

# Bow to Me or Die In an ocean of BLOOD: Why Genghis Khan, Throat Slitter Supreme, Was Even Nastier Than You Thought

- Genghis Khan has been a byword for barbarity for the last 800 years
- Some historians estimate four million people were killed under his orders
- As a boy Genghis believed God had decreed he should conquer the land
- The name Genghis means 'fierce, hard, tough'
- During Genghis's reign of terror the Mongol Empire took up most of Asia

By [Peter Lewis](#)

PUBLISHED: 17:11 EST, 3 July 2014 | UPDATED: 18:06 EST, 3 July 2014

## THE MONGOL EMPIRE by John Man (Transworld £20)

As a byword for barbarity, Genghis Khan has come down to us 800 years later as the cruelest conqueror of all time. We preserve his name to compare the perpetrators of genocide today to him.

Is this tradition justified? That is what a new biographer should tell us and this one, John Man, has every qualification. He even speaks Mongol and makes Mongolia his stamping ground. He has written a very lively and enjoyable book on a very complex and baffling story.

It is littered with names that you have never heard of and cannot pronounce, and the two you do know are not as you thought: Genghis starts a soft G — Chinghis — and his grandson was Kublai Khan, not Kubla as Coleridge had it.

Barbaric: Genghis Khan's name has lived on for 800 years because of the mass killings that took place under his command

The first chapters tell how a poor, illiterate boy, originally called Temujin, got himself recognized as leader of the hitherto disunited Mongols. This near-pagan lad had one great conviction: that Tengri, the Mongol deity, had decreed that he was to conquer all the land in every direction. Why he believed this is a mystery.

He set about it and every victory which he and his horsemen achieved confirmed his belief that God was on his side. In 1189 the Mongols decided he should have a new name: Genghis. It was unique and until recently no one could explain where it came from. Now, however, scholars believe it derives from an obsolete Turkish word, chingis, meaning 'fierce, hard, tough'.

The Mongols took naturally to the idea that they were the master race. Under Genghis — The Fierce Ruler — their empire swelled like a pregnant pig, swallowing up most of central Asia from the Caspian Sea in the west to the China Sea in the east, and taking in the great cities of the Silk Road, Bukhara and Samarkand.

In the spring of 1211, he gathered an army some 100,000 strong and advanced across the Gobi to conquer the Chinese empire of Jin. The men took 300,000 horses and were armed with catapults which could lob rocks or firebombs 100 meters.

Great empire: Under Khan's reign of terror the Mongol empire encompassed most of Asia Behind this came herds of mares to provide the warriors with horse milk. Often this mass migration incorporated wives, families and sheep. The whole juggernaut probably ran to 250,000 with a million animals in tow.

When they reached a fortified city their strategy was to surround it, starve it and invite its leaders to surrender or be annihilated. Those that refused were slaughtered to the last man, woman or child, but the same thing might easily happen to those which capitulated.

Terror was the Mongols' weapon — shock and awe. Genghis applied it ruthlessly. In 1219 he led his army westwards from China towards the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, the eastern outposts of Islam, which had a degree of civilization undreamed of on the Mongol steppes.

There they lay with domes, palaces, mosques, huge libraries and scores of scholars leading the rest of the world in math, science, astronomy and general knowledge. Bukhara was stripped of its treasures, bombarded and burned until all the males 'who stood higher than the butt of a whip' had been killed.

The Mongol juggernaut rolled on towards Samarkand, defended by some 100,000 troops and 20 elephants, which panicked, trampled their drivers and made off into the plains.

When the city's merchant leaders and senior clergy invited the Mongols in, they looted their treasures, their wives and helped themselves to such survivors as would make slaves.

They moved on to lay siege to the remaining great city, Gurganj. By the time victory came, five months later, the invaders 'were in no mood for mercy'. The figures recorded by Muslim historians are staggering: 50,000 soldiers killed 24 men each.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

There were 40 sacrificial virgins slaughtered at Genghis Khan's funeral.

Genghis now turned his attention to Merv, an oasis city of mosques and mansions. Its ten libraries contained 150,000 volumes, the greatest collection in Central Asia. The Mongols entered the city and after separating 400 craftsmen and a crowd of children to act as slaves, drove the remaining population on to the plain.

'Then,' writes Man, 'the killing started. The place was ransacked, the buildings mined, the books burned or buried. Merv lost almost everything and almost everyone.'

The Mongols ordered that no woman, man or child be spared. Each soldier in the 7,000-strong army was allotted around 300 people to kill. Most had their throats slit. Others were led out, 20 at a time, to be drowned in a trough of blood.

You might have thought even the most hard-hearted troops would balk at having to slit the throats of so many victims, but it doesn't seem to have troubled the Mongols who would have dispatched them, says Man, as easily as sheep.

Merciless: Some historians estimate that as many as four million people were killed by Khan's soldiers

The fearsome leader remembered: A 16ft Genghis Khan statue in Marble Arch, London

He points out that it takes only seconds to slit a throat, and that for 7,000 soldiers 'the slaughter of a million would have been an easy two hours' work'.

In the late 18th century the English historian Edward Gibbon placed the total slaughter at more than four million. The figure may be exaggerated, but it was certainly one of the biggest mass killings in history. Genghis then returned to northern China, which he had only partially conquered. By the second week of August 1227 he was on the verge of achieving an empire running from the Pacific

almost to Baghdad.

It was not to be. He became seriously ill — possibly with typhus — and just days later was dead. But not before having told his leading captives: ‘I am the punishment of God. If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent me as your punishment’.

Throat slitter supreme: Khan, whose real name was Temujin, was named Genghis by his troops because of his fierce personality

His body was secretly taken back thousands of miles to Mongolia, where it was buried somewhere unknown on a sacred mountain. Today, a massive mausoleum shows its visitors colossal statues of him — but no body. They are still looking for it.

Did Genghis achieve anything but the Guinness record in bloodshed? John Man believes he had redeeming features. He allowed toleration of all religions — perhaps because he didn’t have much of one himself, except as a mandate for conquest. He allowed women to play a more leading role than other dictators and he employed anyone of talent, irrespective of where they came from. But he built nothing. He left no palaces, no writings, no philosophy, nothing but territories that owed allegiance to him.

It is a relief to turn to his grandson, Kublai, for the rest of the book. Kublai had himself been recognized not only as the great Khan but as first emperor of a new Chinese dynasty, the Yuan.

He built his new capital, known as Shang Du, which was mistranslated by Coleridge in his opium-inspired poem, Xanadu. Kublai’s normal palace there was called the Pavilion of Peace but for summer he built the pleasure dome that we all know.

It wasn’t much like Coleridge’s dream. The sunny pleasure dome was not made on caves of ice. It was made of bamboo rods laid in a circle and supported by carved wooden columns.

One of his great innovations was paper money. He gave China a new legal system. He built pagodas and adopted Buddhism. Altogether he was a lenient dictator.

He grew very fat (the drink was to blame) and died at the age of 80. At this point he ruled from the Black Sea in the west to the China Sea in the east, covering a sixth of the world’s known land mass.

But within two years of his death this empire had split into its component parts, according to nationality. The Mongol Empire had vanished, leaving a legacy to the world of precisely nothing.