

Who Was Genghis Khan?



By
Nico Medina

Illustrated by
Andrew Thomson

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To Jessica and Katherine,
for the Excellent Adventures—NM

To Rhia, Mum & Dad, and Dai—AT

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The year was 1179. A teenager named Temujin slept soundly in his felt-walled tent alongside his wife, Borte.

The round tent, called a *ger*, stood alone at the edge of the steppe—a region of vast, flat grasslands in Mongolia. Temujin and Borte shared this *ger* with family and friends. Together, they formed a small clan of thirteen people.

Most clans lived close together, forming communities of thousands called tribes. But Temujin's clan lived alone and isolated.

An old woman was awakened by vibrations in the ground.

Hoofbeats. Coming closer.



She screamed for everyone to wake up. Someone was coming!

Three hundred men on horseback from the Merkid tribe raced toward Temujin's *ger*. Eighteen years earlier, Temujin's father—a man named Yesugei—had kidnapped his mother from her Merkid husband. Now Temujin was grown, with a wife of his own. The Merkid wanted revenge.

Temujin's clan jumped into action. But there were not enough horses for everyone to escape. In the confusion, Borte was kidnapped.

Temujin and his clan rode hard through the night. They tried to reach the safety of the forested mountains to the north. There was nowhere to hide on the treeless steppe.

For days, the Merkid searched for Temujin. Finally, they gave up and returned home with Borte as their prisoner.

Temujin climbed to the top of Burkhan Khaldun —“God mountain” in Mongolian. The Mongols worshipped the spirits of the earth, sun, and sky. Burkhan Khaldun, the tallest peak in the area, was the closest earthly place to the Eternal Blue Sky.

To thank the gods for protecting him, Temujin flicked milk into the air then sprinkled some on the ground. He prayed for guidance for three days.



Three rivers flowed from this sacred mountain, presenting Temujin with three choices. He could follow one river southeast, back toward his *ger*. But alone on the steppe, he would never be safe from future attacks. The Onon River flowed northeast, back to the forests where Temujin had grown up, barely surviving by hunting birds and mice. He did not wish to live like that again.

So Temujin chose the third river. He followed it southwest, to the Kereyid people.

The Kereyid joined forces with Temujin and his clan. They attacked the Merkid and rescued Borte.

But that was only the beginning.

Over the next twenty-seven years, Temujin would unite all the steppe tribes. He would become Genghis Khan, ruler of the Mongols, and conqueror of the largest land empire the world had ever known.

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