

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST  
THE END OF THE MONGOL EXPANSION

**Chinggis' death didn't stop the Mongol expansion.** By then his best generals, Jebe and Subedei, who both came from his early days on the steppe, had already conquered the whole Juarezm Empire, down to the Caspian sea and had continued to the Caucasus mountains and the south Russian steppes.

Furthermore, in 1233 they finished the conquest of the Jin Empire, and extended the Mongolian domains down to the Yangzi River. The new Khan was now Ogodei, the successor that Chinggis had designated. None of the khans that succeeded Chinggis had the **founder's charismatic personality**, and all of them were short-lived and heavy drinkers. With Ogodei, the drive towards a more sedentary way of life became evident in 1235 with the foundation of the first Mongol city, the capital Karakorum, in the middle of the Mongolian grasslands.

Despite its location, it was also a remarkably cosmopolitan city, with two mosques, Buddhist and Taoist temples, and a Nestorian Christian church. But Karakorum was built apart from the great trade routes. Its location, devoid of agricultural land and with no water in its surroundings, put unnecessary strain on the sedentary populations that had to provide for it.

As we'll see, William Rubruck, one of our travelers, noted that four hundred carts entered the city every day, loaded with daily supplies. In the long run, this strain will become unsustainable. In 1241 Ogodei, invaded Poland and Hungary, plundering their cities and devastating the land: **almost a half of Hungary's population died**, through slaughter or epidemics. This aggressive expansion can be explained in part because the sheer size and success of the Mongol army created an almost inexorable drive towards additional conquests.

Furthermore, in the open field the Mongols were almost unstoppable, because they had the finest light cavalry in the world and they were able to manoeuvre it with a speed and discipline that was unmatched by the heavy European cavalry. But **Ogodei's early death put an end to Mongol expansionism into Europe.**

What in the long run really stopped the Mongol advance was the fact that their war machine depended on the five to ten supplementary horses that each soldier took with him: and horses needed pastures. Look at the maps and you'll see that the Mongols were a whirlwind, but a whirlwind that followed the trails of the silk roads and that galloped over the grass of the steppes.

Once Hungary was laid waste, Western Europe had too many forests, too many mountains and not enough tempting grazing land. But to understand what saved Europe, we need also to take into account the fact that the Mongols didn't have an established mode of succession. Each time that a Khan died, a Kuriltai was convened. It was attended by the heads of all tribes, and rivalries intensified because Khanship was given by election. Each death disrupted the hierarchy of loyalties and was followed by severe fights, that usually lasted a couple of years and that put a stop to all their activities. The ensuing chaos was worsened by the fact that the Mongols successive khans were all short-lived.

It took two years for Guyuk to be enthroned as Great Khan in 1246, due in part to the rivalries between the mothers of the candidates. **It's worth remembering that** women played an active role in Mongol society and had significant power in decision making. **Guyuk's coronation ceremony was** attended by four thousand envoys from all Eurasia, including western Europeans. Giovanni Carpini, another of our travelers, was there. But Guyuk was also very short-lived. After his death an extremely violent and three-year long Quriltai finally enthroned Mongke in 1251. This was a bloody affair and to secure his power Mongke launched the last big wave of Mongol conquests and he did so with the help of his two brothers, Hulegu, to whom he entrusted the conquest of west Asia, and Kubilai, whom he sent to conquer Song China, that is the China that lay south of the Yangzi. In 1258 Hulegu conquered the highly urbanized Middle East with the help of Chinese engineers and demolished the Abbasid Caliphate, razing Baghdad to the ground.

He boasted of 200,000 deaths and the looting of Bagdad brought an immense booty to the Mongol establishment. The conquest had other lasting effects, the worst of them being the destruction of the underground network of irrigation channels in Iran. Without this vital irrigation, part of the territory became desert once again, as had been the case in Central Asia after the destruction of the dams that channelled water to the cities. The Mongol conquest left a lasting and very negative imprint on the fate of the Middle-East. Even the Muslim naval presence in the Indian Ocean will come to a halt.

Fifty years later, the Zheng He expeditions launched by the Chinese will take advantage of this void. And, ultimately, the Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean will also benefit from it.