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CHINGIS KHAN AND THE RISE OF THE MONGOLS

The sudden rise of the Mongols under the leadership of Chingis Khan, the greatest of nomad conquerors to come galloping out of the grasslands of Central Asia, has long excited the imagination of historians. When Chingis Khan was born around 1165 (and given the name Temujin), the Mongol region was politically fragmented. The Mongols were one of a half-dozen major tribes of migratory herders who claimed sovereignty over parts of the grasslands north of China. Conflict between the various tribes, none of whom had any particular advantage over the others, was endemic.

Temujin's early life, so far as we know, was little different from that of many of his contemporaries. His father, known as Yesugei the Brave, was a minor Mongol leader. When Temujin was about 10 years old, Yesugei was murdered by members of a rival tribe. The death of Yesugei was a disaster for Temujin, his brothers, and their mother, Högelün Ujin. The family was abandoned by the other members of their clan, the Tayichiguds, and experienced much hardship for the next several years.

Somehow Temujin overcame these obstacles. He had a talent for establishing close ties with other nomads, some of whom were tribal elders. His ability as a military leader was extraordinary. Around 1185, when he was about 20, some of the Mongol elders elected him as their khan (tribal chief). Two decades later, following his leadership in the conquest of much of Central Asia, a Great Assembly (*Khuriltai*) of the Mongols designated Temujin as Chingis Khan (Universal Ruler). He spent the rest of his life expanding the boundaries of his conquests—westward toward Persia and southward into China.

Much of Chingis Khan's life will always be a mystery. Our best source for his life is a book called *The Secret History of the Mongols* that was written shortly after the death of the Great Khan. The author of the *Secret History* is unknown, but the book is clearly the work of someone who was a contemporary of Chingis, perhaps even a member of his household. Written to glorify Chingis and having some of the characteristics of an ep

From Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chingis Khan: An Adaptation of Yuan Ch'ao Pi Shih, Based Primarily on the English Translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves*. Expanded edition (Boston: Cheng and Tsui, 1998), pp. 3, 18, 40–41, 44–45, 96–97, 128–134, 146, 160.

poem, the *Secret History* must be used carefully. Despite its limitations, however, the *Secret History* remains the best entry point into the world of Chingis Khan.

How does the *Secret History* help us to understand the reasons for the rise of Chingis Khan?

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MONGOLS

LEGENDARY ORIGINS: THE MONGOL CREATION STORY

There came into the world a blue-gray wolf
 whose destiny was Heaven's will.
 His wife was a fallow deer.
 They travelled together across the inland sea
 and when they were camped near the source of the Onan River
 in sight of Mount Burkhan Khaldun
 their first son was born, named Batachikhan. . . .

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

After the Tayichigud brothers had abandoned the old camp,
 leaving only Hogelun Ujin,
 her sons and her little ones,
 after the Tayichigud had taken all of the people away,
 leaving only the mothers and sons,
 Hogelun Ujin, a woman born with great power,
 took care of her sons.
 Proudly she put on her headdress and gathered the folds of her skirt.
 She went up and down the banks of the Onan
 and gathered pears and wild fruit.
 Day and night she found food for their mouths.
 Mother Hogelun, a woman born with great courage,
 took care of her sons.
 Taking a juniper stick in her hands
 she fed them by digging up roots.
 These boys who were nourished on the wild onion and pear,
 who were fed by Ujin, the Mother,
 became the great Lords of all men.
 These boys who lived on the roots that she dug for them,
 who were cared for with pride by Mother Ujin,
 became the wise men who gave us our laws.
 These boys who were nourished on the wild onion and pear,
 who were fed by the beautiful Ujin,
 grew up to be fine, daring men.
 Once they'd grown into men,
 they pledged to themselves: "Now we'll feed our mother."

and bent needles they'd found into fishhooks.
With these hooks they caught a few misshapen fish.
They made nets to sweep through the river
and they caught tiny fish.
With these in their turn they helped feed their mother. . . .

III. ANDA

[The bond established between Temujin and Jamugha described here eventually broke down frequent occurrence among the fractious nomads of the Mongolian steppe. Nonetheless clear from many passages in the Secret History, that the Mongols attached great importance to anda.]

Temujin and Jamugha pitched their tents in the Khorkonagh Valley.
With their people united in one great camp,
the two leaders decided they should renew their friendship,
their pledge of anda.
They remembered when they'd first made that pledge,
and said, "We should love one another again."
That first time they'd met Temujin was eleven years old.
In those days
when he and his family had been abandoned by the Tayichigud,
he'd first met Jamugha,
a young noble of the Jadaran clan,
and they'd played at games of knucklebone dice on the banks of the Onan,
casting bones on the frozen waters of the Onan.
Jamugha had given Temujin the knucklebone of a roebuck
and in return Temujin gave Jamugha a knucklebone of brass.
With that exchange the two boys had pledged themselves anda forever.
Then later that spring
when the two were off in the forest together shooting arrows,
Jamugha took two pieces of calf-horn.
He bored holes in them,
glued them together to fashion a whistling arrowhead,
and he gave this arrow as a present to Temujin.
In return Temujin gave him a beautiful arrow with a cypress wood tip.
With that exchange of arrows
they declared themselves anda a second time.
So Temujin and Jamugha said to each other:
"We've heard the elders say,
'When two men become anda their lives become one.
One will never desert the other and will always defend him.'
This is the way we'll act from now on.
We'll renew our old pledge and love each other forever."
Temujin took the golden belt he'd received
in the spoils from Toghtoga's defeat
and placed it around Anda Jamugha's waist.
Then he led out the Merkid chief's warhorse,

a light yellow mare with black mane and tail,
 and gave it to Anda Jamugha to ride.
 Jamugha took the golden belt he'd received
 in the spoils from Dayir Usun's defeat
 and placed it around the waist of Anda Temujin.
 Then he led out the whitish-tan warhorse of Dayir Usun
 and had Anda Temujin ride on it.
 Before the cliffs of Khuldaghar
 in the Khorkhonagh Valley,
 beneath the Great Branching Tree of the Mongol,
 they pledged their friendship and promised to love one another.
 They held a feast on the spot
 and there was great celebration.
 Temujin and Jamugha spent that night alone,
 sharing one blanket to cover them both. . . .

4. TEMUJIN BECOMES A MONGOL KHAN, 1185

Then they moved the whole camp
 to the shores of Blue Lake in the Gurelgu Mountains.
 Altan, Khuchar, and Sacha Beki conferred with each other there,
 and then said to Temujin:
 "We want you to be Khan.
 Temujin, if you'll be our Khan
 we'll search through the spoils
 for the beautiful women and virgins,
 for the great palace tents,
 for the young virgins and loveliest women,
 for the finest geldings and mares.
 We'll gather all these and bring them to you.
 When we go off to hunt for wild game
 we'll go out first to drive them together for you to kill.
 We'll drive the wild animals of the steppe together
 so that their bellies are touching.
 We'll drive the wild game of the mountains together
 so that they stand leg to leg.
 If we disobey your command during battle
 take away our possessions, our children, and wives.
 Leave us behind in the dust,
 cutting off our heads where we stand and letting them fall to the ground.
 If we disobey your counsel in peacetime
 take away our tents and our goods, our wives and our children.
 Leave us behind when you move,
 abandoned in the desert without a protector."
 Having given their word,
 having taken this oath,

V. PREPARING FOR BATTLE, 1204

[Temujin's defeat of the Naimans in 1204 gave the Mongols control of much of the steppe and paved the way for his election as Chingis Khan at the Khuriltai in 1206.]

He divided the men into thousands to form troops of a thousand,
and appointed for each troop a captain of thousands,
captains of hundreds, and captains of tens.

He appointed six men to be stewards of the army,
giving them the title of Cherbi,
including Dodai and Ogele Cherbi among them.

Then having divided the army to form troops of a thousand,
having divided it further to form troops of a hundred,
having divided these further to form troops of ten,
he chose from among them his personal guard,
the eighty nightguards and seventy dayguards.

For this he inspected the sons and relations of all his captains,
and the sons and relations of all common soldiers,
and he selected those with the greatest ability,
those most fit and pleasant to look at.

He had Arkhai Khasar help him, saying:

"Let's pick the bravest men and form a troop of a thousand.

On the days of battle these will fight in front of me.

On the other days they will be my dayguard.

Ogele Cherbi will be their commander
and Khudus Khalkhan will advise him."

Then Chingis Khan established these regulations:

"Let the archers,

the solders of the dayguard,

the cooks,

the door keepers,

and the keepers of the geldings

each take his turn at their post during daylight.

Before sunset let the nightguards relieve them.

The men who've served me in daylight

will go spend the night with their horses.

Let the nightguard assign men to lie in the grass around my tent in the
darkness,

and assign others to be the door sentries.

Then at daylight when I arise for my morning drink

let the archers and dayguards tell the nightguards they're here

and let the archers,

the soldiers who are dayguards,

the cooks, and door keepers

each go to their job.

Let them each be seated in his proper place.

They'll each finish their assigned tasks,

which will last three days and nights,

spending each of the nights the same way with their horses,
then they'll trade places with the men who've relieved them,
becoming the nightguards on the following night,
beginning as the men who lie in the grass around my tent."

So having divided his army to form troops of a thousand,
having appointed his stewards,
having chosen his eighty nightguards,
and seventy soldiers as dayguards,
having selected the bravest among them for Arkhai Khasar to lead,
having made his camp near Keltegi Cliffs on the Khalkha,
it being the sixteenth day of the summer's first moon,
the Red Circle day in the Year of the Rat,
having sprinkled libations of mare's milk on his standard of nine tails
as a signal to Heaven that he was going to war,
Chingis Khan set out with his army against the Naiman. . . .

AFTER 1206: CREATING THE MONGOL STATE

He rewarded all those who had helped him establish the Nation
by appointing them Mingghan-u Noyan [rulers of a thousand households].
He divided the people into bands of one thousand households,
appointing captains of thousands,
captains of hundreds, and captains of tens to rule over them.
He divided the people into units of ten thousand
and appointed captains of ten thousand for each unit.
Then Chingis Khan made this decree:
"Before I had eighty nightguards and seventy dayguards.
Now thanks to Eternal Blue Heaven
my power has been increased by Heaven and Earth.
I've straightened out the lives of the entire Nation
and they're controlled by the reins in my hands.
From the thousands of people in the Nation
I'll select men to serve me as nightguards, archers, and dayguards
until I've filled a unit of ten thousand."
When Chingis Khan proclaimed that he would select his new guard
he issued this decree to the entire Nation:
"Let the ablest and best-looking men step forward,
the sons of captains of ten thousand,
of thousands, of hundreds, of tens,
and the sons of common soldiers,
any man who is worthy to serve in my presence.
The sons of captains of thousands
should bring ten companions and one younger brother.
The sons of captains of hundreds
should bring five companions and one younger brother.
The sons of captains of tens or common soldiers

along with their own horses.

When the son of a captain of thousands comes to serve me, the ten companions he brings will be given to him to command, along with any animals and property given to them by their fathers. All this will be redistributed from the units they've come from. The same will hold true for the sons of captains of hundreds, of tens, and of common soldiers.

Their companions and their property will be redistributed.

Any person who does not obey this order will be punished.

Any person who's accepted to serve in my presence and doesn't serve properly, I'll send such a man out of my sight and exile him to a distant land."

Because Chingis Khan had originally chosen eighty nightguards from among the sons of the captains of thousands, of hundreds, and tens, now he chose eight hundred nightguards.

Then he said:

"In addition to these eight hundred

fill out the guard to make it a unit of one thousand.

No one shall stop a man who wishes to volunteer for the nightguard.

Yeke Negurin will be their captain

and he will command a thousand men."

Previously he had chosen four hundred archers.

Now he said:

"Jelme's son, Yesun Tege, will be captain of the archers,

and Yesun Tege, Bugidai, Horkhudagh, and Lablakha

will each command one company taken from the various units."

In addition to the thousand dayguards he had chosen before, commanded by Ogele Cherbi, he said:

"Select one thousand dayguards from Mukhali's people and let Bukha command them.

Select a thousand from Ilugei's people for Alchidai to command.

Both Dodai Cherbi and Dokholkhu Cherbi will command a thousand dayguards.

Chanai will command a thousand chosen from Jurchedei's people.

Akhutai will command a thousand chosen from Alchi's people.

Arkhai Khasar will command a band of a thousand chosen heroes, and these heroes will be the dayguards on usual days.

During battles this band of heroes will surround me."

From the tens of thousands of people eight thousand dayguards were chosen, along with two thousand nightguards and archers.

The guard was a band of ten thousand soldiers.

Then Chingis Khan made this decree:

"This band of ten thousand soldiers will serve in my presence and become the great middle army.

Bukha, Alchidai, Dodai Cherbi, and Dokholkhu Cherbi will be their senior commanders."

Then he established these rules for men who served in the guard:

"When a soldier enters service in the guard

he'll serve in his place for three nights
and then change places with his relief.
If a soldier breaks the rules once
he'll be corrected with three lashes.
If the same soldier breaks the rules again
he'll be corrected with seven lashes.
If that same soldier breaks the rules a third time
he'll receive thirty-seven lashes.
We'll assume that he's found his duties too difficult to perform
and he'll be exiled to some distant place.
The company commanders will see to it
that the guard hear these rules every third turn of service.
If these rules aren't repeated the commanders will be punished.
Having heard these rules
if a guard breaks them he'll be punished.
Let no commander hold himself above the members of my guard.
The soldiers who serve me are equal to any man.
If they cause offense to any man let him come to me.
If they've done something that should cost them their lives
then I will behead them.
If they've done something they should be beaten for
then I will order them to lie down and see that they're beaten.
If any man lays a hand on a member of my guard
his lashes will be paid back with lashes
and his fists will be paid back with fists.
The members of my guard are superior to the captains of thousands.
The companions of my guard are superior to the captains of hundreds and
the captains of tens.
If the captains of thousands argue or fight with my guard
it's the captain of thousands who'll be punished."

Then Chingis Khan spoke to the captains of his guard
and made this decree:

"The archers, dayguards, and cooks
will each perform their appointed duties,
and then when the sun sets
they'll give their places to the nightguard,
leaving the tent to pass the night elsewhere.
When the archers leave they'll give their quivers to the nightguard,
and when the cooks leave they'll give up their utensils and bowls.
The next morning the archers, dayguards, and cooks will return
and wait at the place where the horses are kept
until I've had my morning broth.
Then they'll announce themselves to the nightguard
and return to their places,
the archers taking back their quivers,

This is the procedure that will be followed.

Once the sun has set

any person found near the palace tent will be seized by the nightguard, held through the night and questioned the next morning.

When one company changes place with another

the nightguard coming in will present their passes and take their place, and the nightguard being relieved will present their passes and leave.

The nightguard who lie around the outside of the tent and guard the door will cut in two any person who tries to enter the tent at night.

If someone comes with an urgent message

let them present it to the nightguard.

They can stand to the north of the tent

and announce that they have a message to present.

No one may sit above the nightguard's seat.

No one may enter the tent without the nightguard's permission.

No one may walk between the nightguard and the tent.

No one may walk between the nightguard's posts.

No one may ask how many soldiers are in the nightguard.

The nightguard will arrest any person who walks between their posts.

The nightguard will arrest any person who asks their numbers

and will confiscate the gelding the person rode that day,

along with the person's saddle and bridle,

along with the clothes the person was wearing."

And these orders were strictly followed,

so that one evening

when Eljigedei tried to walk between the nightguard and the tent

even though he was a trusted soldier

he was arrested by the nightguard. . . .

Once again Chingis Khan spoke, saying:

"The nightguard will supervise my servants,

the sons and daughters of my Palace Tent.

They'll watch after those who tend to my camels and oxen

and see that all the tent carts are in order.

The nightguard will collect all the weapons

and keep them beside the standard and drums.

They'll also collect all the utensils and bowls,

supervising all that's eaten and drunk.

Let them see to it that the sides of meat are cooked properly

and that all other food is prepared well.

If I need any food or drink I'll get it from the nightguard.

The archers are forbidden from distributing any food

without permission from the nightguard.

And when they do divide the food

the nightguard are first to be served.

The nightguard can command anyone who enters or leaves the Palace Tent.

They'll be posted at the door

and two of them will be in charge of the great wine table.

Other nightguard will be responsible for putting up the Palace Tent.

When I go out with my falcons to hunt
the nightguard will go along with me.
They'll separate into two divisions
and one division will remain with the carts in the Great Camp.
If I don't go off to fight in a war
then no member of the nightguard may go to war without me.
Any commander in my army who becomes jealous of this
and tries to break this law will be punished.
If you say to yourselves,
'How can the nightguard be excused from warfare?'
the answer is that the nightguard must always protect
the golden life of Chingis Khan.
When I hunt, they hunt with me.
When the Palace Tent moves or stops to make camp,
they must oversee all the work.
Don't imagine it's an easy job to guard me constantly.
Don't think it's easy to oversee all the carts
when my Great Camping Circle is on the move or at rest.
I say to myself,
'The nightguard must work twice as hard as the rest of the army.'
That's why I can say,
'Let them not go to war unless I go to war.'"
Then finally Chingis Khan made this decree:
'Some of the nightguard will serve as judges
and hear cases under Shigi Khutukhu.
Some will gather and distribute the weapons and armor.
These nightguard will also gather the nets used for hunting on the steppe.
Others, along with the stewards,
will divide and distribute the satins. . . .

CONQUERING NORTHERN CHINA, 1211–1215

After this in the Year of the Sheep
Chingis Khan set out to fight the people of Cathay [northern China].
First he took the city of Fuzhou
then marching through the Wild Fox Pass
he took Xuandefu.
From here he sent out an army under Jebe's command
to take the fortress at the Zhuyongguan.
When Jebe arrived he saw the Zhuyongguan was well defended,
so he said:
"I'll trick them and make them come out in the open.
I'll pretend to retreat
and when they come out I'll attack them."
So Jebe retreated and the Cathayan army cried:
"Let's go after them!"

until the valleys and mountainsides were full of their soldiers.
Jebe retreated to Son-di-i-wu Ridge
and there he turned his army around to attack
as the enemy rushed towards him in waves.
The Cathayan army was beaten
and close behind Jebe's forces
Chingis Khan commanding the great Middle Army attacked as well,
forcing the Cathayan army to retreat,
killing the finest and most courageous soldiers of Cathay,
the Jurchin and Khara Khitan fighters,
slaughtering them along the sides of Zhuyongguan
so that their bodies lay piled up like rotting trees. . . .

VIII. RECRUITING ADMINISTRATORS, 1220s

Once he had conquered the Moslem people
Chingis Khan appointed agents to govern in each of their cities.
From the city of Gurganj came two Khwarezm [present-day Uzbekistan]
Moslems,
a father and son named Yalavech and Masgud,
who explained to Chingis Khan the customs and laws of these cities
and the customs by which they were governed.
Chingis Khan appointed the Khwarezm Masgud head of the agents
who governed the cities of the Turkestan:
Bukhara, Samarkand, Guranj, Khotan, Kashgar, Yarkand, and Kusen Tarim.
And his father Yalavech he made governor of the city of Zhongdu in Cathay.
Since among all the Moslems Yalavech and Masgud
were the most skilled at the customs and laws for governing cities,
he appointed them the governors of Cathay,
along with our own agents. . . .

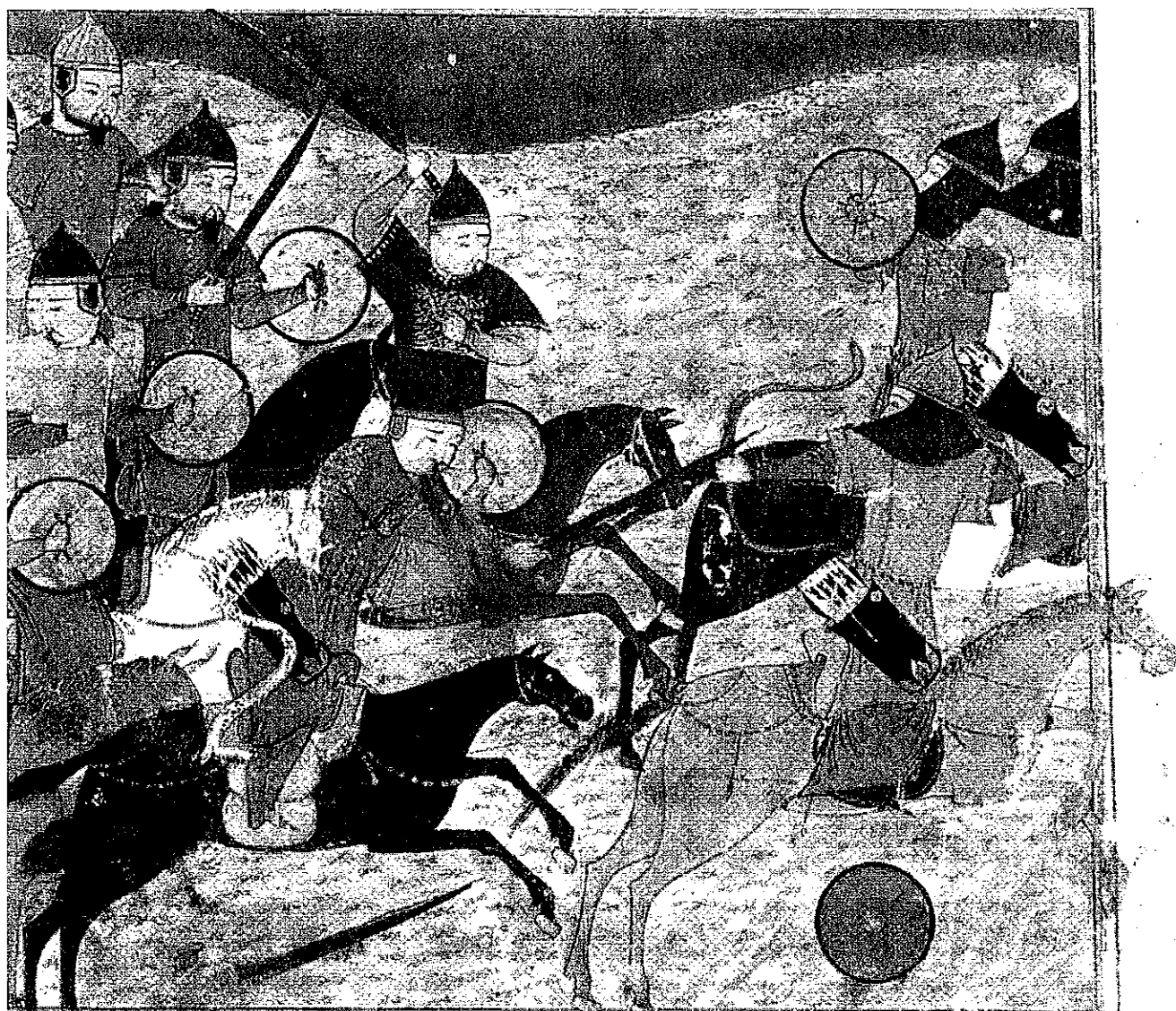
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What did the Mongols mean by "anda"? Why was anda important to the Mongols? What does the importance of anda suggest about the strength of kinship ties, tribal loyalties, and the stability of Mongol systems of governance?
2. How does the *Secret History* explain the rise of Chingis Khan? What were his strengths? Does the *Secret History* reveal any of his weaknesses?
3. How would you evaluate Chingis Khan as a manager/administrator? How did he select advisers and generals? What evidence do you find regarding the importance of familial, tribal, or religious loyalties to Chingis Khan?
4. Why were the Mongol armies so successful?
5. What does the *Secret History* reveal about Mongol beliefs and habits of mind?
6. Does the *Secret History* help us to understand why the era of Mongol power was so brief?
7. How does Chingis Khan compare to the Xiongnu leader Modun in Chapter 24?

PERSIAN PAINTING OF CHINGIS KHAN LEADING THE CHARGE

Chingis Khan and his soldiers relied on methods of fighting on horseback that, for the most part, had been pioneered during the first millennium B.C.E. by the Xiongnu and other Central Asian nomads. From the time of the Xiongnu onward the military success of the nomads was based on the use of small but powerful compound bows, mass-produced socketed arrowheads made of iron, and improved saddles that provided stability for the riders. Early in the Common Era the nomads added the stirrup to their horseriding paraphernalia.

An additional reason for the effectiveness of the nomad cavalries was their ability to fight as a cohesive force, a trait that was clearly evident among the Xiongnu and the Mongols. Perhaps the occasional emergence of an unusually talented leader such



Chingis Khan in Battle. Illustration from the *History of the Mongols*, by Rashid al-Din (1247–1317). (Bibliothèque Nationale de France/www.bridgeman.co.uk)

as Mo-tun among the Xiongnu or Chingis Khan was the decisive factor in bringing unity to the chronically feuding nomads. It may be that the anonymous Persian illustrator who painted this picture of Chingis Khan leading the Mongols in battle meant to capture some of the cohesion that the Great Khan was able to establish among his soldiers.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What military equipment is illustrated in the painting?
2. Did the Mongols have the ability to produce all the equipment illustrated in the painting, or was it necessary for them to obtain some of it from sedentary people?
3. In what ways has the artist depicted skill in horseriding?
4. Does the artist seem to have been biased, either toward or against the Mongols? Is this painting an example of pro-Mongol propaganda?