

Era 5: Part 3

The Mongol Dominance

Who were the Mongols?³

See Student Handouts 1.1 and 1.4 and 1.6

Who was Genghis Khan?⁴

See Student Handout 1.2

How did the Mongols acquire their Empire?⁵

See Student Handouts 1.3 and 1.5

What was the lasting influence of the Mongols?⁶

A. Death. The Mongols inflicted it on a large scale. In battle, their powerful bows caused heavy enemy casualties. Moreover, mass slaughter of defeated enemy soldiers and civilians was used as a deliberate policy of terror in order to:

- Decrease the enemy's will to fight
- Induce cities to surrender without fighting, thus avoiding long sieges, which the Mongol army could not afford because it needed to keep moving to find grazing land for its horses
- Avoid the risk of leaving enemies behind that might be capable of renewing resistance
- Reduce the size of occupying detachments needing to be left behind.

But...

- More urban populations were spared than were massacred. Often spared were artisans, clerics of all religions, scholars, merchants, young women, and often officers, nobles, and administrators.
- Mass slaughter was not a Mongol monopoly.
- Mongol rulers revised law codes to reduce the number of offenses that carried the death penalty.

B. Destruction. The Mongols often destroyed the towns they attacked; Mongols traditionally had no use for towns. Destroying them was a practical measure to prevent their use for resistance.

- Irrigation channels were in many areas seriously damaged or neglected, filling with silt and becoming unusable.

- Destruction was a by-product of the Mongols' conquest, rather than policy. They were unaware of or uninterested in the damage; while the local population, reduced by flight, massacre, famine, disease, could not spare the labor to restore and maintain damaged property.

But . . .

- Courier services were expanded and many additional way stations were built along trade routes, where both troops and civilian travelers could re-supply.
- Road and bridges originally built to service the Mongol military became trade and travel routes.
- The extension of the Grand Canal to Beijing allowed cheap transport of rice from southern to northern China.

C. Extortion of Wealth. After first plundering the conquered, the conquerors were for a while satisfied with tribute in the form of demand of silk, grain, precious metals, and sophisticated war machinery. Eventually, though, Mongol rulers required regular, and frequently high, taxes on conquered subjects.

But

- Some of the Mongol wealth was redistributed where Mongols settled as governors, administrators or occupying soldiers.
- They introduced the idea of a graduated income tax which required a higher tax rate for higher incomes.
- The lot of some segments of the conquered population actually improved, owing to profits from the trade promoted and supported by the Mongols, to their enforcement of law and order within their territories, and to their opening of careers to merit, not only birth or wealth.

D. Displacement. During the Mongol campaigns of conquest and later, there was large-scale enslavement and forced movement of populations.

- Many fled in terror when news reached them of an approaching Mongol army.
- Within the army, peoples of different backgrounds were deliberately mixed. They and their families, who often accompanied the army, moved long distances on campaigns and spent long periods in far-away places as occupying armies.

- In conquered territories, the Mongols usually rounded up the craftspeople, and assigned them to Mongol princes and commanders. These captives were carried off to Mongolia or other parts of the growing empire.

But...

- Although conquered people served as captives, they often gained their freedom ; some eventually returned to their homelands.
- The movement of peoples resulted in the exchange of goods, ideas and styles and in frequent and widespread contact between groups of peoples of widely different cultural, ethnic, cultural, religious, and language backgrounds.

- E. Territorial Expansion. The Mongol empire was the largest land empire in the history of the world. After Genghis Khan's death, heirs fought for control, eventually dividing the empire into four separate khاناتes . They controlled—at their peak—territory from the Pacific Ocean to the Alps , and from the central Russian steppes to the Himalayas in India and jungles of southern China. They threatened the monarchies of Europe and challenged Muslim rule in Arabic . The stability of a trans-Asian empire created a Pax Mongolica – a Mongolian Peace .
- F. Disease . The association of disease and warfare is commonplace. Troops live under more unsanitary conditions than is normal. Unburied corpses often contaminated water supplies. Among the overcrowded and underfed in besieged cities and in close quartered armies, an infectious illness could spread quickly. The existing food supply must be stretched to feed the invading army, leaving little behind for the local population and thereby reducing its immune system. The bubonic plague was the worst such disease.

A Closer Look at Catastrophe: The Black Death⁷

The Black Death spread throughout Europe from 1347 to 1351. The disease wiped out nearly half of Europe's population. Many towns and villages lost most of their population, and some completely disappeared. There were three versions of the disease that plagued the population, the most well-known of these being the bubonic plague. Flea-infested rats aboard trading ships carried the disease along trade routes—probably originating in China and entering Europe via the Black Sea—and throughout the continent. As the fleas jumped to humans, the pandemic began.

The Black Death was so named because of the black color of the swollen lymph nodes, called buboes, its victims experienced. They appeared in the neck, armpits, legs, and groin. Other symptoms were severe head and body aches, high fever, rapid pulse, general weakness, and vomiting of blood. Symptoms appeared within a few days of exposure; the bursting of the buboes and death followed in just a few days more.

The bubonic plague hit urban areas hardest, where crowded conditions and poor sanitation helped spread disease. People seldom bathed, so it was common for them to have lice and fleas. There was no garbage collection or sanitation. All forms of refuse were simply thrown into the street, aiding the breeding of disease. The plague terrified people. It was not uncommon for families to abandon the sick, including family members, in an attempt to save themselves. Disposal of bodies became a nightmarish problem. Communal graves became common, as was disposal in rivers.

Many people believed the impure air carried the disease. Those who could afford it escaped to the countryside. They boarded up their homes and wither left their sick loved ones in the care of servants, or just left them inside. Still others isolated themselves in their homes in hopes of avoiding infection. The poor had no means of escape. They lived with and cared for their sick. Because they were in close quarters, the poor often fell victim to the disease themselves.

¹ Adapted from McNeese, Tim. (1999). *The middle ages (A.D. 500-1300)*. Milliken Publishing, St. Louis, MO.

² Basic outline from Spielvogel, Jackson J. (2010). *World history*. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, Columbus, OH.

³ Chapman, Anne. *Mongol empire builders: Fiends from hell or culture brokers?* "World History for Us All." <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Spielvogel, pp 360-361.