



HFM 001 – How Did Genghis Khan Nearly Conquer the World?

Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I'm your host, Michael Rank.

Today's topic is, 'Who is Genghis Khan?' So a lot of people wonder how Genghis Khan who was a poor hunter who grew up in a completely obscure part of the globe then should grow up in creating an empire that after a few generations was three times larger than the Roman Empire. And by doing this, how did he manage to overrun advanced civilizations like China, India, the Middle East, all the way out to Eastern Europe and into Hungary and do all of these in about a half century's worth of time? Well, he managed to do this through a combination of luck and skill, but mostly through his ability to navigate and negotiate the politics of Central Asia.

Before we go into this a little bit deeper, let's look at his background. Genghis Khan was born in 1162 in Mongolia. At the time, there wasn't one dominant government in charge of everything. Instead, it was a group of tribal confederacies that were constantly being fractured, broken and reformed in conditions of extreme warfare and extreme poverty. Genghis' father arranged a marriage for him at the age of nine with another tribe in order to secure an alliance, but his father was poisoned by a different group. So because of this, he and his brothers fended for themselves for many years and they were mostly at the margins of society until Genghis could assert his independence.

As Genghis Khan began to gather soldiers around him, he diverted from Mongolian tradition in two ways that a lot of historians think were the reason that he was able to build out such a huge world empire.

The first thing he did was that he did not assign duties in honor based on people's family relations or marriage alliances or other kinds of familial connections, but instead he assigned these things based on ability and loyalty which was essentially meritocracy. Also because of this, soldiers would come to him and realize that if they won in battle, they could get part of the spoils of the war so that attracted many good soldiers under his rule.

The second innovation that Genghis introduced was that he was able to absorb a lot of different types of people into his empire. So for example, after his soldiers would conquer a village, or a fortress, or a city, rather than chasing off the soldiers there and abandoning all the women and children, he would absorb them into his empire. So it was because of this flexibility that he could have an empire that was thousands of miles long, have hundreds and hundreds of different ethnic groups, linguistic groups, and very different cultures that stretched from Eastern Asia all the way to Eastern Europe.

A second question about Genghis is, 'Who is he as a religious person? What were his religious beliefs?' Genghis Khan practiced the shamanistic religion of Central Asia which means that he worshipped elements of nature. But within his court, he had Muslims, Buddhists, and even Christians. In fact, one or two of his wives were Nestorian Christians. So it makes sense that he was comfortable with so many different religious beliefs around him, because an important way he brought a lot of the world's religions closer together.



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Because he and his sons and their domains stretched from such a large geography, this created a political stability that allowed the Silk Road to flourish. So Southeastern Asia and Central Europe were connected together. This route was taken by Marco Polo, when from 1271 to 1295, he traveled over land from Italy to the court of Kublai Khan, Genghis Khan's grandson.

Last question we have is, 'Who is Genghis the progenitor?' That's a fancy way to say, 'Who is Genghis as a forefather?' This might not seem like an important question but it is because a few years ago, a team of international geneticists, after a ten-year survey, found out that one in every 200 men on earth are directly descendants from Genghis Khan. If you go into the heartlands of the former Mongolian Empire which would be Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and other Central Asian Countries with "stan" in the name, you'll find that that number rises to one name. The reason that happens is because Genghis had many wives, many concubines, so he fathered several children. But in addition, for generations after him, anyone who is a direct descendant of Genghis had immediate legitimacy. He could easily gain power, and as a result, he would have a lot of wives and concubines as well. So for several generations, they were able to reproduce in large numbers.

In conclusion, you could say that there is a little bit of Genghis in all of us.

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