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**Title:** The Mongol War Machine: How were the Mongols able to forge the largest contiguous land empire in history?

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## Introduction

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century a young Mongol chieftain called Temujin united the nomadic steppe peoples of Mongolia through conquest in order to fulfill his vision of a great nation. When Temujin became the undisputed leader of the steppes, he took on the infamous name of Genghis Khan. What followed were some of the most dazzling military campaigns of the ancient world, military achievements which are still often overlooked today. In the Western narrative of military history much emphasis is put on the campaigns and successes of Julius Caesar, of Alexander the Great, Richard the Lion Heart, the Carolingians, the Vikings and many other martial peoples and great leaders. However, Genghis Khan and his successors went on to conquer lands from the Pacific to the Black Sea and from India to the Aegean. Storming out of Asia after crippling parts of Northern China, the Mongols cut swathes across Eastern Europe and Russia, burning Kiev, Moscow and Cracow to the ground as well as ravaging Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Siberia and many other regions during their great Western expedition. The Mongol warriors faced other nomads, European knights, troops behind massive stone walls, Korean guerillas, Burmese war elephants and even the famed Japanese Samurai. Ultimately, the Mongols' mastery of the battlefield allowed them to rule over the largest contiguous land empire in the history of the known world. Naturally, there are many contributing factors which allowed the Mongol armies to ascend to such great heights and these range from ingenious leadership, to discipline and tactics as well as their strategies and especially the inherent qualities of the steppe people as a trained reservoir of warriors.

Historian Steven Turnbull said that the 'Mongol warrior was one of the great success stories of world military history,'<sup>1</sup> and certainly the world shook in fear of them whilst the ground trembled beneath their feet as they conquered nearly half the world's land in a series

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<sup>1</sup>Turnbull, Steven, *The Mongol Warrior 1200-1350*, pp. 4

of stunning campaigns. The Mongols took on an almost mythical quality, but their success is grounded in very real factors. Mongol historian C.C. Walker sums up the military achievements of the Mongols aptly when he says:

There are lesser Mongol chiefs who rode farther, crossed higher mountains and fought several battles which were of equal or greater scope than those of Hannibal at Cannae. Hannibal's maneuver – to give way in the centre, draw in the main body of the attacker, then crush him with his flanking cavalry – was an oft-repeated tactic employed by the Mongols in all their campaigns across Eurasia. Alexander fought fewer enemies and battles and stormed fewer cities than Subotai [a Mongol general] during the expedition from Manchuria to the Crimea. The Mongol cavalry achieved some its greatest achievements in the snows of Russia which crushed Napoleon.<sup>2</sup>

The first step in the Mongol road to immortality was the forging of many different peoples into a highly organized and cohesive fighting force commanded by loyal leaders who would ride to the ends of the world if their leader ordered it. As such, this paper will first deal with the natural qualities of the Mongols which were capitalized upon in order to turn a wild rabble into a ferocious army that could appear anywhere at any time, before moving on to their training, their leadership, their tactics and their strategies which led them to victory time and time again.

### The Mongol Warrior As A Product of the Steppes

The steppe peoples, which were the make-up of the Mongolian forces, were not professional soldiers in the way that the Romans or the Macedonians were, nor even like the European knight, for whilst the Mongolian troops were drawn through universal conscription and then underwent vigorous training, the roots of their skills in combat and many keys to their success were actually products of their lifestyle out on the steppes and not solely from military training as with the aforementioned cultures. The Roman's skill with a sword and shield or the Macedonian's skill with the sarissa developed on the training ground, where as

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<sup>2</sup>McCreight, Major Richard, *The Mongol Warrior Epic: Masters of Thirteenth Century Maneuver Warfare*, pp. 25

the Mongolian's skill at arms came from the harsh school of life on the steppes. Life on the step was a tough and unforgiving world where the people not only struggled against each other, but against nature and so they were hardy people to begin with whose lifestyle added itself to their ability as warriors. When we talk of the military prowess of the steppe peoples, the Mongols were but the most successful of a long line of ferocious warriors like the Huns, Sarmations and Scythians before them. Furthermore, when we speak of their respective successes, there are two consistent factors – the bow and the horse. The horsemanship of the Mongolians was a crucial ingredient in what made them a great fighting force. Mongolian children began to learn how to ride at a very young age and according to John de Plano Carpini, 'their children begin as soon as they are two or three years old to ride and manage horses and to gallop them...' <sup>3</sup> The Mongols were herdsman and so the skill of riding was important out on the steppes. The horse itself that was used by the Mongols was also a great tool and added immensely to their success, in fact, it was very likely the single most important factor in their many great achievements. The Asian steppe pony was a relatively small beast, stubby with short stocky legs and a docile nature. It had legendary endurance and could carrier its rider over great distances of varying terrain. Crucially, it could forage in winter and as such, winter was not the end of a Mongolian campaigning season. Unlike the great chargers of Europe, the steppe pony did not need to be fed on grain and fodder, but ate grass and as such unburdened the Mongols from the logistic nightmare of keeping their horses fed. This gave the Mongol warriors great freedom to travel light and over great distances when they turned their 'diminutive but hardy steeds' <sup>4</sup> to conquering the world. In fact, the Mongol army that first reached Russia had to travel five and a half thousand miles to get there. As such, the Mongols could and did appear out of nowhere and traveled over great

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<sup>3</sup>May, Timothy, 'The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.' pp. 630

<sup>4</sup>Rossabi, Morris, 'All the Khan's Horses.' pp. 1

distances at a speed that had never been done before and perhaps not again until the advent of mechanized warfare. Furthermore, this stunted little horse which carried them to victory time and time again also provided its rider with a source of sustenance. Mongol warriors could drink mare's milk or also, since it did not curdle, they could dry it out to a paste, keep it in a pouch and then simply add water when they needed it.<sup>5</sup> In times of need, the rider could even make a small cut on one of the horse's veins and drink the blood or mix it with the milk for emergency nourishment. Ultimately, their horse gave the Mongols a high degree of flexibility and maneuverability to operate over long distances. Riding from the moment they could stand, the Mongols were natural riders and in combat this granted them many advantages. In fact, a Chinese general said that the Mongols were 'born and raised in the saddle.'<sup>6</sup> They could escape a certain defeat, pursue a broken enemy, execute complex maneuvers over large distances, perform hit and run operations and generally put the warrior where he needed to be and then escape when the moment determined he should be elsewhere. When the Mongols began their expansion, their army was composed entirely of cavalry, most of which were light horse archers, but also with some heavier cavalry armed with lances and sabers. Furthermore, each warrior had at least three or four horses in his possession and this allowed them to swap horses often so that they did not tire on campaign and they even swapped during battle to facilitate in multiple charge and withdrawals. This effectively gave the Mongols dominance of the battlefield because they never had to stop moving, but it also contributed greatly to the traveling of great distances at high speeds and of concentrating forces after marching divided.<sup>7</sup> A Mongol army could march hundreds of miles in a few days, they covered one

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<sup>5</sup> Adams, Major Ryon, *Outfought and Outthought: Reassessing the Mongol Invasions of Japan*, pp. 48

<sup>6</sup> May, Timothy, 'The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.' pp. 631

<sup>7</sup> Rossabi, Morris, 'All the Khan's Horses.' pp. 2

hundred and eighty miles in three days before the battle of Mohi<sup>8</sup>, in separate columns, locate the enemy and then the best place of attack before converging to strike from all directions.<sup>9</sup> Without their stout little horses this would not have been possible and historian Morris Rossabi went so far as to call them ‘the intercontinental ballistic missiles of the thirteenth century.’<sup>10</sup>

Equally renowned was the Mongol’s skill in using the bow. Again, John de Plano Caprini provides a good example when he tells us that the Mongols ‘hunt and practice archery, for they are all, big and little, excellent archers...’<sup>11</sup> Children learned to shoot the bow as early as they learned to ride and practiced by shooting small animals. They would become so skilled with the bow that the Armenians, who had been in contact with multiple cultures that favored the bow, singled out the Mongols as the ‘Nation of Archers.’<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, using the bow from an early age gave the Mongols the great strength needed to fully draw their bows as adults which often had a pull weight of up to one hundred pounds.<sup>13</sup> The Mongol bow itself, like their horse, was a vital factor which contributed to their astounding successes. The Mongolian bow was a recurved composite bow of wood, horn and sinew that used the curve of the bow to give it such an armour piercing punch despite its small size. In the hands of the Mongols who had trained with it since their childhood and who had the strength to draw it fully, this was a deadly weapon indeed. The range of the Mongolian bow was around three hundred and fifty yards which was ‘superior to the contemporaneous English Longbow, whose range was only two hundred and fifty yards.’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>McCreight, Major Richard, *The Mongol Warrior Epic: Masters of Thirteenth Century Maneuver Warfare*, pp. 127

<sup>9</sup>Gabriel, Richard A., ‘The Right Hand of Khan.’ pp. 47

<sup>10</sup>Rossabi, Morris, ‘All the Khan’s Horses.’ pp. 2

<sup>11</sup>May, Timothy, ‘The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.’ pp. 630

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 623

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 631

<sup>14</sup>Rossabi, Morris, ‘All the Khan’s Horses.’ pp. 1

When we combine the Mongol's skill with the bow and horse, the result is the Mongolian warrior that took the world by storm. The power of the bow and the accuracy with which the warriors could shoot it from horseback made them an almost unstoppable power. Furthermore, their use of the stirrup allowed them greater accuracy whilst shooting because they could keep steadier on the horse. The stirrup also allowed them to utilize the Parthian shot, which is when they rode away from an enemy, turned one hundred and eighty degrees and then shot behind them. Carrying multiple quivers, the Mongolians could send volley after volley into the enemy and then wheel about on their horses, retreat to their line, swap horses and then do it all over again. Games such as the *bombog kharvaa* honed their skills as archers on horseback by tasking the rider to hit a ball on a pole as they approach it, one as they pass it and one with a Parthian shot.<sup>15</sup> Competitions like this, hunting and lots of practice turned the riders in exceptional horse archers. Essentially, the Mongolian prowess as mounted archers, based on their lives on the steppe, led one Chinese chronicler to say of them, that “the Mongols are good at riding and archery. Therefore, they took possession of the world through this advantage of bow and horse.”<sup>16</sup> If one imagines thousands of expert horsemen galloping into battle whilst shooting a powerful recurved bow with pinpoint accuracy, carrying multiple bows, at least three quivers and a string of fresh horses, it is not hard to see why the Mongols took the world by storm. The speed and flexibility of the Mongol forces is in stark contrast with that of the slow and cumbersome knight or the huge but poorly trained Chinese militias that they would face in battle.

One other aspect of their daily life contributed greatly to their potential as world conquering warriors is that of the *nerge*. This was a huge hunt that took place every year in which every able man of age mounted his horse and strung out across a great distance

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<sup>15</sup>May, Timothy, ‘The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.’ pp. 626

<sup>16</sup>Sinor, Denis, ‘The Inner Asian Warriors.’ pp. 137

forming a circle that gradually contracted forcing a great deal of game to the centre from where it was difficult to escape. This took place over a few days to a month and involved large numbers of men over a great distance. It gave trained the Mongols in communication, control and discipline, and like their skill as mounted archers, it also could be turned towards warfare both on a tactical and strategic level, but these will be covered at a later point.

Clearly, the Mongols had all the pre-requisites necessary to be a powerful army as a product of their nomadic steppe life, however, it was only with the vision of Genghis Khan that the proper organization and discipline was developed to make it possible for these wild warriors with their raw power and natural abilities to be harnessed and directed.

### Organization of the Mongol Armies

Prior to the arrival of Genghis Khan, the most basic unit of arranging Mongol warriors was the *tumen* and at this time it was around one thousand riders strong.<sup>17</sup> This was how they were organized and below this level there were no other sub units. A battle was when warriors rode as a *tumen*, slammed into the opponent's *tumen* and then slugged it out until one army broke or ceased to be able to fight any longer. If there was any kind of cohesion, then it was simply that warriors often rode close to warriors from their own family. There was no effective system of control and as such these Mongol *tumens* were little more than individually skilled brawlers and in this state they could not force the armies of the world to their knees. Genghis Khan was quick to see this and so he set about reorganizing the Mongol warriors under the decimal system in which a *tumen* was ten thousand warriors, a *minghan* was one thousand, a *jagun* one hundred and an *arban* was a unit of ten warriors.<sup>18</sup> Whilst this may seem insignificant, it actually gave the Mongol leaders a much greater degree

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<sup>17</sup>McCreight, Major Richard, *The Mongol Warrior Epic: Masters of Thirteenth Century Maneuver Warfare*, pp. 32

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 34



of control over the forces at their dispersal. With this new flexible structure, huge forces and tiny forces alike could have tasks delegated to them during or before battles allowing for much more complex battle plans. It also meant that armies could be split up on various missions, but most importantly, it allowed commanders keep control during a battle. Instead of sending their forces as a single mass into the enemy, they could be in control at all times and this contributed greatly to their victories, especially when complex tactics were involved on the field. Furthermore, the command system was also improved under Genghis Khan and it became organized around a merit system. When in Europe and China, royal princes were the leaders of armies, Genghis Khan put only his most able warriors in charge of his forces and gave them a huge amount of discretion to carry out operations, such as was given to his greatest general Subotai. Whilst Genghis' family members were often in high positions, they still deferred to experience. Genghis Khan even created a general staff for the Mongol armies who were in charge of everything from the horses, to intelligence and to planning. This organization is one of the main factors that separates the Mongols from their predecessors who were never able to reach the same dizzying heights.

The discipline and loyalty instilled in Mongol warriors was also a vital factor in the consistency of their success. Renowned Mongol historian Timothy May actually says that 'the instillation of discipline into the tribes of Mongolia may have been Chinggis Khan's greatest achievement.'<sup>19</sup> Before Genghis Khan, the steppe warriors fought each other relentlessly, without order and as explained above, without any organization. However, if the Mongols were to conquer the world, they would need to be disciplined and be loyal to something or someone more than to themselves and loot. One of Genghis' first moves when creating his army was to destroy the old tribal ties, and new recruits would be split up upon arrival to his camp where they would forge loyalty to Genghis and to the Mongols as a whole.

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<sup>19</sup>May, Timothy, 'The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.' pp. 632

As such, this created a more unified force. Genghis also realized that armies of the day often lost effectiveness due to their desire to loot and plunder an enemy before he was totally crushed and as such, Genghis Khan went to great lengths to exorcise this problem from his forces. He ordered his forces never to plunder an enemy before they were utterly defeated and he also demanded that his forces always regroup at a specific location rather than disperse in all directions should they themselves be defeated, as was generally the case if this happened.<sup>20</sup> Genghis Khan said, 'If we conquer the enemy, we shall not stop to plunder. If the victory is complete, that booty will be ours in any case and we will share it among ourselves. If we are forced by the enemy to retreat, let us turn back to the point where we began the attack. The men who do not turn back to the point where we began the attack will be cut down.'<sup>21</sup> Their discipline would become legendary and Genghis expected every order to be followed to the letter, even if he commanded a warrior to kill his own family. The Papal envoy John de Plano Caprini, well accustomed to discipline and obedience, said of the Mongols that "these men are more obedient to their masters than any other in the world, be they religious or secular."<sup>22</sup> Their discipline was maintained by a strict set of laws, rules and regulations where the system of punishment ranged from three strokes of the cane all the way to execution. Interestingly, this system applied to both officers and lower ranked warriors.<sup>23</sup> Known warriors who disobeyed orders were to be sent to Genghis for punishment, but lower ranked warriors were to be executed on the spot if their crime merited it. If they plundered before it was time, warriors were executed and if they talked about their plans, transgressors were executed, and also, interestingly, warriors who did not flee or attack with the rest of their unit were executed.

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<sup>20</sup>May, Timothy, 'The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.' pp. 632

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 633

<sup>22</sup>Turnbull, Steven, *The Mongol Warrior 1200-1350*, pp. 12

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

Overall, the organizational reforms, the instillation of discipline and the draconian measures of enforcing them, ensured that the Mongol forces could and did do exactly what was asked of them even when hundreds of miles away from their Khan on campaign. Ultimately, the natural skills acquired by the Mongolian people as a result of their life on the steppes, coupled with the organizational reforms of Genghis Khan led a contemporary Persian historian Juvaini to say that ““With regard to the organization of their army, from the time of Adam down to the present day...it can be read in no history and is recorded in no book that any of the kings that were lords of the nations ever attained an army like the army of the Tartars...What army in the whole world can equal the Mongol army?””<sup>24</sup> Essentially, Genghis Khan had created a true army out of the steppe peoples of Mongolia.

Once the Mongols were ready, Genghis Khan unleashed them on the world to begin their wars of conquest and expansion. The Mongols were victorious in countless battles during their campaigns and this was a direct result of the ingenious tactics they employed on the battlefield, which were in turn both possible because of and an outgrowth of their life and skills from the steppe. The skill of the Mongols on the battlefield was well expressed by the archdeacon of Spalato when he said ““There is no people in the world as experienced [as the Mongols] in war, one which could, as they, defeat the enemy – particularly in the open field – be it by sheer force of military know-how.””<sup>25</sup> We shall now look at just what tactics the Mongols used in order to evoke such a comment.

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<sup>24</sup>Sinor, Denis, ‘The Inner Asian Warriors.’ pp. 134

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

## Mongol Tactics and Strategies

The tactics of the Mongolian armies revolved around the composition of their forces, which was entirely cavalry based, and their natural strengths of archery and mobility. The majority of the cavalry were lightening fast, unarmored mounted archers and the rest were heavy cavalry armed with lances and wearing lamellar armor which was still very light. The Mongols generally chose to avoid hand to hand combat until the enemy had been broken by arrow fire and this is also reflected in most of their textbook tactics.

One of the most basic tactics employed by the Mongols was the ‘arrow storm’, in which the Mongol forces simply kept their distance from the enemy and showered them with arrow fire, during which ‘archers did not aim at a specific target, but loosed their arrows at a high trajectory into a predetermined “killing zone” or target area.’<sup>26</sup> The aim of this tactic was to break up the enemy formation enough to allow the Mongolian lancers to finish the job. This is essentially what happened at the Battle of the River Kalka in 1223 when a Mongol force of twenty thousand under the great Mongolian general Subotai annihilated a Russian force of eighty thousand.<sup>27</sup> As the Russian forces of Mstislav the Daring advanced, the Mongolian horse archers rode across their line and hammered them with arrows until they broke formation. The Mongolian heavy cavalry then charged into the fray and decimated the scattered forces. The death toll on the Mongols was light, but the Russians lost over forty thousand men in this encounter.<sup>28</sup>

Another tactic employed by the Mongols on the battlefield was the charge and shoot or *caracole* tactics. This employed the arrow storm, like many of their tactics, but in a rotational hit and run form. Waves of Mongol archers would ride at the enemy, fire as many arrows as they could and then turn around to head back to their own lines at the last minute.

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<sup>26</sup>May, Timothy, ‘Genghis Khan: Secrets of Success.’ pp. 44

<sup>27</sup>Rossabi, Morris, ‘All the Khan’s Horses.’ pp. 2

<sup>28</sup>Gabriel, Richard A., ‘The Right Hand of Khan.’ pp. 42

According to Timothy May, they could get as close as '40 to 50 meters from the enemy lines before wheeling around. This distance was close enough to pierce armor, but distant enough to evade a countercharge.'<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, on the way back to their line, the Mongols used the Parthian shot to keep up the barrage. Also, May tells us that since the Mongols each carried sixty arrows, they keep up this barrage for nearly an hour, constantly using their fresh remounts to keep up the pace.<sup>30</sup> When they reached their own lines, the next wave would move forward and continue the process. This tactic is evidence of the high degree of discipline and coordination of the Mongol forces because it required a great deal of precision and practice if the riders were not to crash into each other as they kept up the attack, one group advancing, one falling back. This was part of many a Mongol battle plan and served to wear down the enemy without engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Marco Polo tells us that the Mongols 'never let themselves get into a regular medley, but keep perpetually riding around and shooting into the enemy.'<sup>31</sup>

Another important tactic utilized by the Mongols, and made possible because they were a mounted force, was *Fabian* tactics. The Mongols would not fight an enemy if the conditions were not ideal and did not simply fight the enemy where ever they were. If the enemy was in a well defended fortified position, the Mongols would not waste lives throwing men at it, but would simply withdraw until a better battleground was found. However, this also served to either dissipate enemy forces who thought the threat had passed, or even better, to lure the enemy from their strongholds where they could be crushed out in the open. However, two of the most successful tactics that the Mongols practiced were that of the feigned retreat, and double envelopment or flanking tactics.

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<sup>29</sup>May, Timothy, 'Genghis Khan: Secrets of Success.' pp. 45

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>May, Timothy, 'Genghis Khan: Secrets of Success.' pp. 45

The feigned retreat was employed by the Mongols on some of their greatest victories, but the most detailed accounts of them relate to their European campaign where there were at least four major instances of its use. A feigned retreat could work in two ways. First, it could be when a small Mongol force attacked an enemy and fell back, leading them directly into an ambush and the other was when a Mongol force lured an enemy army over long distances, pretending to retreat, until they reach a battleground of their choosing, where they would make a stand. Generally, in the ambush version, the retreating force would turn to attack the enemy's front and then seemingly out of nowhere, the rest of the Mongol army would emerge and smash into the flanks of the enemy who had himself become very strung out over the course of the pursuit. When Subotai was conducting his foray to the West, he encountered a large and hostile Georgian army against which he knew he could not win in the open. He conducted a feigned retreat, stringing out and tiring the Georgian forces before he reached a picket of fresh horses. Subotai's army, now mounted on fresh horses, joined up with his archers, turned around and smashed the Georgian army, killing their king in the process. However, the Battle of Liegnitz is a better example of the feigned retreat leading to an ambush and it was a crucial set piece battle.

When the twenty thousand strong force of Kaidu<sup>32</sup> faced the thirty thousand strong force of Duke Henry II of Silesia in 1241<sup>33</sup>, they were not up against a ramshackle horde of peasants, but against some of Europe's finest warrior knights – Teutonic and Templar knights were present in force. To beat his enemy, Kaidu used tactics that, in the words of Erik Hildinger, 'resembled those of the hunter, who uses speed, finesse and deception to herd his prey where he will, then kill it with as little risk to himself as possible.'<sup>34</sup> Henry initiated the attack and sent his cavalry at the Mongols, but they were quickly surrounded and hammered

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<sup>32</sup>Hildinger, Erik, 'Mongol Invasion of Europe.' pp. 38

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 40

with accurate arrow fire and were forced to retreat. Henry then sent the rest of his force to hit the Mongol line, but the Mongols did not hang around to oblige them. The Mongol forces turned tail and sped off in retreat, encouraging Henry's eager forces to pursue. The European cavalry very quickly became separated from their infantry and lost their formation when all of a sudden the retreating Mongols turned around in good order and streamed to the side of the scattered knights, peppering them with arrows. Furthermore, Mongol cavalry that had been laying in ambush launched an attack on the knights' flanks, shooting them with arrows and skewering them with their lances. The light Mongol cavalry showered the unprotected infantry with arrows whilst the heavier cavalry annihilated the surround knights, who nevertheless put up a brave fight to the last man. By the end of the battle, twenty five thousand of Henry's thirty thousand men were dead and the road to France lay open.<sup>35</sup>

Before the Battle of the Kalka River, Subotai actually retreated for over a week, luring the Russian forces further into the steppe and stretching their army out over a large distance. The Mongols in this case did not spring an ambush, but used the feigned retreat for a different reason. They made the Russians believe that they were in disarray and so, when the Mongols finally took a stand, the Russian attacked without waiting for their army to regroup and form up. As such, the Mongols tore the scattered forces apart with a combination of archers and heavy cavalry.

The Battle of the Sajo River is an example of yet another function of the feigned retreat. The Mongol forces of Subotai did not relish fighting the one hundred thousand strong Hungarian army of Bela IV unless it was on Subotai's terms and so he retreated with his forces for nine days until he led his enemy to a battlefield of his choosing. Bela's army was not strung out and took up position on the opposite side of the river to the Mongols. The river had a single bridge across it and this was controlled by a small force of Mongols. The

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<sup>35</sup>Hildinger, Erik, 'Mongol Invasion of Europe.' pp. 41



Mongols on the bridge and Bela's forces soon began to engage in hand-to-hand conflict. However, this was all just a diversion, because Subotai had found a crossing downstream and took three tumens with him. Here we move on to the other major tactic employed by the Mongols – flanking and envelopment. Subotai smashed into the Hungarian rear and flanks causing them to withdraw to their camp. The Mongol forces proceeded to surround the camp and although they were outnumbered, their skill with the bow and maneuverability meant that it did not matter. The encirclement tactic used by the Mongols is directly related to the *nerge* and they followed the same practice of tightening the circle so that the enemy was utterly trapped. In this case, the Mongols opened a gap between their pincers, encouraging the Hungarian forces to try and flee. However, the Mongol forces had done this simply so that the Hungarians would cease fighting, because they knew that if the Hungarians had no hope of survival, they would fight bitterly to the last man, instead of discarding their equipment and making a dash for the freedom offered. This turned into a full-scale rout with unarmed knights and foot soldiers alike streaming out of the gap in a straggly column, however, the Mongols appeared on both sides, rode alongside them and picked them off at their leisure. Anywhere from fifty to seventy thousand Hungarians lost their lives in this battle and subsequent retreat.<sup>36</sup> Other significant examples of the Mongols using flanking and envelopment tactics can be seen during the Battle of the Yang-Ho Valley against the Chinese in which Mongol cavalry hit them on all sides killing eighty thousand. Also, the Battle of Ghora Tarap against the Khwarezmids saw a Mongol force use double envelopment to defeat their enemy.<sup>37</sup>

The *nerge* tactic of encirclement was also used on broader scale and not just against field armies, but also on the campaign level. Their tumens would hit a region from many

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<sup>36</sup>Gabriel, Richard A., 'The Right Hand of Khan.' pp. 48

<sup>37</sup>McCreight, Major Richard, *The Mongol Warrior Epic: Masters of Thirteenth Century Maneuver Warfare*, pp. 104



angles, quickly taking every town they came across and forcing armies and populations alike to the centre, usually a major city.<sup>38</sup> This isolated the centers of power from each other, prevented forces from joining up, increased the burdens on the cities to maintain order, morale and supplies and ultimately aided the Mongols in a rapid conquest by forcing their enemy to a position of their choosing. This is exactly what they did in their brutal fight against the Khwarezmid Empire.

The tactics and skills of the Mongols seem like the most obvious factors in their success, however, it is often taken for granted how a nomadic steppe people brought numerous and great stone building empires to their knees, like in China and Persia and across Europe. It is clear how they clutched victory after victory in the battlefield, but without being able to besiege and reduce cities, their victories would have come to little and so if we are to understand the keys to Mongol success, we must now examine the siege warfare of the Mongols.

### Mongol Siege Warfare

When Genghis Khan led his armies into Northern China to fight the Jin Dynasty, he outmaneuvered and crushed every force that the Chinese sent to meet him in the open. However, unlike some of the Mongols' other enemies, the Jin quickly learned to avoid set piece battles and to hide behind their massive stone walls. The war in China is actually a very good way in which to see how Mongol maneuver warfare fared against more static, fortress warfare like that of the Jin, Song, Koreans and Khwarezmids. At first the Mongols had to take cities through long and costly investments or through trickery, but they still had to prowl like a jungle cat outside the bigger and better defended cities like Peking and Kaifeng. The Mongols could not consolidate a victory or make it last if they could not reduce major cities

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<sup>38</sup>May, Timothy, 'The Training of the Inner Asian Nomad Army in the Pre-Modern Period.' pp. 621

and so during the lull in the fighting, the Mongols began to focus on siege craft and they very quickly learned how to deal with walled cities. When the Mongols returned to finish off the Jin, things were a bit different. The Mongols had learned a great deal from the vast numbers of Chinese artisans that they had captured during the first war and as such, according to historian Kim Stubbs, the Mongols ‘now had access to the most sophisticated techniques available at that time.’<sup>39</sup> From that point on, when these wild, nomadic horsemen came upon major cities, with their massive stone walls and countless defenders, the Mongols proceeded to smash them to pieces. The war in China had been a wake-up call and a stepping stone. With what they learned, they would be able to take the world by force. Once the Mongols became master besiegers, the tactic of hiding behind massive stone walls instead of fielding armies to face the Mongols in the open, actually helped the Mongols to beat them, because the Mongols just took every city and town they came across one by one, defeating enemies in a piecemeal fashion. This display of adaptability helps us understand why the Mongols were successful in ways that their ancestors were not. Crucially, the Mongols’ new found skills in siege warfare did not hamper their mobility in any way and the Mongols remained a lightning fast cavalry horde. The Mongols could still travel further and faster than any other army, only now when they got to a city they could assault it with ‘battering rams, four-wheeled mobile shields, fire tubes, trebuchets, and siege bows...’<sup>40</sup> This combination of speed and siege capability, as well as their near invincibility in the open, meant that the Mongol army really was the most effective military machine in the world. The Jin cities were the first to fall, but Genghis turned his new siege skills on the Khwarezmids not long after in a war of extermination. Great cities like Otrar, Bukhara, Nishapur and the capital Samarkand all fell to the Mongols after bloody sieges. The defenders of Nishapur, who themselves had lots of

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<sup>39</sup>Stubbs, Kim, ‘Facing the Wrath of Khan.’ pp. 33

<sup>40</sup>Stubbs, Kim, ‘Facing the Wrath of Khan.’ pp. 33

siege weaponry, were overawed by that in possession of the Mongols.<sup>41</sup> During their Western campaigns, the Mongols destroyed twelve walled cities in less than two months, including Moscow and Ryazan.<sup>42</sup> Not long after, even the great stone walled city of Kiev ‘fell quickly to Mongol bombardment...’<sup>43</sup>

Of course, it is not enough to say that they learned the trade and so were good at it, we must look at the actual siege tactics employed by the Mongols to see what made them so successful at it. The Mongols were almost entirely dependant on Muslim and Chinese engineers not only to build equipment, but to man it also. Sometimes if a city could not be reduced by bombardment, the Mongols took a page out of Julius Caesar’s book, unwittingly, and built a counter-fortress around the city in order starve them out. Cleverly, the Mongols did not go straight for the centers of power, but destroyed all its satellite towns and cities so as to be able to focus purely and wholly on the big cities when the time came. The Mongols also made significant use of prisoners and conscripts from previously conquered areas as ‘forced labor and arrow fodder.’<sup>44</sup> If a moat needed filled, it was the levies who collected debris to fill it with and the levies who had to brave the missile fire to do it. If the Mongols needed to build a trench, it was the levies who built it, if they needed defensive works, the levies built them and generally anything else that needed done to facilitate the Mongol siege.<sup>45</sup> They also built the siege engines that would never cease to bombard a city once they began. They did not just attack with ballistae arrows and stones, but naphtha too was hurled over the walls, Greek fire and even, according to John de Plano Carpini, burning human fat.<sup>46</sup>

The Mongols employed other tactics during a siege, such as tunneling under walls to weaken or collapse them, flooding cities, like at Xixia, and these also were done by the levies

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<sup>41</sup>May, Timothy, ‘Genghis Khan: Secrets of Success.’ pp. 44

<sup>42</sup>Gabriel, Richard A., ‘The Right Hand of Khan.’ pp. 44

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>May, Timothy, ‘Genghis Khan: Secrets of Success.’ pp. 46

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 46

so as not to risk the more important Mongolian warriors. The levies manned the battering rams and even attacked the walls, but when there was a way in, the Mongols themselves stormed the breach, usually at night for additional protection. As a prime example of a typical Mongolian siege procedure, Timothy May presents us with the siege of the Russian city Vladimir. He tells us that,

The Mongols isolated the city by surrounding it with a wall before bombarding it with catapults, arrows, fire arrows and attacks by levies with battering rams. Once they had breached a city wall, they mounted a quick assault at night to reduce casualties.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, the combination of Mongol speed, flexibility, skill on the battlefield and siege proficiency made them a near unstoppable force, but the Mongols still had one more weapon in their arsenal, perhaps the one which ensured their names would be forever on our tongues. The Mongols spread terror and destruction where ever they went, and many cowered in fear just from hearing their name. The use of terror and destruction was a very calculated method of Mongol warfare and we shall now address how and why it was employed.

### Terror and Destruction

When the Mongols beat an enemy, they often decapitated their heads and impaled them on wooden stakes for all to see. When they took a town or city that had resisted them, they generally executed every male taller than a cart wheel or a whip and according to one figure, the death toll from their campaign in Hungary was estimated at fifty per cent of the local population.<sup>48</sup> Those inside of Kiev when the Mongols stormed it were put to death and in fact, nearly every other major eastern European city was destroyed and its population slaughtered. Genghis Khan's brutal war in the Khwarizmian Empire has been described as 'campaign of extermination' by historian Archer Jones.<sup>49</sup> According to contemporary tallies, the death toll

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 47

<sup>48</sup>Gabriel, Richard A., 'The Right Hand of Khan.' pp. 48

<sup>49</sup>Jones, Archer, *The Art of War in the Western World*, pp. 142

in this campaign was in the millions and whilst this is highly unlikely, given that the total population of the region probably only ran into the few millions, it points to the massive trail of death and destruction that the Mongols left behind them.<sup>50</sup> In general, where ever the Mongols went, the local populations suffered greatly. However, as was mentioned previously, this cruelty and terror was itself a weapon and not just a manifestation of some kind of Mongolian blood lust and it had both a logical purpose as well as being part of a more political strategy. One of the most basic purposes of Mongolian terror was to send a message to all who may oppose them that resistance is futile and anyone who resists will meet the same fate. This message traveled faster than any courier and so the Mongols' reputation arrived at a city before they themselves did, often leading a city to surrender without a fight, as had happened at Zarnuk near Samarkand, and so avoiding costly battles or sieges. In letting everyone know that resistance would only bring death, according to Kim Stubbs, the Mongols' 'brutal strategy conversely often resulted in the avoidance of unnecessary bloodshed.'<sup>51</sup> When cities did resist, they were razed to the ground without mercy – women were raped, young men taken into slavery for labor or conscription, older males executed and any artisans were sent back to Mongol camps. The city of Merv, a hugely important Islamic cultural centre, resisted the Mongols before surrendering, however, they were still all put to the sword for daring to defy the Mongols. If a city did not resist at all, they were spared, like the ancient city of Herat, however, the city revolted after the Mongols' departure. Genghis is reputed to have asked how this city failed to understand their message of terror as evidenced by their uprising. He sent his army back to Herat and they slaughtered everyone. Genghis Khan very consciously did these things to permanently subdue large groups of people by instilling in their collective memory what the repercussions of defiance were. Genghis Khan is said to have asked a Khwarizmian if the bloodshed will ever be forgotten, to which the man

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<sup>50</sup>Stubbs, Kim, 'Facing the Wrath of Khan.' pp. 33

<sup>51</sup>Stubbs, Kim, 'Facing the Wrath of Khan.' pp. 33

answered, ““If Jenghiz Khan continues this campaign of murder, no one will be left alive to harbor a memory of the bloodshed.””<sup>52</sup> Essentially, the cruelty of the Mongols was so effective that their relatively small force could go from city to city, take many of them without a fight and then return if any dared to defy them and thereby conquer huge swathes of territory.

Of course the brutal slaughters also served a few other purposes and not just that of encouraging others not to fight. It was very pragmatic and in destroying every town or city that they came across, the Mongols secured their lines of communication, demoralized enemies that were resolved to fight and also left no one behind to become enemy soldiers in the near or distant future. Furthermore, they destroyed the production centers needed to equip and supply any gathering of soldiers. Also, by butchering the garrison of every place they came across, the Mongols ensured that they would not need to leave behind many of their own forces to hold and garrison the city themselves, thus freeing up the maximum number of warriors possible to move on and continue their conquests.

In short, the Mongols used terror because it offered them many advantages as a minority during their expansions and they would rather a city surrendered without a fight than have to lay siege and thus lose time and men. Furthermore, due to the acute awareness of their finite resources, they did not want to have to garrison cities across the territories they conquered, nor did they want rebellion behind their lines. As such, they cultivated their reputation for massacres for one reason and they carried out the massacres themselves for another.

### Some Closing Remarks

At this point it is prudent to reiterate the importance of mobility to the success of the Mongol armies. Everything they did from their most basic tactics to their grand strategies was

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<sup>52</sup>Jones, Archer, *The Art of War in the Western World*, pp. 143

only possible because of their mobility and speed. The feigned retreat would not have been possible on foot, nor by a force not born to the saddle. The flow of a battle could not change so drastically to fit their plans without their horses and one of their favorite tactics, the double envelopment, was largely possible because of their ability to get around their enemy and stay out of reach. Their campaign strategies of striking fast at multiple outlying targets at once, the great distances they covered and their surprise attacks, all were made possible because of their mobility. They retained the initiative, took the fight to the enemy, when, where and how they wanted and when they got there, they executed complex tactics based on speed and flexibility. They traveled in many different columns when advancing into enemy territory, fought many battles, then converged to hit the enemy when it was suitable. They could be everywhere at once and then all of sudden they were gone as quickly as they came, only to hit somewhere else but this time as a single unit. Their mounted courier system the *yam* was a series of postal relay stations at set intervals through which forces could send information all over Mongol territory whether on troop movements or vital intelligence and the Mongols could communicate at a high speed over great distances, unlike other armies where news traveled very slow and was almost always received too late to be of any use. As such, one must not overlook the significance of the horse to almost every aspect of Mongol success and the Mongols themselves knew this, for one commander is reputed to have said, “If the horse dies, I die; if it lives, I survive.”<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The Mongol armies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were like an unstoppable force of nature. Occasionally they met with minor setbacks and were once famously defeated by another mounted force, the Mamluks of Egypt. They were also repelled

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<sup>53</sup>Rossabi, Morris, ‘All the Khan’s Horses.’ pp. 2



by the Japanese and in general suffered a few other minor losses during their vast expansions, but for the most part, the Mongols were an invincible military force who seized victory after victory for over one hundred and fifty years in the face of impossible odds. The Great Wall of China could not keep them out, the massive stone walls of Peking, Samarkand and Kiev could not beat them, the vast rivers of Europe did not slow them down, and powerful armored knights, the best warriors that Europe had to offer, fell in their hundreds, pierced by a dozen arrows each. There was no distance too great, no enemy too strong and no obstacle insurmountable for the Mongol warriors who shot out of the Asian steppes like a harbinger of death, ready to carry all before them to see their names go down in history, to become the rulers of all that they could take for themselves. The reasons for their success, as has been made clear over the course of this paper, were many. Genghis Khan saw the great strengths that lay in the steppe peoples of Asia and so he built an organized army around their natural abilities, trained them, instilled discipline, gave his army expert leaders and then he unleashed it. When the Mongols encountered their greatest weakness, stone walls and siege warfare, they simply adapted and became masters of a foreign skill. Their remarkable little horses carried them across the world and their powerful bows annihilated some of the biggest and most powerful armies of the day. Ultimately, when the organizational and disciplinary reforms of Genghis Khan allowed for the creation of a large and well coordinated Mongolian army, their skills from the steppes and hunting techniques could be employed on a wide scale to combat enemy armies, even ones far larger than their own. When this was combined with the new skills that they learnt along the way, the Mongols could make short work of their enemies in almost any scenario. In short, the qualities of the steppe horse allowed the Mongols to travel great distances to enemy lands, the mobility and speed of the Mongols ensured that they could always fight the enemy on their own terms, the organization and training of the army ensured that they could successfully execute complex maneuvers over



large distances and their martial skills acquired from a life time of training and hunting with horse and bow ensured that when they got there, they could win.



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