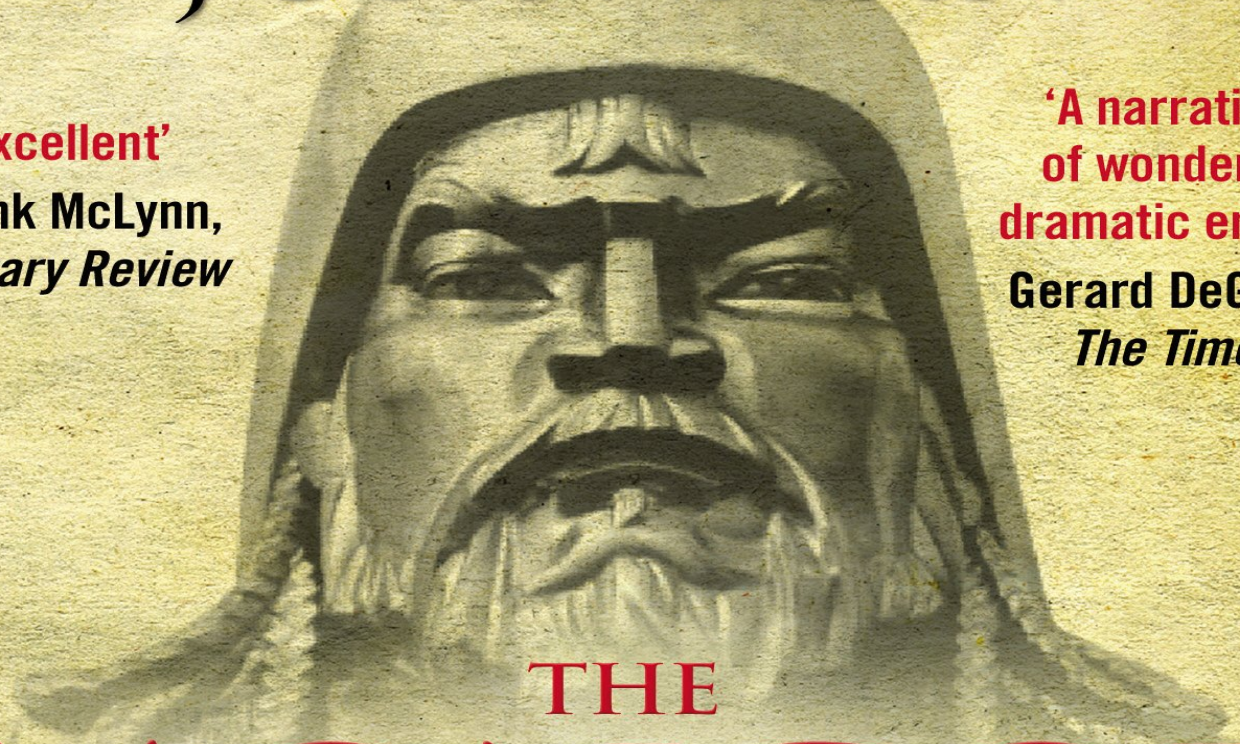
JOHN MAN

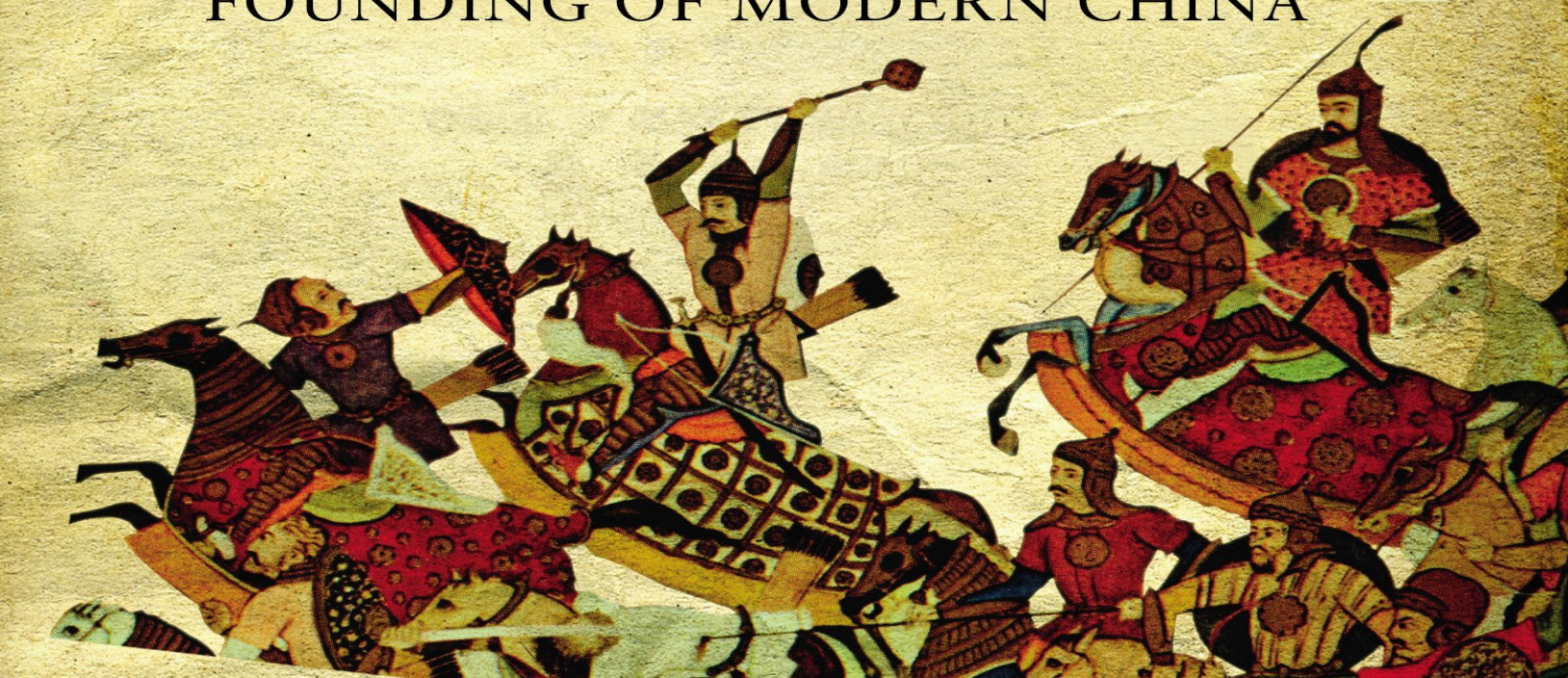
'Excellent'
Frank McLynn,
Literary Review

'A narrative of wonderful dramatic energy'
Gerard DeGroot,
The Times



THE MONGOL EMPIRE

GENGHIS KHAN, HIS HEIRS AND THE FOUNDING OF MODERN CHINA



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Mongol Empire changed the course of history and transformed the map of the world. Driven by an inspiring vision for peaceful world rule, Genghis Khan – mass-murdering barbarian to his victims, genuis and demi-god to his people – united warring clans and forged an empire that spanned Asia, bringing people, cultures and religions together and opening intercontinental trade.

Under his grandson, Kublai Khan, the vision evolved into a more complex ideology, justifying further expansion. Fuelled by the belief that Heaven had given the whole world to the Mongols, Kublai doubled the empire's size until, in the late thirteenth century, he and his family controlled one-sixth of the world's land area. Along the way, he conquered China, made Beijing his capital and gave the nation the borders it has today, establishing the roots of the twenty-first century superpower.

Charting the rise and eventual fall of Genghis's 'Golden Family', John Man's authoritative account brings the empire vividly to life, providing essential reading for anyone with an interest in history, geopolitics, and today's complex and volatile world.

CONTENTS

THE MONGOL EMPIRE

Genghis Khan, His Heirs and the Founding of Modern China

JOHN MAN

For TW and DW-M

MAPS

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The quotations from *The Secret History* are from de Rachewiltz's version (see Bibliography), with permission from Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, Netherlands.

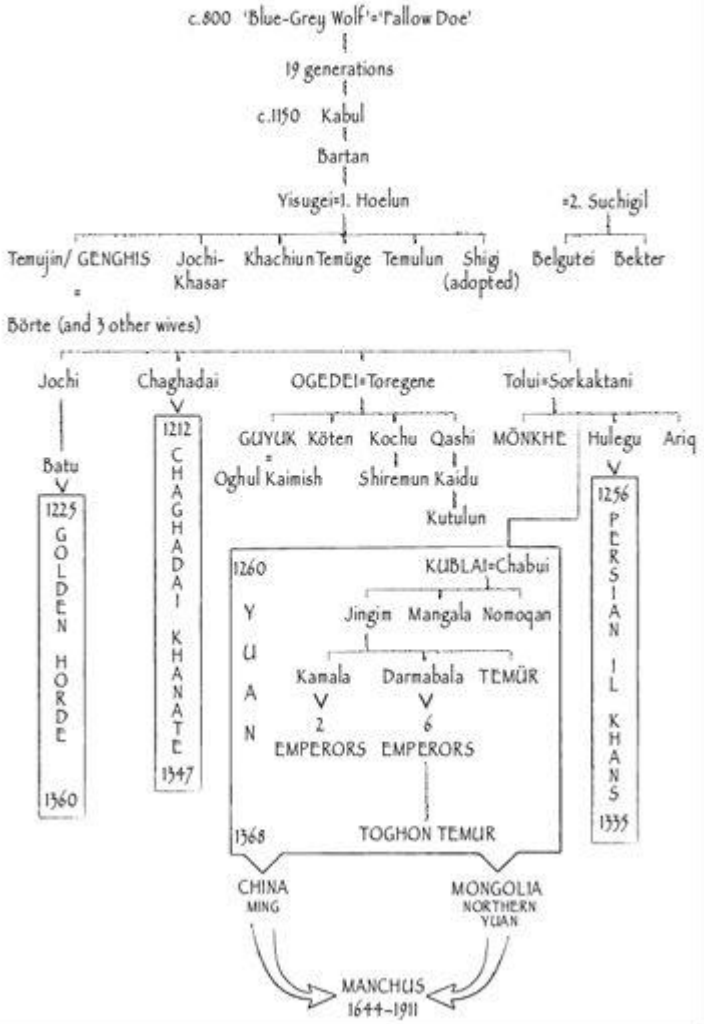
A note on spelling

In transliterating Chinese, pinyin is now standard, but it still overlaps the old Wade–Giles system. I use whichever seems more appropriate. Spellings of personal names vary widely. 'Genghis' is pronounced 'Chingis' in Mongol, and should really be spelled like that in English (to overcome a common fault: the G is soft, as in 'George', not hard, as in 'good'). I retain 'Genghis' out of deference to tradition. I use the more familiar 'Kublai' rather than 'Khubilai', 'Qubilai' or 'Kubla'. Xanadu is 'Shangdu' (Upper Capital) in Chinese; but Xanadu is traditional in English, thanks to Coleridge.

THE EMPIRE: RULERS AND REGIONS

A guide to the main characters, their relationships, their domains and a rough chronology

GREAT KHANS in CAPITALS



INTRODUCTION

THE IDEA FOR this book came from working on a proposal for a series of films. I was in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, with a corporate boss who was interested in promoting Mongol culture. One of his ambitions was to commission a feature film to tell the story of Genghis Khan. It would be big budget, $100 million in Hollywood terms, appealing to audiences worldwide. Never mind other films on the same subject – no one had done Genghis's whole life. He had already discussed the project with three Hollywood scriptwriters. Things had not gone well. I could see why. He was interested in history, but knew little about narrative techniques; Hollywood scriptwriters know a lot about narrative, but care little about history. I saw one script by a well-known writer. It had this body-copy in an opening scene:

> The desert giving way to grass – sparse and flat. A woman, solitary, a symbol of sensuous feminine grace, carries water balanced on her head. Her hips sway timelessly.

It would never work, not just because in Mongolia no woman ever carried water on her head, let alone doing so while symbolizing grace with hips swaying timelessly. It would not work because of the history. Genghis's story is too big to be contained in a single film, even for a brilliant scriptwriter willing to become familiar with medieval Mongolia, China, Korea, Tibet, Japan, Russia, Georgia, Hungary, shamanism, Islam, Buddhism and Daoism. You could no more compress it into a hundred or so minutes than you could the Second World War.

It's not just the range of material that makes it impossible. It wouldn't work because Genghis's empire is only part of the story. He died halfway through. His grandson Kublai took up where Genghis left off, doubling the

empire's size over the next seventy years. A single book, possibly; a single film, no.

So, I told him, he would have to think *really* big. How about not one film, but nine? How about not $100 million, but $1 *billion*? That would give scope to tell the full story.

He loved the idea. The problem is it will never happen, not because of the history, which divides quite neatly into nine self-contained stories, but because of its scope. How on earth do you write nine films all at once – and they have to be all written together, because they interrelate – let alone shoot them?

The discussion had a positive outcome. It made me take the long view and look back on the Mongol empire from today, with Asia dominated by the empire's top successor-state, China.

On the map, China is, as its name says, *zhong guo*, or Central Nation, a singularity, a unity, linking the Pacific to Central Asia, the gravelly wastes of the Gobi to subtropical Hong Kong. But the view from inner space suggests otherwise. Open Google Earth, find China, drift from west to east for 4,000-plus kilometres, and you will see that ecologically the nation is divided. The west and north are all browns and greys, marking the deserts of Xinjiang, the icebound wrinkles of the Tibetan plateau and the grasslands of Mongolia. There are few picture-icons on screen. Click on some and you will see why – huge skies, lunar landscapes, unnamed mountains, hardly a city and not many people.

Wandering very roughly from south-west to north-east, a colour change makes a fuzzy boundary. The browns of high and sparse wastelands tumble into lowland greenery. Along with China's two great rivers, the Yellow River and the Yangtze, the green surges east, over fertile lowlands, until it bulges into the Pacific like a well-fed paunch. This half is veined with roads, crammed with cities, exuberant with pictures and teeming with about a fifth of all humanity.

From Earth orbit, China looks as if it is made of two different parts.

In history, there were many more than two. Once upon a time, 850 years ago, China was not today's China. It was divided into six.[fn1] Before that, down the centuries, other parts came and went, sometimes a dozen or more, seldom fewer than six, sometimes thrusting westwards as if feeling a way towards India, sometimes scrabbling to the north-east into Manchuria and

Korea. In fast-forward, the map of Chinese history looks like a cell-culture dividing, growing, dying back, but always a plurality, united only by an idea of unity that in the early days definitely did not include the very non-Chinese areas of Tibet or the deserts and grasslands beyond the Great Wall.

What brought these parts together?

For the start of the answer, stay on Google Earth, mouse your way up to Beijing, in the top right part of the green bit, then on northwest, across the grey-brown grasslands that span China's northern border into what is now Mongolia proper. If you search around for a focal point, you may find the twin border towns where the only railway comes through. There's not much to see. You are now over the Gobi, where the grass is so scattered on the gravel plains that only a camel would consider it as food. In summer, ramshackle trucks with two trailers belch their way northwards across wastelands that you might call trackless, except that the Gobi has many tracks and no roads. The tracks remain through the winter, because they are frozen. The desert may become temporarily trackless in early summer, when it is flayed by dust storms that could strip away your eyelids.

Head north-west, following the railway line. Halfway to the capital, Ulaanbaatar, go northwards for 80 kilometres until you come to a river, the Kherlen, which you can't miss because it sweeps round in a great bend, running in from the north and heading away north-east. Follow it upstream, and you come to forested ridges and mountains known collectively as the Khentii.

If you want to understand why China is politically united and the shape it is today, this is where the story starts, on a mountainside where, in the year 1180 or thereabouts, a young man, hardly more than a teenager, has been hiding from enemies who want to kill him. The boy's name is Temujin, and at this moment very few people have heard of him, because he is down, and very nearly out. But not quite. Soon, he will become rather better known as Genghis Khan.

He is the key – his character, his vision, his beliefs, his ideology and his talent as a leader. Everyone knows about his ruthlessness, of course: millions dead, dozens of cities ruined. Less widely known is his genius for leadership, and less still the religious ideology with which his heirs justified their conquests. To them, Heaven was very much on their side, and every success, every city destroyed, every conquest, every submission, proved it.

History is not always just one damn thing after another; sometimes it is a story that makes sense. This one, the story of the Mongol empire, has a narrative arc unified by an ambition that now seems quite mad. Genghis created the belief – perhaps in himself, certainly in his followers – that Heaven had given the world to the Mongols and that their task was to do everything possible to turn divine will into reality. The story of how this ambition ran its course spans almost two centuries, much ground and astonishing changes – from 1180 to the late fourteenth century; from nothing much to the world's largest land empire; from an insignificant young warrior to the world's most powerful ruler; from a dream of world conquest to the discovery that the dream was mere fantasy.

But from that dream came something real: today's China. Inheriting the vision of world conquest from his grandfather, Kublai conquered all old China, added vast new territories, united east and west, doubled the country's size, gave it its capital, ruled from it as a Chinese emperor and created a new sense of national unity. Of course, the empire of which he was indirect head reached much further, to the borders of Europe, but his China – essentially today's China plus Mongolia – was under his direct rule. No subsequent ruler thought of backtracking. That Mongolia itself became independent a century ago was simply an unfortunate aberration.

Of the many ironies in this story, two of the strangest are that today's China owes its shape and size – its geographical self-image – to a barbarian non-Chinese who was its greatest enemy; and that the same barbarian is now honoured as an insider, the founder of a Chinese dynasty.

All of this still governs the geopolitics of Inner Asia. Mongolia has vast and untapped resources. China is hungry for them. The frontier between them, until recently nothing but expanses of gravel, sand and rock, is rapidly yielding unheard-of quantities of copper, coal, gold and many other minerals. These are, of course, technically on Mongolian soil. But Mongolia has been independent of its Chinese colonial masters for only a century, and to many Chinese the region is 'really' Chinese, on the grounds that it was once united by Kublai Khan, the Mongolian emperor who founded China's Yuan dynasty. And who inspired Kublai Khan? Why, his grandfather Genghis, which in Chinese eyes turns Genghis into a Chinese.

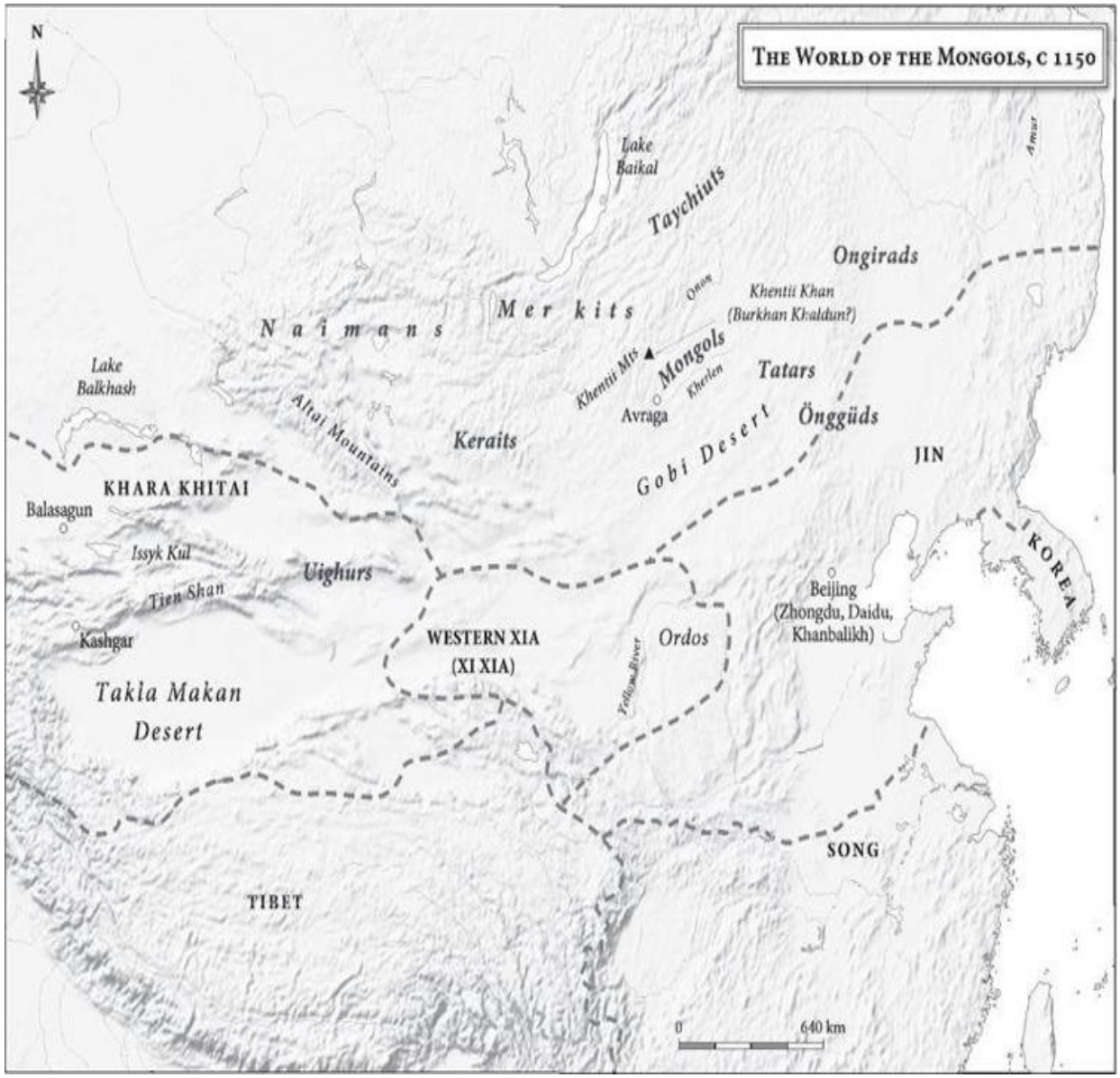
Did Mongolia rule China? Did China rule Mongolia? Much depends on the answers. To understand what is happening and what will happen here over the next few decades, there is no choice but to go back 840 years, to

that young man hiding on a mountain in a wilderness, unknown to the outside world.

[fn1] Jin, Song, Yunnan, Tibet, Xinjiang and part of Mongolia (though the last is complicated in ways we'll get to later).

PART I

GENGHIS


THE WORLD OF THE MONGOLS, C 1150
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Taychiuts
Amur
Ongirads
Khentii Khan (Burkhan Khaldun?)
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Mongols
Kherlen
Tatars
Lake Balkhash
Avraga
Önggüds
Altai Mountains
Keraits
Gobi Desert
JIN
KHARA KHITAI
Balasagun
Issyk Kul
Uighurs
KOREA
Tien Shan
Beijing (Zhongdu, Daidu, Khanbalikh)
Kashgar
WESTERN XIA (XI XIA)
Ordos
Yellow River
Takla Makan Desert
SONG
TIBET
0
640 km

‘HIS DESTINY ORDAINED BY HEAVEN’

1180, ON A mountain in Northern Mongolia: it all starts here, with the young man who would become Genghis Khan surviving an enemy attack. He has been lying low, following deer-trails he has known since childhood, sleeping rough beneath shelters of elm and willow twigs. His new wife, with whom he is very much in love, has been carried off. When the coast is clear on the morning of the third day, he emerges. Only days before, with his enemies hunting him over scree-covered slopes and through fir forests, he seemed doomed to an early death in obscurity. Yet here he is, alive. It occurs to him that his survival is not solely down to good luck and his own skills. Surely he has been protected. Heaven – Blue Heaven, the ancient god of the Mongols – must have had a hand in it.

From this tiny event – a down-and-out warrior grateful for his survival – grew a leader, an ideology, a dream of conquest, an empire, a new world.

But before we get into the consequences, there are questions to answer. How and why did he get into this fix in the first place? Who wanted him dead?

One answer is: Nature herself, for he had been born into a harsh way of life. These mountains and fir forests run across what is now the Russian border. A hunter with a good bow could shoot deer and elk, but there was not much to eat in the forests but pinenuts and berries. Real food was found in the broad valleys and the flatlands to the south, where grass for horses, cattle and sheep underpinned a herding economy. Or rather, real food *is* found: this should really be in a mix of past and present, because life in the Mongolian countryside is much as it was, with the exception of motorcycles and solar-powered TVs. It is from their animals that the herders must meet their needs: meat, skins, wool and the dozens of different products made from milk. There’s not much variety. Life is good in the summer, of course, when you can shoot marmots or gazelle, and your animals fatten on lush grasses, and there is plenty of fermented mare’s milk, the mildly alcoholic *airag* (otherwise known by its Turkish name, *kumiss*). Possibly, summers were even better in Genghis’s day. Recent research suggests that his success

depended on 15 warm and wet years, which promoted ‘high grassland productivity and favoured the formation of Mongol political and military power’.[fn1] But the winters are Siberian. The main river, the Kherlen, and the many small ones that run out of the Khentii Mountains, are frozen for half the year. Occasionally, ice-storms seal the grass in an armour of ice, killing animals by the million. Wolves take sheep. To the south, conditions are even harsher. Grasslands give way to the Gobi’s sparse and gravelly wastes.

To cope with these challenges, herders, who have been developing their skills for over 2,000 years, are experts. The Mongolian *ger* (better known to westerners by the Turkish term *yurt*) is domed to shoulder strong winds, and thick woollen felt over wooden roof-spokes keeps out rain and snow. To stay warm and to cook, you burn dried dung. In winters gone by, without today’s iron stoves, you either coughed in a fog of smoke or opened the roof-flap and let in the cold. In summer, the smoke was a defence against the pestering flies. *Gers* and the carts that carry them, and the powerful little bows of wood and bone acted as reminders that these sailors on the ocean of grass needed their forest roots.

The trouble was not so much the climate, the need to keep moving to fresh pasture and the lack of luxuries, but the feuding. Clans and tribes had their traditional allies, but with wealth and power measured in herds and everyone on the move twice a year between summer and winter pastures, clan fought clan and vengeance followed injury down the generations. At best, young men had glorious assets: huge blue skies, horses galore, powerful bows, shoulder muscles like slabs of stone. But there were costs. A raid put an arrow in your back or left you wifeless, childless, motherless or horseless, facing winter with not a sheep to your unwritten name. Girls, as good in the wooden saddles as boys, grew up tough in mind and body, but were still in need of strong men.

The downside of steppe life was anarchy. Everyone knew this. All but the wildest wanted peace. The trouble was that every would-be leader wanted it on his own terms, without any of the give-and-take imposed by a central government. The only recourse was power, which was what the young Genghis lacked, but which he hoped for, because his great-grandfather had had it.

Earlier in the same century, when the old were young, a tribal chief named Kabul had crossed the Gobi, ridden through the mountain passes

where the Great Wall now runs, down to the city now known as Beijing. In a film, this would be part of the back-story, sung by a bard, because by Genghis's time everyone would know what happened. Kabul, Genghis's great-grandfather, was the source of the very idea of national unity. He had united the Mongol tribes as their khan,[fn2] and the emperor of the northern Chinese empire of Jin had invited him to Beijing in the hope of winning him over with silks and wine. Kabul was not to be won. He got drunk, had the temerity to tweak the emperor's beard, and barely escaped with his life. Vengeance fell on Kabul's heir – his cousin, Ambakai, captured and crucified on a frame known as a 'wooden donkey'. His last message acted as a rallying-cry to his heirs: 'Until the nails of your five fingers are ground down, until your ten fingers are worn away, strive to avenge me!' Kutula, one of Kabul's sons, responded, launching a series of raids, earning himself a reputation as a Mongol Hercules, with a voice like thunder and hands like bear paws. But his strength did not guarantee victory. In about 1160, the Mongols, as hard to unify as a herd of cats, fell back to raiding and revenge killing and wife-stealing.

Kabul's grandson Yisugei dreamed of restoring unity, and so, unfortunately, did his cousins. The Mongols now consisted of some eighteen clans, two of whom claimed the khanship. To do so successfully, each needed the loyalty of all. This was the Catch 22 of steppe politics: leadership needed loyalty, which depended on wealth and power, to acquire which needed leadership.

To secure followers, Yisugei's first task was to get a wife.

This story and many others are told in the epic known as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, our main source for the events that produced Yisugei's son, the nation's founder, the future Genghis Khan. It is not only the prime source; it is the only one in Mongolian, and it is crucial because the incidents it describes are selected for their importance in explaining the rise of its hero. This 'foundation epic' was written in a mixture of prose and poetry within two years of Genghis's death in 1227,[fn3] when the new nation's leaders gathered to crown his heir, his third son, Ogedei. Memories were still fresh, and the best stories were already being turned into song by bards (though not the conquests, perhaps because bards did not accompany the armies; *The Secret History* is pretty hopeless on military matters). Its disparate elements include snatches of epic verse, paeans of praise, ancient

precepts and elegies, none of which were secret, by the way: the epithet was applied by modern scholars because it was kept private by Genghis's family. It contains many adventures – all the chaotic ebb and flow of the struggle for survival and dominance on the vast canvas of grassland and forest. At the time they happened, these events would have seemed of only local significance. But by the time *The Secret History* was written, everyone knew they were much more than that, because from the chaos had arisen a hero, a leader, a national founder, an emperor.

The Secret History has two agendas. The first is to turn the chaos into a coherent account of state-creation, with frequent identification of the year according to the widely used twelve-year cycle of animals common in east Asia (the *History* itself is dated the Year of the Rat, 1228), with the anonymous writer[fn4] choosing those incidents that make sense of Genghis's rise. For instance, it retells a clichéd incident in which a mother gathers her disputatious sons and has them break first one arrow then try to break a bundle, which they can't do; moral – to survive and conquer, stick together! Secondly, the *History* tells us about the qualities that were essential for leadership: bravery, decisiveness, judgement, generosity of spirit, ruthlessness, a vision of what had to be achieved. There are many obscurities. But often the incidents – almost certainly those that had already been popularized by bards – have a dramatic intensity that makes them as good as treatments for movie scenes, complete with dialogue.

Yet it's more than a narrative. It is also a political manifesto, showing how divine will has been at work to produce Genghis, back for twenty-three generations to animal ancestors, which were – as its opening lines state – a deer and a wolf, 'born with his destiny ordained by Heaven Above'. It tells how this worked in practice. Twelve generations back, there was a woman, Alan the Fair, who bore two sons, then after the death of her husband became pregnant three more times. Her two older sons accuse her of impropriety. Not at all, she says: 'a resplendent yellow man' came into her tent through the smoke-hole or the gap at the top of the door and 'his radiance penetrated my womb', then 'he crept out on a moonbeam or a ray of sun in the guise of a yellow dog'. It's not quite a virgin birth, but at least an immaculate conception. Alan the Fair knows a messenger from Heaven when she sees one, because the bright yellow, or golden, light symbolizes supreme power and the dog is an oblique way of talking about a wolf, the

Mongols' totemic animal and a symbol of fierceness. 'The sign is clear,' she says. 'They are the sons of Heaven', destined to 'become rulers of all'.

Twelve generations later Genghis appears, followed by his heirs and family – the Golden Clan as they called themselves. It was for them that *The Secret History* was written. That was why it was secret. It remained so because the original was lost. It was preserved only because the Mongols' Chinese-speaking successors transliterated the Mongol into Chinese syllables as an aid to learning the language, but that version also vanished from the imperial archives. It was rediscovered in private hands in the late nineteenth century, and scholars set about the task of restoring the Mongolian text, back-transliterating it from the Chinese signs.

With the theme stated in the first few lines – a destiny 'ordained by Heaven Above' – many of the incidents incorporate a religious ideology, based on the Mongolian deity Blue Heaven. As time and *The Secret History* go on, we will learn more about this concept and its evolving complexities.

So here we have a document carefully constructed for its narrative power and ideology to present the past in a way that explains the present and foresees the future. It's not exactly the most objective of historical sources. Historians are confronted with this problem all the time, but usually there are many alternative sources that allow scholars to work towards 'objective' truth, assuming there is such a thing. In this case, it is the first and only written account in Mongolian, on which all later sources draw (though there are Chinese and Persian sources, which add details that both corroborate and conflict with the Mongolian). All we can do is make the best of it, admiring it as part history, part folklore and part hagiography, and being extremely careful about taking it at face value.

A chance meeting changed the course of Yisugei's life, and that of world events. One day, according to *The Secret History*, he was out hawking on the banks of the River Onon when he came across a man riding beside a little black, two-wheeled cart pulled by a camel, a form of transport reserved for wealthy women. Perhaps Yisugei recognized him as Chiledu, the younger brother of the chief of a neighbouring tribe, the Merkits, who lived in the forests to the north-west, up towards Lake Baikal. A glimpse of the girl in the cart inspired him – she was a beauty. Moreover, her clothing showed she was of a clan traditionally linked to his by marriage. He fetched his two brothers, overtook the slow-moving procession, chased off the

Merkits, grabbed the camel's tether, and set off slowly across the grassland, with the young woman, Hoelun, bewailing her fate, throwing herself back and forth, plaits flying, in an agony of grief at the loss of her husband. Oh, shut up, said one of the men riding beside her. Forget him. He's history. This was not quite true, as things turned out, for the incident provides crucial motivation for later events, but Hoelun accepted Yisugei as her new husband and protector. Six months later, after Yisugei returned from a raid, she greeted him with the news that she was pregnant.

Yisugei's task now was to regain the authority once wielded by his grandfather, Kabul Khan. He needed help. One potential ally was a Turkish tribe, the Keraits,[fn5] his neighbours to the west (remnants of a region-wide community of Turks who had migrated westwards, eventually reaching a new homeland, today's Turkey).

The Keraits had been nominally Christian for almost two centuries. They owed their Christianity to a 'heretical' sect named after the fifth-century patriarch Nestorius, who was banished from Constantinople for asserting the equality of Christ's two natures, god and man. This meant opposing the official cult of the Virgin as the Mother of God, which Nestorius said denied Christ's humanity. His followers fled, and thrived, spreading eastwards to China and into Central Asia, where they converted several tribes, including the Keraits.[fn6]

The Keraits' current leader, Toghril, had had a colourful career, having been abducted and ransomed twice in childhood, before slaying several uncles to secure the throne. When Toghril was forced to flee by a vengeful relative, Yisugei helped him regain the leadership. (The remains of his HQ – a mound, a few stones – can still be seen a short drive west from Ulaanbaatar.) Toghril and Yisugei became 'sworn brothers', an alliance which would later prove of peculiar importance in Genghis's career.

Three months later, another raid, a victory, in Manchuria, home of the Mongols' old rivals, the Tatars.[fn7] Yisugei returned with a captive, a senior Tatar named Temujin. It was around this time, probably in 1162, that Hoelun's baby was born, close to the River Onon, near a hill called Spleen Hillock.[fn8] If later practices are anything to go by, Hoelun's *ger* would have been off-limits to almost everyone, with a female shaman as midwife looking closely at the baby for some omen, for this was after all the great-grandchild of a khan. Lo and behold, a son, with a clot of blood 'the size of a knuck-lebone' in his right hand. Later, in folklore, this was seen as an

omen of fierceness – but only because the baby turned out fiercely successful. Some babies wielding blood clots turn out gentle failures.

Following tradition, Yisugei named the boy after his captured foe, Temujin (who vanishes from the story, presumably killed or ransomed). So the future Genghis entered life with a Tatar name, quite a suitable one actually, because it derives from the Mongolian word for 'iron' and means 'iron-man' (i.e. blacksmith), not that the original Temujin was a smith any more than anyone named Smith is today. Anyway, his parents liked the connotations of iron – two later children bore names with the same root.

When the boy was eight, Yisugei set out to find a future wife for Temujin from Hoelun's clan, the Ongirad, with whom the Mongols traditionally arranged marriages. They lived several hundred kilometres away to the east, on the grasslands that flow over today's Chinese border. Near his destination, he came across an Ongirad couple who had a daughter, Börte, a year older than Temujin, and were keen for a match. The two fathers agreed, in a stock phrase, that both their children had fire in their eyes and light in their faces. To seal the bond and ensure mutual trust, Yisugei left his son with his future in-laws, Dei and Chotan. On leaving he told Dei to look after Temujin, and urged 'Don't let him be frightened by dogs!' This may seem odd – the future ruler of all Eurasia afraid of dogs? – but dogs were bred big and fierce. Even today, when you approach a *ger*, you shout 'Keep the dogs down!' Genghis himself must have approved the anecdote as a nice human touch.

During the journey home Yisugei came across a group of Tatars feasting and, in accordance with the rules of hospitality on the steppe, he was offered food and drink. They must have recognized him, and seized the chance to take revenge for his previous attacks by mixing poison into his drink. By the time he reached home three days later, he was sick, and dying.

This is the real beginning of the story, because just before Yisugei died, he summoned Temujin home. Everything before is back-story, given significance only by what happened next. If Yisugei had not died, little Temujin would probably have been left with his prospective in-laws for years, would have married his intended, Börte, and lived happily ever after, or not, unknown to the outside world. His destiny would have been very different, and so would that of Mongolia, China and all Eurasia.

Hoelun was left without a protector, and with seven young children between three and nine, five of her own and two by a second wife, Suchigil. Their hopes for success in war, their insurance against catastrophe, had suddenly vanished. Another clan, the Taychiuts, direct descendants of Ambakai, whose khanship had ended on a 'wooden donkey', now bid for power. Seeing a chance to dispense with possible rivals – in particular Yisugei's boy Temujin – they abandoned Hoelun, even spearing an old man who remonstrated with them. Hoelun was left without herds to almost certain death.

But she was a woman of spirit. She became a hunter-gatherer. *The Secret History* depicts her, skirts hoisted, noblewoman's tall hat firmly on her head, grubbing with a sharpened stick for berries and roots: burnet, silverweed, garlic, onion, lily bulbs, leeks. Suchigil must have been doing much the same, but she plays no role in the story. The boys learned to make hooks from needles and use nets to catch 'mean and paltry' fish.

So for three or four crucial years, Temujin knew what it was like to be at the bottom of the heap, to be without the protective network of family, companions and close friends, without enough animals to provide meat, milk or felt for a new *ger* covering. He must have grown up feeling trapped in the brutal hand-to-mouth existence of down-and-out hunter-gatherers, longing for security, herds, and vengeance.

During this harsh time, Temujin found a best friend, a boy named Jamukha. At the age of ten, the two exchanged gifts. In winter, swaddled in furs against the cold, they played at dice with animal ankle-bones, as people still do today. In the spring, as the grass grew sweet through the melting snow, Jamukha made Temujin a whistling arrowhead in exchange for an arrow tipped with horn. Twice the boys swore they would be *anda* – blood-brothers.

This was a family under stress – two women raising seven children. It was hardly surprising if the two eldest boys, Temujin and his half-brother Bekter, felt a growing sense of rivalry. One autumn, when Temujin was thirteen, his two half-brothers stole a small fish and a bird Temujin and their brother Khasar had caught. When Temujin and Khasar complained to their mother about the thefts, Hoelun reproached them. How could they say such things at a time when 'We have no friends but our shadows'? The two boys stormed out, seething. Then, bows at the ready, they crept up on Bekter, who was on a rise watching over some light-bay geldings. Bekter yelled at

them: We need to be together, taking revenge on our Taychiut kinsmen; why 'regard me as a lash in the eye, a thorn in the mouth?' Don't touch Belgutei, he added, and sat cross-legged, as if calling his half-brother's bluff.

Temujin and Khasar shot Bekter and killed him, in cold blood.

You have to ask: if *The Secret History* is about the rise of our hero, what is this foolish and cowardly act doing in there? The answer is that it is a lesson, spelled out by Hoelun. She is distraught, and delivers a scathing condemnation. 'You who have destroyed life!' she yells, and compares her sons to a roll-call of destructive beasts, 'citing old sayings, quoting ancient words'. She goes on and on, in verse, which suggests it was well known and sanctioned by Genghis himself. It's there to make two points. First, no leader should undermine the family network, the core to survival and future strength. Her children have disobeyed the ancient injunction taught by the tale of the unbreakable bundle of arrows: stick together. Second, listen to the women. They often know what's right.

Not long after this, perhaps the following May, the Taychiuts paid a call. Against the odds, Temujin had survived, thanks to his mother. It was time to deal with him properly by kidnapping him, showing him off and executing him. When they came, the children escaped across the melting snow into a narrow valley, where they remained, trapped. 'Send out Temujin!' called the attackers. 'We have no need for the rest of you!' Instead, his two brothers and sister put him on a horse and sent him off alone into dense forest, where he hid for three days.

At this point, trying to work his way out on foot, leading his horse, his saddle became loose and fell off. Looking at the straps, he couldn't understand how this had happened, or – more significantly – why, for in cultures with a belief in spirit worlds, otherwise inexplicable events are often ascribed to other-worldly influences. So Temujin wonders, for the first time in *The Secret History*, whether he is under divine protection: 'Is this a warning from Heaven?' He's not sure – with good reason, as it turns out – but is not going to take a risk. He turns back and hides for three more days. Then he tries again, only to be stopped by another odd occurrence: a white boulder the size of a tent tumbles in front of him, blocking his path. Again he wonders, 'Is this a warning from Heaven?' Again he retreats, for another three days, until hunger drives him out – right into the arms of the waiting

Taychiut. If Heaven is protecting him (as suggested by the auspicious use of threes, and the triply auspicious nine, and the colour white) it has not yet become very effective.

This episode and the adventure that follows are powerfully told in *The Secret History*; it makes a good story, it shows that Heaven is on his side, and it contains a number of insights into Temujin's character. He himself must have told it many times, and approved its retelling as a way of showing his growing strength, maturity and Heaven-sent luck.

For a week or two, Temujin was held prisoner by the Taychiut chief, Targutai,[fn9] under whose orders he was passed from camp to camp as proof of his captor's dominance. He was made to wear a heavy wooden collar, a portable pillory known as a cangue, fixed round his neck and wrists.

His prospects could hardly have been worse, for humiliation would precede execution. In fact, character and chance were about to come to his aid. The previous night Temujin had been billeted with a man named Sorkan-shira, who was a member of one of the Taychiut's subject clans, and not as loyal to its leader as he might have been. He allowed his two sons to loosen Temujin's cangue in order to let him sleep more comfortably. Here was a tiny foundation for friendship, which could be built upon if and when the time came.

The next night was the first full moon of summer, in mid-May – Red Circle Day, as the Mongols called it. The Taychiut had gathered for a celebration. Imagine the broad valley of the Onon, ice-free at last, scattered trees overlooked by still-snowy ridges, horses and sheep grazing the fresh pastures, dozens of round tents, smoke curling from the smoke-holes, horses tethered in lines outside each tent, hundreds of people from the surrounding encampments, an air of rejoicing. Among the crowds that afternoon is Temujin, in his cangue, guarded by a 'weak young man' holding the prisoner's rope.

After dark, the people head for their tents under the full moon. All is quiet. Temujin seizes the moment. He jerks the rope free, swings his wooden collar, clouts the guard on the head and flees into the woods. Behind him he hears a plaintive yell – 'I let the prisoner escape!' – and knows they will be after him. He runs to the river, staggers in and lies down, his head raised clear of the near-freezing water by the wooden cangue.

His pursuers stick to the woods, but someone is on his way home downriver. It is Sorkan-shira, who spots Temujin. Astonished, he mutters that the Taychiut are jealous because there's 'fire in your eyes and light in your face . . . Lie just so; I shall not tell them.' Wait until the coast is clear, he says, then go off to your mother's.

Temujin, though, has a better idea. He is in a dire state. His hands are fixed in the cumbersome cangue, which has rubbed his neck and wrists raw. He is in woollen clothes, in icy water. Flight would mean death by exposure, or recapture. So he totters after Sorkan-shira downstream, looking out for the tent where he passed the previous night, pausing now and then to listen for the slop-slop of paddles in leather buckets as women churn mare's milk late into the night to make *airag*.

He hears the noise, finds the tent and enters. At the sight of the shivering and dripping fugitive, Sorkan-shira is horrified, and urges Temujin to be off at once. His family though – his wife, two sons and daughter – are as sympathetic as before. They untie the cangue and burn it. They dry Temujin's clothes, feed him and hide him in a cart of sheep's wool. He sleeps.

The next day is hot. The Taychiut continue their hunt, turning from the forest to the tents, and at last to Sorkan-shira's. They poke about, looking under the beds, and then in the cart with its pile of wool. They are just on the point of revealing Temujin's foot – a detail surely added by some bard to increase tension – when Sorkan-shira can stand it no longer.

'In such heat,' he says, 'how could one stand it amidst the wool?'

Feeling foolish, the searchers leave.

Sorkan-shira sighs with relief, and tells Temujin to get out, giving him food and drink, a horse and a bow with two arrows. Temujin rides upstream and rejoins his family.

The story portrays the experiences and reveals the reactions that form Temujin's character. He knows what it is like to be poor and outcast. He knows the crucial importance of family. He sees when to act, and acts decisively, but he has steady nerves and knows how to contain himself. Crucially, he can spot a potential ally. All of this will be vital if he is to fulfil his fundamental need: security.

The Secret History continues with another epic adventure. Temujin is gathering companions, as Toshiro Mifune does in *The Seven Samurai* (or

Yul Brynner in the Hollywood version, *The Magnificent Seven*). A year passes. The family has herds, and nine horses, enough for their needs, but not enough to count as wealth. One day, when Temujin's surviving half-brother, Belgutei, is out hunting marmots on the best horse, thieves steal the other eight. Temujin and the others can only watch in helpless rage. Towards evening, when Belgutei returns on the one remaining horse, Temujin, the eldest, gallops off, tracking the thieves across the grass for the next three days.

On the fourth morning, he comes across a tent and a large herd of horses being tended by a teenager named Boorchu. Yes, he saw Temujin's light-bay geldings being driven past earlier. Insisting that Temujin leave his own exhausted horse and take a new one, a black-backed grey, Boorchu shows Temujin the tracks, and takes a sudden decision. 'Men's troubles are the same for all,' he says. 'I will be your companion.' He doesn't bother to return to his tent to tell his father what is happening. Off they go together.

Four days later, the two catch up with the robbers and their herds, and the missing horses. The two companions act instantly, riding into the herd, cutting out their own horses and galloping off. The thieves follow, but night falls and they give up.

Another four days later, approaching Boorchu's father's camp, Temujin makes a generous gesture: 'Friend, would I ever have got these horses back without you? Let's share them.' No, no, Boorchu replies. He wouldn't think of it. His father is rich and Boorchu is an only son. He has all he needs. Besides, he acted in friendship. He couldn't possibly take a reward, as if the horses were mere booty.

Arriving back at Boorchu's tent, there is an emotional reunion between son and father, who has been devastated by Boorchu's disappearance and presumed death. Boorchu is unrepentant, typical of a teenage boy. He's back, so what's the problem? After the scolding and the tears of relief, father and son give Temujin food, and the father, Naku, seals the bond between the two boys: 'You two young men, never abandon each other.' Temujin will remember Boorchu's selfless nobility, and Boorchu will later become one of the greatest of Mongol generals.

There remained a promise to be fulfilled and a ready-made ally to be rediscovered. Temujin, now sixteen, returned to Dei's tent to marry his betrothed, Börte, as arranged by his father some seven years previously.

Börte was seventeen, quite ready for marriage, and her parents were delighted. After the marriage, Dei and his wife accompanied their daughter back to Temujin's home, bearing a present for Hoelun – a sable gown. It must have been a magnificent object, jet black, sleek as oil, with sleeves long enough to cover the hands in cold weather and a hem reaching down to mid-calf. Hoelun would have been thrilled – except that her eldest, now master of the house, had seen a good use for it.

He could already count on his own family, two 'sworn brothers' and another Mongol clan – Börte's and Hoelun's people, the Ongirad. He could do with more help, though, and knew where to find it – from his father's blood-brother, Toghril, the Kerait leader, now master of a domain that stretched from central Mongolia to the Chinese border south of the Gobi.

To back his plea, he offered the black sable gown. Toghril was delighted. 'In return for the black sable coat,' he said, 'I will bring together for you your divided people.'

A good move, because not long afterwards came the attack which forced Temujin to flee to the flanks of his sacred mountain.

The raid comes soon after dawn, when Temujin's family are camping in a broad valley near the headwaters of the Kherlen, the river that embraced their homeland. An old serving woman, Khoagchin, woken by the beat of galloping hooves, yells a warning. Temujin and his brothers leap on their horses and ride to safety on the flanks of the Mongols' sacred mountain, Burkhan Khaldun.[fn10]

Here's a problem. Everyone today thinks they know this mountain. Its name is Khentii Khan – the King of the Khentii – and it is closely connected to Genghis in Mongol minds. Ordinary people, officials and most academics believe that this is the mountain where he roamed as a youngster, escaped his enemies, and is buried (a subject we will return to later). They believe it for many good reasons – because for centuries it has been the focus of Genghis-worship; because one third of the way up there was once a temple, the remains of which can still be found today; and because on the summit there are dozens of shrines. So every four years the government mounts an expedition to it, and up it. It is all very persuasive; except that there is no hard evidence that today's Burkhan Khaldun is yesterday's Burkhan Khaldun. Possibly the name referred to a complex of half a dozen peaks, or even to the whole mountainous region.[fn11] Possibly each clan had its own sacred mountain. If so, no one knows which young Temujin's was.

In any event, Temujin escapes on to a Burkhan Khaldun, if not *the* Burkhan Khaldun. Hoelun snatches up her five-year-old daughter, Temulun, puts her in front of her on a horse, and gallops off with others, but 'there was no horse left for Lady Börte'. The old servant pushes Börte into an enclosed ox-drawn carriage. She might have got away, but the rough ground snaps the cart's wooden axle. The Merkit raiders gather again, wondering what's in the cart. Young men dismount, open the door, and 'sure enough they found a lady inside'. They haul Börte and the old woman up on to their horses' rumps, and join in the search for Temujin on Burkhan Kaldun's forbidding flanks, squelching through peat bogs and forests thick enough 'to stop a well-fed snake'. For three days they circle the mountain, in vain. At last, they withdraw with their women captives. 'We have had our revenge,' they tell each other, and begin the week-long haul back home. Once there, Börte is handed over to a chief.

Temujin does not act the hero in this incident, galloping to safety, leaving his young wife to be kidnapped. But by the time *The Secret History* was written the story was famous, and – we can assume – sanctioned by the hero himself. Everyone had the advantage of hindsight and knew that he was the leader-in-waiting, so his survival was paramount. Besides, the story needs her to be kidnapped, because the kidnapping provides a motivation for what is to come.

Temujin is hiding out in thickets, sleeping rough. He has lost his beloved Börte. His friends will vanish if he is seen to be a loser. When it is safe for him to come out on the morning of the third day, Temujin re-emerges, and is overcome with gratitude for his survival. This is not the first time he has found shelter in the woods and defiles of Burkhan Khaldun. *The Secret History* breaks into verse to capture his feelings:

> Thanks to Burkhan Khaldun
> I escaped with my life, a louse's life,
> Fearing for my life, my only life,
> I climbed the Khaldun
> On one horse, following elk tracks;
> A shelter of broken willow twigs
> I made my home.
> Thanks to Khaldun Burkhan[fn12]
> My life, a grasshopper's life,

Was indeed shielded!

Though all high places are sacred, this mountain deserves special reverence. He vows he will honour it always by remembering it in his prayers every morning; and so will his children, and his children's children. Then, in actions representing total submission to a higher power, he faces the rising sun, drapes his belt and hat – both symbols of power and authority – over his shoulders, beats his chest, makes a ninefold obeisance towards the sun and prepares a libation of *airag*, fermented mare's milk.

Temujin's life was shielded – by what? There is only one possibility: by the power that he had been near while on the mountain, the Heaven of *The Secret History*'s opening lines. It is time to take a closer look at what this power was.

'Heaven' is the translation of the Mongol god, Tengri, who was also the god of several other Central Asian peoples, for belief in Tengri went back centuries before the Mongols arrived in Mongolia. Possibly the word derives from the same root as the Chinese for 'Heaven', *tien*, as in Tien Shan, the Heavenly Mountains, or Beijing's Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace. In any event, Tengri was used by the Xiongnu, who may or may not have been the Huns, and who ruled an empire that covered a good deal of east Asia from 200 BC to AD 200.[fn13] Turkish tribes adopted the name, recording it in various spellings on numerous stone inscriptions in central Mongolia and then carrying it with them as they migrated westwards, until they converted to Islam. It was also inherited by the Mongols when they arrived in their homeland in the late first millennium (which, in the words of Igor de Rachewiltz, suggests that 'the Turks played vis-à-vis the Mongols a role similar to that of Greece vis-à-vis Rome'[fn14]). Like the word 'heaven' in many languages, it refers both to the sky and its divine aspect: 'the heavens opened', 'Heavens above!' There is also a sense (possibly, though nothing in its etymology is certain) of a force, 'the power that makes the sky turn'.[fn15]

So far, Tengri looks like an equivalent of the Old Testament god, though the Jewish god often interfered in human affairs, guiding and punishing, while the ancient Turkish-Mongol one was impersonal, not involved in the petty feuds of the steppe. It was and is natural, therefore, for Muslims and Christians to equate Tengri with Allah and God. The term is also used to

refer to Hindu gods and Buddhist spiritual entities. Like all the main monotheisms, Tengrism was rooted in beliefs in a universe of spirits. Tengri presided over numerous lesser *tengris* (ninety-nine of them in later Buddhist theology) and over the uncountable spirits of rocks, trees, rivers, springs, groves, storms and almost any natural manifestation you can think of. That's why today, as you drive around Mongolia, you see on mounds and hills and ridge-tops stones piled into shrines (*ovoos*), on which lie offerings of bottles, blue silk and valueless banknotes.

This brings us into the system known as animism, the belief not only in the existence of countless spirits, but also in the ability of certain people – shamans – to contact and control them, and use them to heal. There is something fundamental in these beliefs. Spirits and shamans are common to pre-literate, pre-urban cultures across the world, from Siberia (where the word 'shaman' comes from) to Africa, Australia and the Americas. There were many ways to contact the spirit world, through hallucinogens, drugs, trances, music, drumming, rituals and/or by climbing something that approached the place where the spirits and/or the Great Spirit, Zeus, Allah, God or Tengri lived, like a tower or a mountain. This is why mountains sacred to prehistoric peoples have shrines on them; why they are hard but not too hard to climb; why cultures as separate as the Mayas, the Sumerians and the Egyptians built pyramids; and why religious buildings in many faiths have towers.

So it is on a sacred mountain that Temujin has his first inkling of being under the protection of Heaven, the universe's supreme power. It was the power that kept the stars turning, the power that all mankind sensed, and which therefore underlay all religions.

As conquest followed conquest, Tengri underwent refinements, gradually strengthening to become what some scholars call an ideology, Tengrism. Possibly this happened under the influence of the great monotheisms of Islam and Christianity. Originally merely a spiritual version of the sky, Blue Heaven, Tengrism became both more universal and more involved with human affairs – *Eternal* Heaven. Eternal Heaven grants protection, good fortune and success. It is the source of strength, with the power to inspire the correct decision at times of crisis, and to impose its will. Later, when the empire was established and expanding, edicts usually began with an invocation: 'By the power of Eternal Heaven . . .' or 'Relying on the

strength of Eternal Heaven . . .' The problem lay in deciding what was decreed and what wasn't.

Superficially, to claim Heaven's backing looks like nothing more than a reflection of the Chinese imperial tradition of claiming to rule by the 'Mandate of Heaven'. But perhaps there's more to it. The Mandate of Heaven could, by definition, be granted by the gods to an emperor only retrospectively, after he or his dynasty had come to power. Before conquest or seizure of power, Heaven may be on your side, but you cannot know it for sure until you ascend the Dragon Throne. The corollary is that if you fail, Heaven withdraws its mandate; but you cannot know this until you fall from power. Young Temujin's future followers believed that Heaven was on his side in advance of any success, not only when he was still a louse on the side of a mountain but back for centuries to the emergence of the Mongols.

But why? Young Temujin had no idea, and nor did the later Genghis. Nor, come to that, did his heirs. No one had anything sensible to say on the subject. From this mystery sprang one of the Mongols' most surprising traits – tolerance, in the sense of an absence of religious bigotry, which we will see in action in due course.

Later, successful conquests inspired a rather less attractive trait – arrogance. True, you have to be strong to begin with. But to be truly successful, Heaven must increase your inborn strength. Then you will be successful in whatever you do. Success proves that Heaven is with you. On the basis of this circular argument, Temujin/Genghis's heirs acquired a certainty their famous forefather never had. For if you have been appointed by Heaven, then any conquest is by Heaven's order and Heaven's will. In a famous letter to the Pope, Genghis's grandson Guyuk asked in effect, 'How do you think we achieved all this, except by Heaven's command? So Heaven must be on our side. That being so, you cannot possibly claim God's backing. Accept, and submit.'

In the Christian West, there is a traditional belief that God can be influenced by prayer. Even today, church services pray for peace and good health, the implication being that if Christians do not do this, the things they pray for may slip God's mind. Originally, Tengri was too remote to be influenced. But as conquest succeeded conquest, beliefs changed. If the Mongols were world-rulers, perhaps they had some influence over the deity that backed them. On one occasion Genghis asks Heaven for strength to do what is necessary, namely start a war in risky circumstances. The Persian

historian Rashid al-Din, writing in his encyclopaedic *Collected Chronicles*[fn16] some seventy-five years after Genghis's death, tells of another occasion when Genghis prayed 'Oh Eternal Heaven, lend me help from on high and permit that here on earth men, as well as spirits good and bad, assist me.'

The concept of Tengri had an additional subtlety, again deriving from Turkish beliefs. Heaven Above was the more powerful half of a duality, the other, weaker half being the Earth Below, or Mother Earth as the Mongolians called it. It had a name taken from a Turkic source: Etügen, with various spellings.[fn17] To be truly *truly* successful, you need not only Heaven, but Heaven and Earth working together. Naturally, success proved that the Mongols had the backing of both, a belief that was yet to evolve its most outrageous tenet – that the whole world already actually belonged to the Mongols, and that it was their job to make everyone on earth realize this astonishing fact.

[fn1] Pedersen et al., see Bibliography.

[fn2] The nature of Mongolia's unity before Genghis created the nation is much debated. In brief, Kabul's realm was not a state but a unity of clans. He was master of a confederation of chiefdoms.

[fn3] When the *History* was written is much debated by scholars. The arguments are reviewed by Bira, Atwood and de Rachewiltz (see Bibliography).

[fn4] Possibly a Tatar, Shigi, who was adopted into Genghis's family and became head of his bureaucracy. The *History* was written for Genghis's heir, Ogedei, almost certainly with his collaboration. The year of composition is much debated. Other Rat years have their supporters. Atwood (2007) favours 1252 on the basis of many anachronisms, de Rachewiltz argues (2008) that the author conflated two years, 1228–9, and the *History* should be dated 1229, the year of the Ox.

[fn5] The simplest of many spellings, among them Kereyid, Kereit and Khereit.

[fn6] Vague echoes of this in the west started a rumour that there lived in Central Asia a Christian king referred to as 'Prester John', Prester being a contraction of Presbyter (priest). Supposedly Prester John would gallop to the aid of the Christian Crusaders in the Holy Land. It was a disappointment when the 'Christians' turned out to be the Mongols.

fn7 Often spelled Tartar in English, because it was confused with Tartarus, a region of Hell. It was then applied to the Mongols as a whole. To Europeans, Mongols were a people from Hell.

fn8 Where this happened is disputed. In 1962, for Genghis's 800th birthday, the government opted for a site in Dadal, on the basis of not very good evidence. More likely it was near Binder.

fn9 Literally 'Fatty', which suggests he was nicknamed for being fat. More likely, he belonged to a sub-clan, the Targut.

fn10 'Burkhan' means 'sacred', 'holy'. 'Khaldun' may possibly derive from a word meaning 'cliff' or 'willow'. Frankly, no one knows.

fn11 The arguments are summarized by de Rachewiltz in his *Secret History*, pp. 229–30. He is (almost) certain that yesterday's Burkhan Khaldun is today's Khentii Khan. I'm not so sure (see p. 303).

fn12 The name's elements are reversed for stylistic reasons. This is verse, after all.

fn13 The Chinese and Mongolians say they are one and the same, but the evidence is lacking. See my *Attila*, Chapter 2.

fn14 In de Rachewiltz, 'Heaven, Earth and the Mongols'. see Bibliography.

fn15 Jean-Paul Roux, *Tängri*.

fn16 Other versions of the name are *Compendium of* or *Collection of Histories*.

fn17 Marco Polo mentions this god as Natigay, a corruption of Etügen, though he thought she was male. So did John of Pian di Carpine, who transcribed the name as Itoga.

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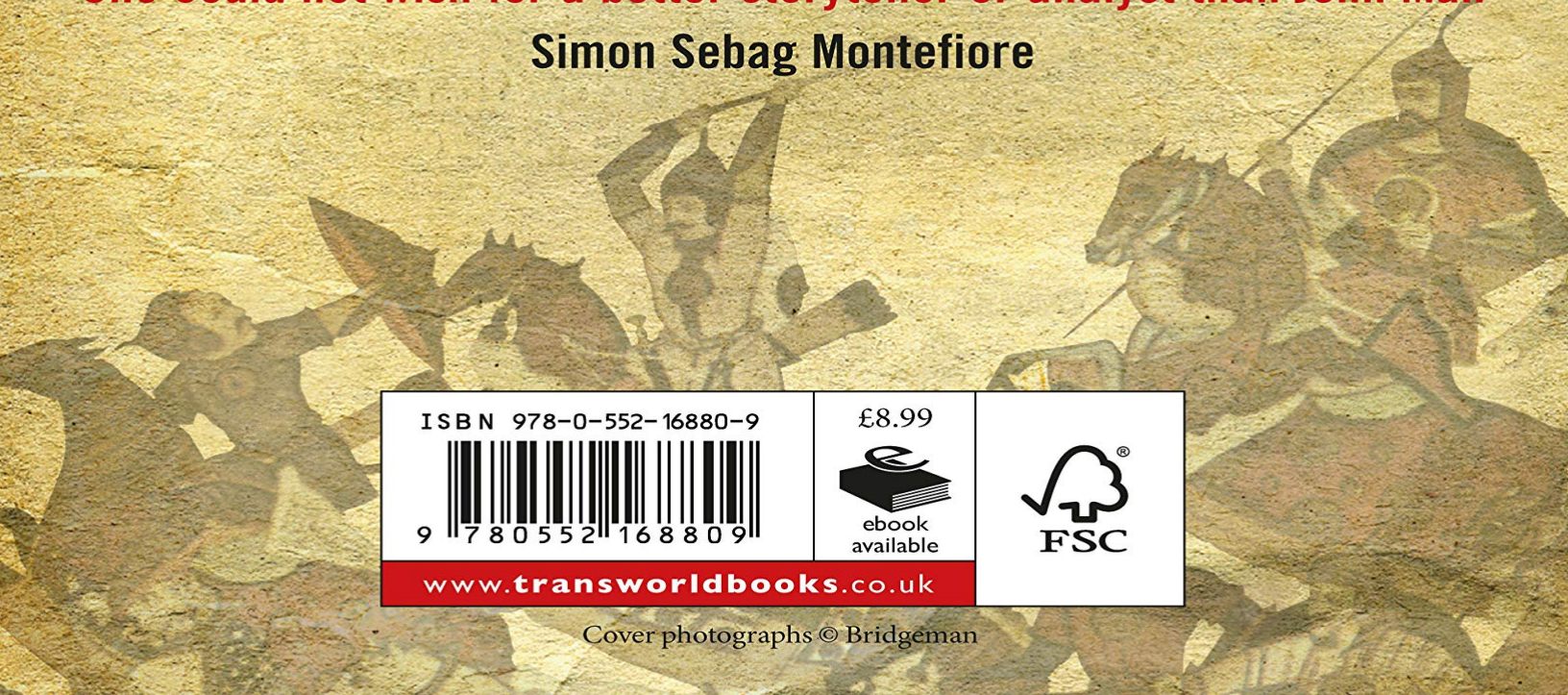

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