

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST CHINGGIS KHAN AND THE MONGOL EXPANSION

In 1209 the Uyghurs, a sedentary and very civilized people that lived in what is today's north Xinjiang, offered their allegiance to Chinggis to free themselves from the oppression of other steppe peoples. Their incorporation was providential for Chinggis: they taught him how to administer a sedentary empire, and they provided the interpreters that would be vital for an empire in which dozens of languages were spoken of which the Mongols knew none.

At that point the Mongols were still illiterate and Chinggis, realizing that written communication was essential for an effective administration, decided to use the alphabetic Uyghur script to transliterate the Mongol. It is also now that the shift towards conquest begins to appear, and it is directly related to the Silk Road. This commercial artery that runs along the Gansu Corridor was basically controlled by the Xixia, a fact that greatly annoyed the Uyghurs who were also a trading people. When the Xixia and the Jin restricted their trade with the Mongols, the Uyghurs and the Mongols started to move. Chinggis understood perfectly the importance of trade and by now he also had a clear picture of the commercial network that connected China with Central Asia, India and Persia and he knew that the Xixia controlled an essential section of it.

Furthermore, he needed fresh grazing for his horses, because every Mongol went to war with five replacement mounts, and the Xixia lands had plenty of pastures. Persistent drought and 20 years of internal wars had impoverished the Mongol economy and Chinggis knew that booty was essential both to hinder political upheavals and to face economic uncertainty. Last but not least, his power was absolute in times of war but diminished in times of peace, when there was no booty to be distributed. To retain power, he needed to wage war. But the conquest of the Xixia posed the new problem of rendering walled cities.

The Mongols lacked engineers and the protracted siege of cities triggered epidemics. After securing all the possible grazing ground, Chinggis left the Xixia alone for the moment and turned to the Jin Empire that the Jürchen had established in the North China plain.

The Jin Empire had conquered the previous Liao dynasty of the Khitai. The Jin were an occupying force and both the remaining Khitai and the 50 million Chinese who lived in the Jin territories, detested them. When in 1211 the Jin imposed limitations on trade with the Mongols, Chinggis decided to attack, and the Khitai that lived inside the Jin Empire decided to help, providing him with the military engineers that he needed. The siege of the Jin capital, Zhongdu, today's Beijing, caused most of its population to starve and ended in a bloodshed and plundering that left corpses on its streets rotting for years.

The Mongols left a trail of death and destruction in their wake and they used terror as a weapon.

With the help of the Chinese engineers, who taught them the use of catapults and other war techniques, the Mongols were now capable to destroy walled cities.

At first the Mongols' purpose was to raze all the cities, kill all the peasants, and turn this vast domain into grazing ground. But Chinggis listened to the advice of a capable official of the defeated Khitai who argued that taxes on agriculture would provide a better income than herding on unsuitable land. The Mongols came from a world in which plundering was the basic way to get wealth, and they had to be persuaded that having a tax system was also a means of attaining income. This **reminds us that Chinggis' success came as** much from his political acumen and his administrative know-how as from his military capacity.