmopolitan empire?
3. What factors account for the incredible success of the Mongol campaigns of conquest? Why did the Mongols fail to conquer Japan, Southeast Asia, Egypt, and Europe?
4. Why did the nomadic conquerors so often adopt the features, structures, and beliefs of the cultures they conquered?
5. What were the benefits and disadvantages of the *Pax Mongolica*? What were its long term impacts on the Mongol Empire and on the large Eurasian settled societies?
6. How did Mongols compare, in their tactics, policies, and impacts, with earlier rulers of multicultural empires, such as Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Muslim Arabs, and Seljuk Turks?

GOING FURTHER

Adshead, S. A. M. *Central Asia in World History.* 1993.
Allsen, Thomas. *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire.* 2002.

Allsen, Thomas T. *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. 2001.
Amitai-Preiss, R., and D. Morgan, eds. *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy*. 2000.
Bartlett, W. B. *The Assassins: The Story of Islam's Medieval Secret Sect*. 2001.
Chase, Kenneth. *Firearms: A Global History to 1700*. 2003.
Dardess, J. W. *Conquerors and Confucians*. 1973.
De Hartog, Leo. *Genghis Khan, Conqueror of the World*. 1989.
De Hartog, Leo. *Russia Under the Mongol Yoke*. 1996.
Farmer, Edward L. *Early Ming Government*. 1976.
Frank, A. G. *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*. 1998.
Golden, P. *Introduction to the History of Turkic Peoples*. 1992.
Grousset, Rene. *The Empire of the Steppes*. 1970.
Khan, Paul, ed. *The Secret History of the Mongols*. 1984.
Martin, H. D. *The Rise of Genghis Khan and the Conquest of North China*. 1971.
Mokyr, Joel. *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress*. 1990.
Morgan, David. *Medieval Persia, 1040-1479*. 1988.
Morgan, David. *The Mongols*. 1986.
Ostrowski, D. *Muscovy and the Mongols*. 1998.
Ratchnevsky, Paul. *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*. 1991.
Rossabi, M. *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*. 1988.
Severin, Tim. *In Search of Chinggis Khan*. 1992.
West, Elizabeth E. *Mongolian Rule in China*. 1989.

Key Dates and Developments

1025–1040	Seljuk Turks enter Persia
1055	Seljuk Turks conquer Baghdad
1071–1076	Seljuks defeat Byzantines, take Syria and Palestine
1092–1194	Seljuk Empire disintegrates
1114–1127	Jurchens defeat Khitans and conquer northern China
1206	Temujin proclaimed Genghis Khan
1211–1215	Mongols defeat Jurchens and ravage northern China
1219–1221	Mongols conquer Khwarazm and ravage Persia
1237–1241	Mongols invade Russia and central Europe
1255–1260	Mongols invade Southwest Asia, take Baghdad in 1258
1274, 1281	Japan rebuffs Mongol invasions with help of storms
1275–1292	Marco Polo reportedly resides in China
1279	Khubilai completes conquest of China
1325–1355	Ibn Battuta travels across much of Asia and Africa
1335	Il-khan regime collapses in southern Asia
1340s	Plague pandemic spreads across Eurasia
1368	Mongols ousted from China; Hongwu begins Ming dynasty
1380–1405	Timur Lenk ravages much of Asia