

History Level 7

Chapter 4 — Asia and the Pacific, 600–1750 — depth topic: Mongol expansion

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Mongol life on the steppe: what stayed and what changed

Section 4A · Strand: Historical Knowledge and Understanding · Sub-strand: Investigation: Asia and the Pacific region (c. 600–1750 CE) Owns: VC2HH8K24 Draws on: .E01–.E09 (this section teaches .E08–.E09; .E01–.E07 are linkage keys only — menu topics not chosen in this book, D7)

Teaching sequence

1. Words to define before we start

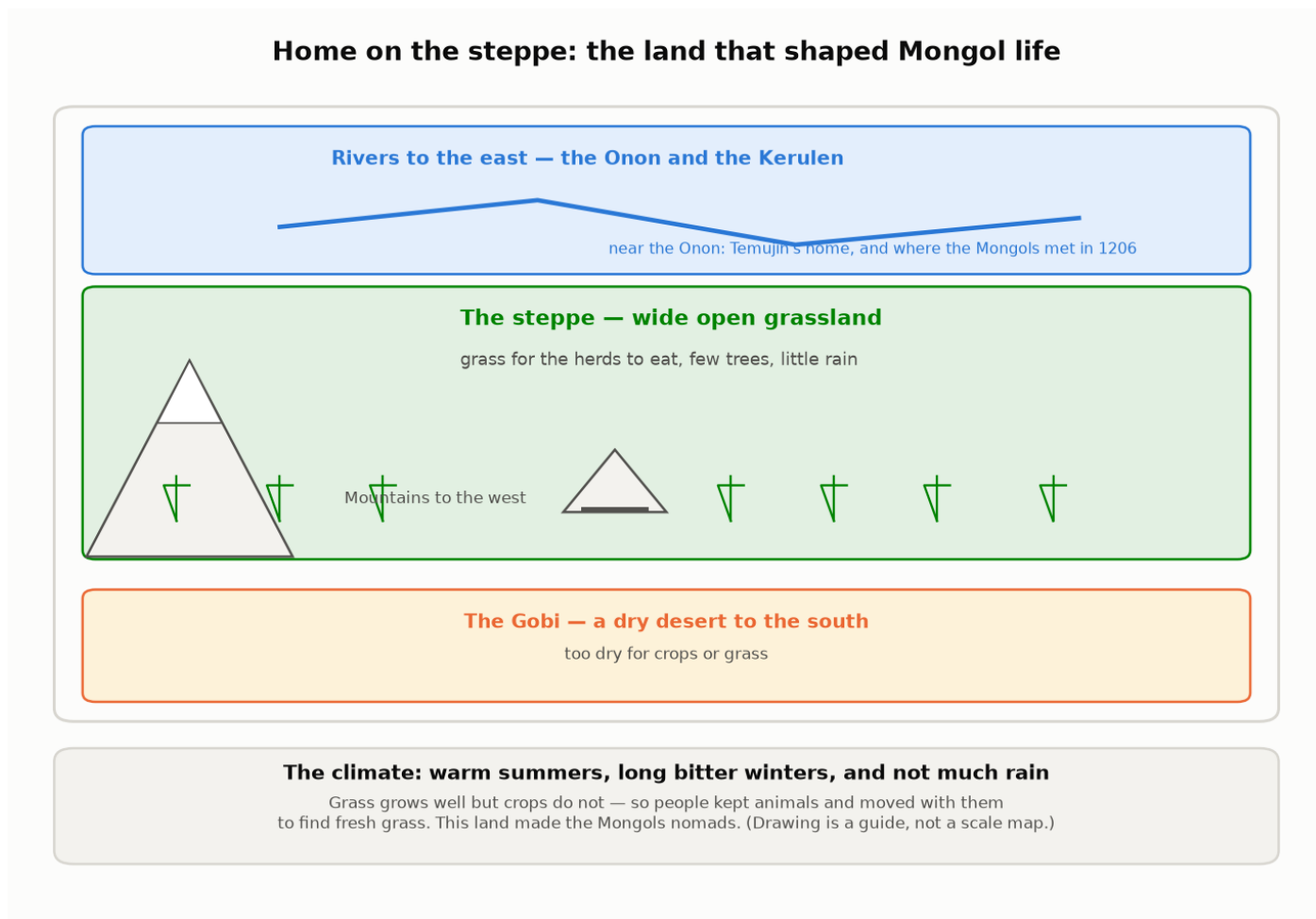
Key terms, defined before use.

- *Continuity* — what stays the same over time.
- *Change* — what becomes different over time.
- *Nomad / nomadic* — the Victorian Curriculum uses “nomadic” (in .E08) but does not define it. This section therefore treats it as **moving from place to place with herds, rather than living in one settled home**. A *nomad* is a person who lives this way.
- *Steppe* — the wide, open grassland of northern Asia where the Mongols lived.
- *Khan* — a title meaning leader or ruler. In 1206 the chosen ruler took the title **Genghis Khan**.
- *Kurultai* — a great meeting of Mongol leaders where big decisions were made.
- *Ger* — the round, felt-covered Mongol home; in English it is often called a **yurt**.
- *Tribe* — a group of families that believed they belonged together and followed one leader.

In this section you will meet the **Mongol peoples** of the steppe, and you will ask one big question: **what stayed the same, and what changed, in their way of life when Temujin — later called Genghis Khan — brought the tribes together in 1206 CE?**

2. The steppe: the land that shaped a way of life . E09

The story of the Mongols begins with the land. Figure 1 shows the home of the Mongol peoples.



Labelled guide drawing of the Mongol steppe: wide open grassland in the centre with a ger, mountains to the west, the dry Gobi desert to the south, and the Onon and Kerulen rivers to the east, with a note that Temujin was born near the Onon and the Mongols met there in 1206

Figure 1. Home on the steppe: the land that shaped Mongol life.

The steppe is a sea of grass. It has warm summers but long, bitter winters, and not much rain. Grass grows well, but crops do not. That one fact — **good for grass, bad for crops** — is the key to the whole Mongol way of life. Because the land could not feed people with farms, the Mongols kept animals and moved with them to find fresh grass and water. The land made them **nomads**.

Notice that this is a **continuity**: for centuries before and after 1206, the steppe and its seasons set the pattern of daily life. The environment did not change, so the need to move did not change either.

3. A life on the move: herds, food and home .E09

The Mongols built their whole life around their animals.

The herds: animals the Mongols kept on the steppe	
Life depended on these animals — they gave food, clothing, homes and transport	
Animal	What it provided
Horse	riding and fast travel; mares gave milk for the drink airag; the heart of herding and hunting
Camel	carried heavy loads across long dry stretches; gave wool and milk
Cattle	gave meat, milk and hides; pulled the carts that carried homes and goods
Sheep	the most numerous; meat and milk, and wool pressed into felt for homes
Goat	milk and meat; soft under-wool; hardy on rough ground

Herders moved their camps to follow fresh grass and water for these animals.

Table of the five herd animals kept by the Mongols — horse, camel, cattle, sheep and goat — and what each one provided, such as riding, carrying loads, meat, milk and wool for felt

Figure 2. The herds: animals the Mongols kept on the steppe.

A Mongol family’s wealth was measured in animals, not in land or money. The herds gave almost everything: meat and milk for food, wool and hides for clothing and homes, and horses and camels for travel.

Foods of the steppe: what the Mongols ate and drank

Food came from the herds — most of it was made to keep well and travel well

Food	How it was made	Why it suited life on the move
Borts — dried meat	meat cut into thin strips and dried in the cold winter wind	very light, kept for months, easy to carry on the move
Yoghurt and dried curds	milk turned into yoghurt, then into hard dried cheese (aaruul)	kept well without spoiling; good food for long journeys
Airag — fermented mare's milk	mare's milk left to ferment in a leather bag, stirred often	a fresh drink made from the herds all through summer
Meat and milk from the herds	from the animals the family owned — no fields needed	the herds fed the people wherever the camp moved

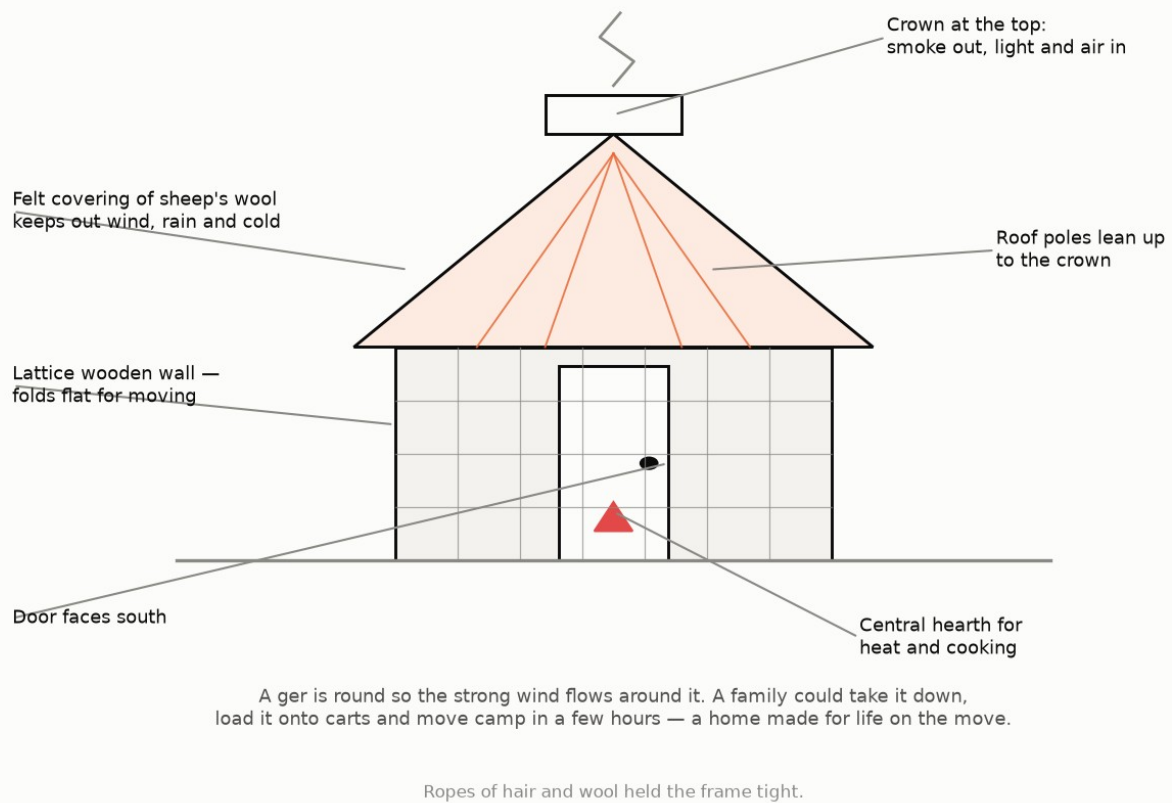
These foods are still made in Mongolia today — a way of life that has continued for centuries.

Table of steppe foods: borts (dried meat), yoghurt and dried curds, airag (fermented mare's milk) and meat and milk from the herds, each with how it was made and why it suited life on the move

Figure 3. Foods of the steppe.

Because the camp moved often, food had to keep well and travel well. Meat was dried in the cold winter wind to make **borts**; milk was turned into **yoghurt** and hard dried curds; and mare's milk was made into a drink called **airag**. All of it came from the herds — no fields needed.

Inside a ger — the Mongol home (in English, a yurt)



Labelled cutaway drawing of a ger (yurt): a lattice wooden wall, a felt covering of sheep's wool, roof poles leaning up to a crown at the top, a door facing south and a central hearth for heat and cooking

Figure 4. Inside a ger — the Mongol home.

The Mongol home, the **ger** (a **yurt** in English), was made for moving. Its wooden frame folded flat, its felt covering kept out wind and cold, and a family could take it down, load it onto carts and move camp in a few hours. The round shape let the strong steppe wind flow around it.

These three figures — the herds, the food and the ger — are the heart of the Mongol **way of life**, and all three were strong **continuities**: they were the same long before 1206 and long after it.

4. Who did what: roles and relationships (CD)

Every person in the camp had a part to play. Figure 5 shows the roles of the different groups.

Who did what: the roles different groups played, and how they related	
Everyone had a part to play in keeping the camp and the herds going	
Group	Role in daily life
Men	herded horses and sheep, hunted, fought to guard the people, and made tools and tack
Women	ran the camp, the herds and the carts while men were away; made felt and prepared food; held respected roles and could speak for the family
Children	learned to ride and to help with the herds from a young age, and learned the stories of their people
Herders (ordinary families)	owned and cared for the animals, moved camp with the seasons, and followed their leaders
Chiefs and khans	led the group, made decisions, organised hunts and defence, and spoke for the people

These roles stayed much the same before and after 1206 — a strong continuity in Mongol life.

Table of the roles of different groups in Mongol society: men, women, children, herders (ordinary families), and chiefs and khans, each with a short note on their role in daily life

Figure 5. Who did what: the roles different groups played, and how they related.

Roles followed age and sex, and these stayed much the same across time — another **continuity**. Men herded horses and hunted; women ran the camp, the herds and the carts and held respected roles; children learned to ride almost as soon as they could walk. Ordinary herders followed their leaders, and chiefs and khans led and made decisions.

Relationships, though, were mainly about **family and tribe**. Before 1206, your first loyalty was to your own kin and your own tribe — and that was about to change.

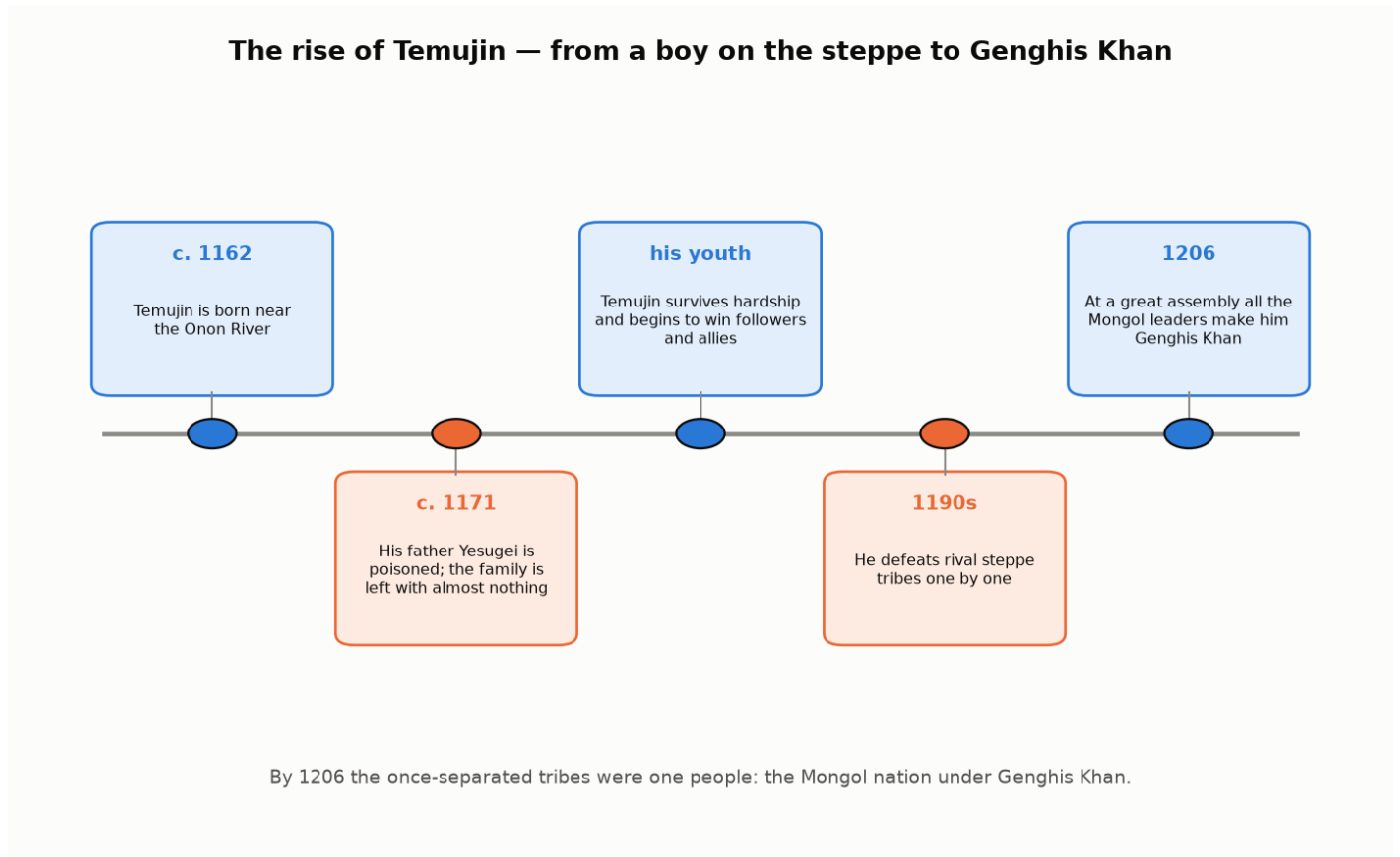
5. Many tribes: life before 1206 .E08

Before 1206 there was no single “Mongol nation”. The steppe was home to many separate **tribes** — the Mongols, Tatars, Keraites, Naimans and others. They shared a way of life (herds, gers, the steppe) but not a ruler. Tribes traded and married, but they also raided each other for animals and goods, and small wars were common. A child grew up expecting both the freedom of the open grassland and the danger of a raid.

Into this world, around **1162 CE**, a boy named **Temujin** was born near the Onon River.

6. The great change: Temujin unites the Mongols, 1206 CE .E08

Figure 6 follows the rise of Temujin.



Timeline of the rise of Temujin from c. 1162 to 1206: born near the Onon River; his father Yesugei poisoned c. 1171 leaving the family with little; he survives hardship and wins followers; he defeats rival steppe tribes in the 1190s; and in 1206 a great assembly makes him Genghis Khan

Figure 6. The rise of Temujin — from a boy on the steppe to Genghis Khan.

Temujin's early life was hard. His father, a chief named Yesugei, was poisoned when Temujin was a boy, and his family was left with almost nothing. Temujin survived by winning loyal friends and allies, and over the 1190s he defeated the rival tribes one by one.

In **1206 CE** the leaders of the steppe gathered at a great **kurultai** near the Onon River and made Temujin ruler over all of them, giving him the title **Genghis Khan**. For the first time, the once-separate tribes were one people. Our best witness is a book written close to these events (Figure 7).

Primary source: The Secret History of the Mongols

the oldest surviving book in the Mongolian language, written about 1240 CE

PRIMARY SOURCE

*"Then the leaders of the Mongol tribes gathered together,
and they gave Temujin the title Genghis Khan,
and made him ruler over all the Mongols."*

— adapted from *The Secret History of the Mongols*, c. 1240 CE,
describing the great assembly of 1206

This book tells the story of Temujin's life — his hard childhood, his rise, and how
in 1206 the Mongol leaders made him Genghis Khan. Because it was written close to
the events it describes, it is one of our best sources for Mongol life.

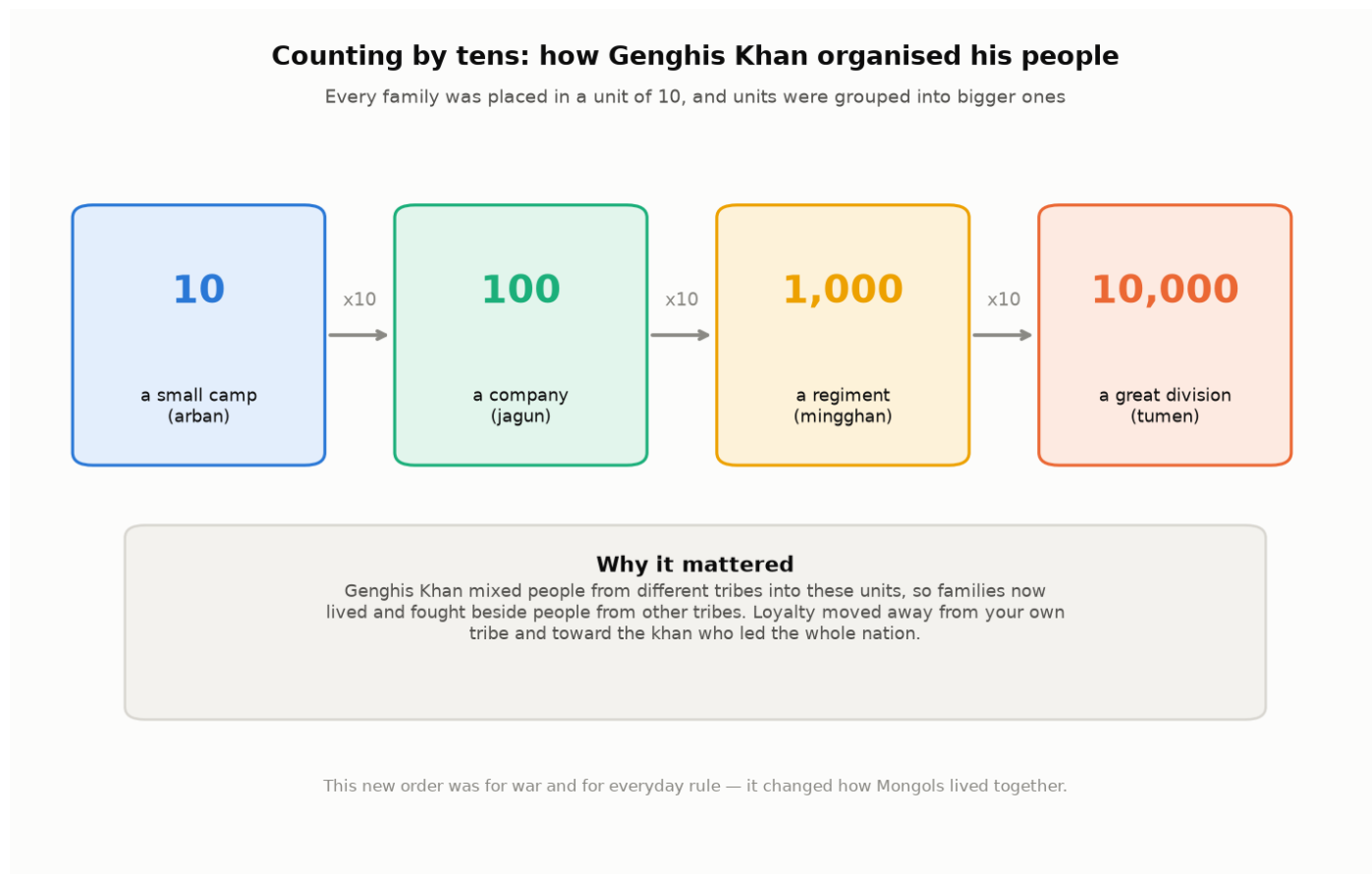
*Primary source card quoting an adapted line from *The Secret History of the Mongols* (c. 1240 CE): "Then the leaders of the Mongol tribes gathered together, and they gave Temujin the title Genghis Khan, and made him ruler over all the Mongols," describing the great assembly of 1206*

*Figure 7. Primary source: *The Secret History of the Mongols* (c. 1240 CE).*

This unification is the great **change** of the section: many tribes became one nation under one ruler. It changed who the Mongols were and how they were ruled.

7. A new order: what changed in how Mongols lived together .E08

Genghis Khan did not just take a title; he reorganised his people. Figure 8 shows his new system.



Labelled diagram of the decimal organisation: units of 10 (arban) grouped into 100 (jagun), 1,000 (mingghan) and 10,000 (tumen), with a note that Genghis Khan mixed people from different tribes into these units so loyalty moved from the tribe to the khan

Figure 8. Counting by tens: how Genghis Khan organised his people.

Every family was placed in a unit of ten, and tens were grouped into hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands. Most important of all, Genghis Khan mixed people from **different tribes** into these units, so families now lived and fought beside people from other tribes. Loyalty moved away from your own tribe and toward the khan. A person could also rise by skill and loyalty, not only by birth. This new order — for war and for everyday rule — is a clear **change** in the relationships between groups.

8. Putting it together: continuity and change (CD)

So what stayed the same, and what changed? Figure 9 sorts the evidence of this section across the five parts of the content description.

What stayed and what changed in Mongol life

What stayed the same, and what became different after the tribes united in 1206

Aspect	Continuity — stayed the same	Change — became different
Social	families lived in gers; men, women and children kept their roles	people from different tribes were mixed together; now, loyalty to the khan could now raise a person's standing
Cultural	foods such as dried meat and yoghurt, the ger, and the love of horses	the tribes began to think of themselves as one people — the Mongols
Economic	herding animals and moving to find grass stayed the main way of life	the khan shared out grazing land and goods, and organised great hunts
Environmental	life stayed tied to the steppe, its grass and its harsh seasons	little changed here — the land still set the pattern of daily life
Political	khans still led, and great assemblies (kurultai) still made big decisions	many separate tribes became one nation under Genghis Khan, with a new decimal order

Much of daily life continued, while the biggest changes were in how the Mongols were ruled and organised.

Two-column table sorting continuity and change across five aspects — social, economic, political, cultural and environmental — showing for each what stayed the same (such as the ger, foods and herding) and what became different after 1206 (such as loyalty to the khan and the decimal order)

Figure 9. What stayed and what changed in Mongol life.

The pattern is clear. **Daily life continued:** the herds, the ger, the foods, the steppe and the family roles were much the same after 1206 as before. The **biggest changes were political and social:** many tribes became one nation under Genghis Khan, and the decimal order rewired loyalty and status. Historians such as David Morgan, in *The Mongols* (1986), stress exactly this point — that the Mongols' everyday herding life was old and strong, while their unity as one nation under Genghis Khan was new, and it changed how the Mongols were ruled.

Worked examples

Example 1 — with help

Classify each real feature of Mongol life below as **social** (roles, family, ranks), **cultural** (food, home, beliefs), **economic** (making a living), **environmental** (land, climate) or **political** (power, rule).

Working	Comment
(a) The Mongols kept horses, sheep and cattle for milk, meat and wool.	Making a living from herds → economic .
(b) Women ran the camp and held respected roles in the family.	Roles and ranks within the group → social .
(c) The Mongols lived in felt-covered gers and drank airag.	Food and homes are part of a way of life → cultural .
(d) The steppe has little rain and long, cold winters.	Land and climate → environmental .
(e) The kurultai of 1206 chose one leader for all the tribes.	A decision about who rules → political .

∴ the five features sort as: economic, social, cultural, environmental, political.

Example 2 — with help

Sort each feature below as **continuity** (stayed the same after 1206) or **change** (became different).

Working	Comment
(a) Mongol families still lived in gers and moved with the seasons.	Same home, same movement → continuity .
(b) Warriors were organised into new units of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000.	A new way of organising people → change .
(c) Herders still lived on dried meat, yoghurt and mare's milk.	Same foods → continuity .
(d) Loyalty moved from your own tribe to the khan of all Mongols.	A new focus for loyalty → change .
(e) Mongols still rode horses and herded sheep across the steppe.	Same work, same animals → continuity .

∴ daily life (a, c, e) continued, while organisation and loyalty (b, d) changed.

Practice tasks

Practice with help

Q1. (.E09) Copy the table and, using Figure 2, give one use for each animal.

Animal	One use
Horse	e.g. riding and fast travel
Camel	
Cattle	
Sheep	
Goat	

Q2. (.E09) Using Figure 3, name: (a) the meat dried in the cold winter wind; (b) the drink made by treating mare's milk; (c) the hard dried milk food that kept well on journeys.

Q3. (.E09) Look at Figure 4. (a) What covered the wooden frame of a ger? (b) Why was a home that could be packed onto a cart useful to herders?

Q4. (CD) Copy the two columns of Figure 9. Add one more example of **continuity** and one more example of **change** from this section, each not already in the figure.

Q5. (.E08) Use Figure 6. (a) In what year was Temujin given the title Genghis Khan? (b) What happened to his father when Temujin was a boy? (c) What was a kurultai?

Q6. (.E08) Look at Figure 8. (a) List the four unit sizes, smallest to largest. (b) How did mixing different tribes in these units change people's loyalty?

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E09) Explain why the Mongols lived as nomads. Use two pieces of evidence about the steppe from Figure 1.

Q8. (CD) Describe how the Mongols lived before 1206, under the headings: **food, housing** and **work**.

Q9. (.E08) Explain how the rise of Temujin changed the way the Mongols were organised. Use at least one piece of evidence from Figure 6 and one from Figure 8.

Q10. (CD) "Mongol life changed a great deal in 1206." Do you agree? Support your answer with examples of **both** continuity and change.

Source-based inquiry task

Q11. (.E09, links to the source skills of Chapter 5) Read the adapted source and answer the parts below.

"Their homes are round, made of a frame of sticks and covered with felt, and they travel with the people. From their horses' milk they make a drink that they love." — William of Rubruck, a friar from Europe who visited the Mongols, 1253–1255 CE (adapted)

- (a) Name two things William of Rubruck describes about Mongol life.
 - (b) William of Rubruck was a visitor from Europe. How might this shape what he noticed?
 - (c) Is this a primary or a secondary source? Give one reason for your answer.
 - (d) Give one thing this source is useful for, and one thing it does not tell us.
-

Answers

Q1. Camel — carried heavy loads and gave wool and milk. Cattle — gave meat, milk and hides, and pulled carts. Sheep — gave meat, milk and wool pressed into felt. Goat — gave milk, meat and soft wool.

Q2. (a) Borts (dried meat). (b) Airag (fermented mare's milk). (c) Dried curds (aaruul).

Q3. (a) Felt made of sheep's wool. (b) Because the camp moved to follow fresh grass, a home that could be taken down and loaded onto carts let the family move quickly.

Q4. Any valid pair. Example: continuity — children still learned to ride and help with the herds; change — people from different tribes now lived and fought beside one another.

Q5. (a) 1206 CE. (b) His father Yesugei was poisoned, and the family was left with almost nothing. (c) A great meeting of Mongol leaders where big decisions were made.

Q6. (a) 10, 100, 1,000, 10,000. (b) Families now lived and fought beside people from other tribes, so loyalty moved from the tribe to the khan.

Q7–Q10 — see model answers below.

Q11. (a) The round felt homes (gers) that travel with the people, and the drink made from horses' milk (airag). (b) As an outsider he noticed things that seemed strange to a European — such as felt homes and mare's milk — so his account highlights what was different from his own life. (c) Primary — written by a person who was there and saw Mongol life himself in 1253–1255. (d) Useful for: the look of the ger and the diet (a first-hand picture of daily life). It does not tell us: how the Mongols themselves saw their own life, or the political changes of 1206.

Model answers

Q7. The Mongols lived as nomads because the steppe could not support farms. First, Figure 1 shows the steppe is wide grassland with little rain, so grass grows well but crops do not — people could not settle to farm. Second, Figure 1 shows the land has long, bitter winters, so herds had to be moved to find grass and water through the year. Because the land gave grass, not crops, the Mongols followed their animals from place to place.

Q8. Food: the Mongols lived on their herds — dried meat (borts), yoghurt, dried curds and airag, all made to keep well and travel well. **Housing:** they lived in gers (yurts), round felt homes that could be taken down and moved in a few hours. **Work:** most people herded animals — men herded horses and hunted, women ran the camp and the herds, and children learned to ride and help. Together these show a way of life built completely on moving with the herds.

Q9. Before 1206 the Mongols were many separate tribes that often raided each other, and loyalty was to your own tribe. Figure 6 shows that by 1206 Temujin had defeated the rival tribes and was made Genghis Khan, uniting the Mongols under one ruler. Figure 8 shows he then reorganised the people into units of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000, mixing different tribes together so loyalty moved from the tribe to the khan and skill could raise a person. So the rise of Temujin changed the Mongols from scattered tribes into one organised nation.

Q10. I agree in part. There were big **changes** in 1206: many tribes became one nation under Genghis Khan (political), and the new decimal order mixed tribes and moved loyalty to the khan (social). But there were also strong **continuities**: families still lived in gers, lived on dried meat and yoghurt, and herded animals across the steppe (cultural, economic and environmental). So 1206 changed how the Mongols were ruled and organised, far more than it changed their daily way of life.

Causes and consequences of Mongol expansion

Curriculum focus: this section owns VC2HH8K25 and develops elaborations .E01–.E13. Following this book’s coverage decisions, it teaches .E11–.E13:

- .E11 — how the Mongols joined Europe and Asia through conquest, new settlements and trade — coinage and paper money, and the rising flow of European merchants to China
- .E12 — Genghis Khan’s army organisation by tens, and his rules for governing the empire — laws written down, no killing of animals during their breeding season, freedom of religion, and wider trade
- .E13 — what Mongol expansion did to life in China — before the conquest, during it, and after it

Elaborations .E01–.E10 are linkage keys retained for other sections and are not taught here.

In the year 1206, the grasslands of inner Asia were home to many small tribes that often fought each other. By 1290, the children and grandchildren of one man — Temujin, better known as Genghis Khan — ruled a single empire that stretched from the edge of Europe to the sea east of China. No land empire in history has ever grown so big so fast.

This section asks two questions a historian always asks about a turning point like that. **Why did it happen?** (the causes) and **What followed?** (the consequences). Along the way we will also sort out what changed and what stayed the same — because conquest never changes everything.

About the key words. The Victorian Curriculum uses words like *khan*, *empire* and *conquest* without defining them, so this section defines every key word at first use (see Part 1 and the figure that goes with it). Two of the words in this section are contested — historians argue about exactly what they mean — and where that happens, the argument is set out in a box, with both sides given equal weight.

Teaching sequence

Part 1 — The key words of this section (.E11–.E13)

These are the working definitions used throughout this section.

- **steppe** — the wide, dry grassland of inner Asia, with hot summers and cold winters, where the Mongols lived.
- **empire** — many lands and peoples ruled by one ruler or state.
- **khan** — the title of a Mongol ruler or chief. (A title, like “king” or “queen”.)
- **khanate** — one of the regions ruled by a branch of the Mongol ruling family after the empire split.
- **kurultai** — a great meeting of the tribes, where big decisions such as choosing a khan were made.
- **decimal organisation** — building the army in fixed groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000.
- **Yasa** — the body of rules and orders that Mongol sources give to Genghis Khan. (Contested: see Part 4.)
- **yam** — a relay system of stations with fresh horses and riders, carrying messages across the empire.

- **caravan** — a large group of traders travelling together, with pack animals and guards.
- **envoys** — official messengers sent from one ruler to another.
- **religious freedom** — people being allowed to keep their own beliefs and worship.
- **paper money** — notes issued by the ruler, used in place of metal coins.
- **dynasty** — a line of rulers from the same family, one after another.

Key words of this section

Subject terms for the Mongol expansion, defined at first use. Keep these meanings in mind as you read.

steppe

the wide, dry grassland of inner Asia where the Mongols lived

empire

many lands and peoples ruled by one ruler or state

khan

the title of a Mongol ruler or chief

khanate

one of the regions ruled by a branch of the Mongol ruling family

kurultai

a great meeting of the tribes, where big decisions such as choosing a khan were made

decimal organisation

building the army in fixed groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000

Yasa

the body of rules and orders Mongol sources give to Genghis Khan

yam

a relay system of stations, fresh horses and riders carrying messages across the empire

caravan

a large group of traders travelling together, with pack animals and guards

envoys

official messengers sent from one ruler to another

religious freedom

people being allowed to keep their own beliefs and worship

paper money

notes issued by the ruler, used in place of metal coins

dynasty

a line of rulers from the same family, one after another

Decimal organisation, the Yasa and the yam are explained in Parts 3-5 of this section.

Thirteen definition cards for the key words of this section: steppe, empire, khan, khanate, kurultai, decimal organisation, Yasa, yam, caravan, envoys, religious freedom, paper money and dynasty, each with a one-line definition

Check: which of these words name a **thing** (yam, paper money), which name a **person or title** (khan, envoys), and which name an **idea** (religious freedom, decimal organisation)?

Part 2 — Causes: a united steppe looks outward (. E11)

Before 1206, the tribes of the steppe raided and traded with the big settled states around them, but they were rarely united. Three long-term causes made expansion possible once they were.

1. **Unification under Genghis Khan.** Temujin defeated his rivals tribe by tribe, and in 1206 a kurultai gave him the title **Genghis Khan**. One steppe, one ruler, one army: the fighting energy of the tribes now pointed outward instead of at each other.
2. **A rebuilt army.** Genghis Khan reorganised the warriors into a new kind of army (Part 3). It was faster, better disciplined and harder to break apart than the old tribal war bands.
3. **The steppe needed trade.** Herding life produced horses, hides and wool, but not grain, cloth or tea. The steppe had to trade with the settled lands — and when trade was blocked or traders were harmed, the Mongols treated it as an act of war.

One more cause is **debated**. A tree-ring study by Neil Pederson and colleagues (2014) found that the years 1206–1225 were very **wet** for the steppe, which means more grass, more horses and more warriors to feed an expansion.

Historians' debate: did the climate cause the expansion?

- **For:** the tree rings show the Mongol rise happened in the wettest spell in over a thousand years. More grass means more horses, and horses were the engine of Mongol power. A dry steppe, by contrast, makes poor herds and weak armies.
- **Against:** weather is a background condition, not a cause. Wet years did not unite the tribes, rebuild the army or choose the targets. The same wet weather fell on tribes that had fought each other for generations without building an empire.

Both sides agree the tree-ring evidence is good. They disagree about what kind of cause climate can be: a loaded spring, or the hand that pressed it.

The **trigger** came in 1218. Genghis Khan sent a **caravan** of traders to Otrar, a town on the edge of the Khwarezmian Empire (a rich state in what is now Uzbekistan and the lands around it). The town's governor seized the goods and killed the traders. Genghis then sent **envoys** to the ruler, the Khwarezm Shah, demanding punishment — and the Shah had the envoys killed. In Mongol eyes this broke the most sacred rules of trade and guest-right. From 1219 the Mongol army fell on Khwarezmia, and the westward door opened. The same pattern — attack, victory, new frontier — then repeated for decades under Genghis Khan's successors: against the Jin and the Song in China, and west into Russia and eastern Europe, until Mongol armies stood at Baghdad in 1258.

Why did the Mongols expand?

Long-term causes stacked up over years. A single trigger in 1218 turned them into war.

Long-term causes

1206 — the steppe unites

Temujin joins the warring steppe tribes into one people and takes the title Genghis Khan. No more fighting each other: one army, one ruler.

A rebuilt army

The army is organised in groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000. Men are promoted for skill and loyalty, not family name. Fast horse archers, strict discipline.

The steppe needs trade

Herders need grain, cloth and metal from settled lands — by trade or by force. Expansion brings goods and wealth to reward followers.

A wetter steppe? (debated)

Tree-ring studies suggest unusually mild, wet years about 1206-1225 — more grass, more horses (Neil Pederson and colleagues, 2014). Other historians warn climate alone cannot explain the expansion.

The trigger, 1218

The Khwarezm Empire (Central Asia) attacks a Mongol trade caravan at the city of Otrar and kills its merchants.

Genghis Khan sends envoys to demand payment. The Khwarezm ruler has one envoy killed and sends the others home in shame.

Genghis Khan marches west in 1219 with about 100,000 men. Otrar, Bukhara and Samarkand fall.

Waves of expansion

1219-1221

Khwarezm Empire falls to the Mongols

1211-1234

war on the Jin dynasty of north China

1235-1279

war on the Song dynasty of south China

1230s-1240s

Mongol armies reach Russia and eastern Europe

1258

Baghdad, heart of the Islamic world, is taken

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Genghis Khan" and "Mongol empire"; Juvaini, History of the World-Conqueror (c. 1260); accessed 24 August 2026.

Cause map of Mongol expansion: long-term causes (the 1206 unification at a kurultai on the Onon River, the rebuilt army, and the steppe's need for trade, plus the debated wetter-steppe finding of Pederson and colleagues, 2014), the 1218 trigger at Otrar where a caravan was seized and envoys killed, and the waves of conquest that followed: Khwarezmia 1219-1221, Jin China 1211-1234, Song China 1235-1279, Russia and eastern Europe in the 1230s-1240s, and Baghdad in 1258

Sources: The Secret History of the Mongols (c. 1240); N. Pederson and colleagues, tree-ring study of steppe weather, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2014); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol empire"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Check: sort the four causes in this part into **long-term causes**, a **debated cause** and a **trigger**. Why do historians keep those three separate?

Part 3 — The decimal army (. E12)

Old steppe war bands fought in family and tribe groups, so a tribe's loyalty always came first. Genghis Khan broke that pattern by sorting every warrior into fixed tens:

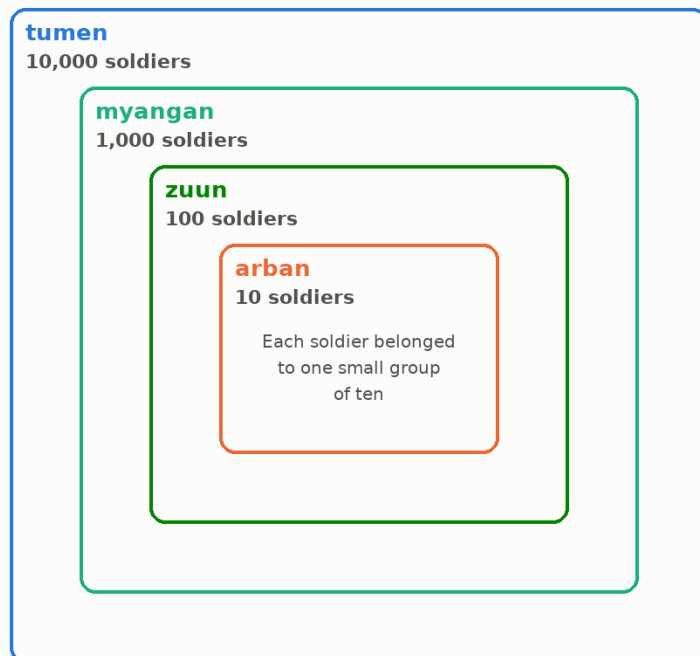
- **arban** — 10 warriors
- **zuun** — 100 (ten arbans)
- **myangan** — 1,000 (ten zuuns)
- **tümen** — 10,000 (ten myangans)

Units mixed men from different tribes, so no chief could peel his tribesmen off and go home. Leaders were chosen for skill and loyalty, not for family name. Discipline was harsh: if one man of an arban ran away, the whole ten could be punished. And the army moved fast, because every rider kept several horses and the whole force lived and travelled the way the steppe already did — on horseback, in felt tents, with its herds behind it.

This army was itself a **cause** of expansion: it let a small population beat bigger, richer states one at a time, and it kept winning far from home.

An army built in tens

Genghis Khan organised his soldiers in fixed groups of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000 — each group inside the next.



Sources: The Secret History of the Mongols (c. 1240); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol empire"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Why it mattered

Old loyalties broken

Men from different tribes were mixed into new units, so they followed the khan's commanders, not their old tribal chiefs.

Promotion by merit

Commanders were chosen for skill and loyalty, not for who their family was. Able men could rise from an arban to a tümen.

Strict discipline

Groups were responsible for each other: if one man ran from battle, his whole group of ten could be punished. Units fought together and stayed together.

Speed and supply

Every soldier rode a horse and carried his own food and gear. Small groups could split up, move fast and join again — often before enemies knew they were coming.

Nested diagram of decimal organisation: an arban of 10 warriors sits inside a zuun of 100, inside a myangan of 1,000, inside a tümen of 10,000, with side notes that units mixed tribes, leaders were chosen by merit, discipline was shared, and the army moved fast on horses

Sources: The Secret History of the Mongols (c. 1240); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol empire"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Check: a tümen holds how many arbans? (Work it out from the nesting, not by guessing.) What old loyalty did this structure break?

Part 4 — Governing the empire: four policies (. E12)

Conquest won the empire; these four policies held it together. Each is named in elaboration . E12.

1. **Laws written down.** Genghis Khan's rules and orders — against stealing animals, kidnapping women or betraying a guest — were written down and enforced across the empire. Later sources call this body of rules the **Yasa**.
2. **Animals protected in the breeding season.** Rules banned the killing of animals at breeding times, so herds could raise their young. On the steppe, animals were food, transport and wealth — protecting them protected the empire's food supply.
3. **Religious freedom.** Conquered people kept their beliefs. Monks, priests and Muslim prayer leaders were freed from taxes and labour. In the capital Karakorum, mosques, churches and Buddhist temples stood side by side, and the ruler Möngke Khan compared the faiths to the fingers of one hand — different fingers, one hand (reported by William of Rubruck, 1255).
4. **Trade expanded.** Merchants were protected on the roads, taxes on trade were kept low and fixed, and the yam (Part 5) kept the routes supplied. Mongol rulers even put silver into merchant partnerships, sharing the profits — and the risks.

Contested term: the Yasa.

The **Yasa** is the name later sources give to the body of rules and orders attributed to Genghis Khan. The contest is about its form: was it a single written law code?

- **One side** reads the sources — for example the Persian historian Rashid al-Din (c. 1307) — as describing a real code: rules set down by Genghis Khan, written up, and sworn to by later rulers. On this reading the Yasa worked like a constitution for the empire.
- **The other side**, put most clearly by David Morgan in *The Mongols* (1986), argues that no such single book ever existed: the “Yasa” was a growing bundle of orders, customs and sayings, never gathered into one code in Genghis Khan's lifetime.

Both sides agree that Genghis Khan's rules were law across the empire and that later rulers appealed to them. They disagree about whether those rules ever became one written code — so *Yasa* is safe to use for “the body of rules”, but not for “the law book”.

How Genghis Khan ruled: four policies

Conquest won the empire; these policies held it together. Each one is named in elaboration .E12.

1. Laws written down (the Yasa)

Genghis Khan's rules and orders were written down and enforced across the empire: no kidnapping women, no stealing animals, no betraying a guest. Historians debate whether these rules were ever gathered into one book — see the contested-term box.

2. Animals protected in the breeding season

Rules banned the killing of animals at breeding times, so herds and wild animals could raise their young. On the steppe, animals were food, transport and wealth — protecting them protected the empire's food supply.

3. Religious freedom

Conquered people could keep their own beliefs. Monks, priests and Muslim prayer leaders were freed from taxes and labour. In the capital Karakorum, mosques, churches and Buddhist temples stood side by side. Khan Möngke compared faiths to the fingers of one hand.

4. Trade expanded

Merchants were protected on the roads, taxes on trade were kept low and fixed, and the yam relay kept routes supplied. Mongol rulers even put silver into merchant partnerships, sharing the profits — and the risks.

Sources: The Secret History of the Mongols (c. 1240); Juvaini, History of the World-Conqueror (c. 1260); William of Rubruck, Itinerary (1255); accessed 24 August 2026.

Four policy cards: laws written down (the Yasa), animals protected in the breeding season, religious freedom (mosques, churches and temples side by side in Karakorum; Möngke Khan's fingers of one hand), and trade expanded (protected merchants, low fixed taxes, the yam, and silver put into merchant partnerships)

Sources: *The Secret History of the Mongols* (c. 1240); Juvaini, *History of the World-Conqueror* (c. 1260); William of Rubruck, *Itinerary* (1255); David Morgan, *The Mongols* (1986); accessed 24 August 2026.

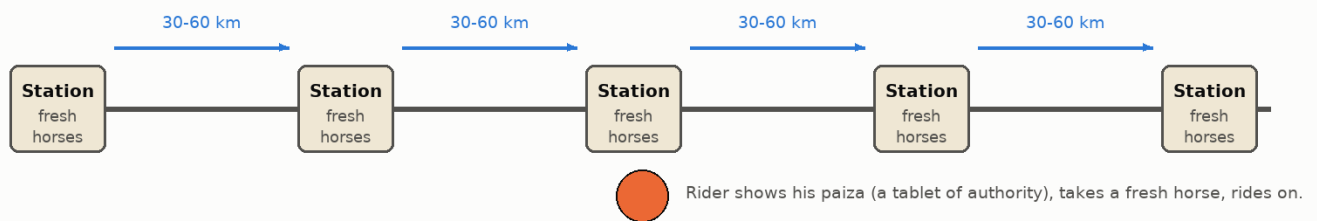
Check: which of the four policies helped **farmers and herders**, which helped **traders**, and which helped **people of many beliefs**? Could one policy help more than one group?

Part 5 — The yam: messages at speed (.E11, .E12)

An empire is only as strong as its news. The **yam** was a chain of stations, roughly 30–60 km apart, where riders could swap tired horses for fresh ones and carry messages day and night. A rider with the right papers — a **paiza**, a metal tablet marking him as the khan’s messenger — could cover 200–300 km in a day. Genghis Khan began the system; his son and successor Ögedei organised it into a regular network. The yam carried orders and reports, moved envoys, and — this matters for .E11 — protected and supplied the merchants whose caravans followed the same roads.

The yam: messages across an empire

A relay of stations, fresh horses and riders. Started by Genghis Khan, organised empire-wide by Ögedei.



What it carried

Messages, orders and reports from the ruler; officials, envoys and armies on the move. Goods travelled the same roads with merchant caravans.

How fast it moved

Riders changed horses at each station and could cover 200-300 km in a single day — news from one end of the empire to the other in weeks, not years.

Why it mattered

One ruler could command armies, tax collectors and judges thousands of kilometres apart. The same roads kept trade moving and made travel safer.

Sources: World History Encyclopedia, "Yam"; Marco Polo, *The Travels* (c. 1298-1299); accessed 24 August 2026.

Diagram of the yam relay: stations 30-60 km apart where a rider swaps a tired horse for a fresh one, the paiza tablet that marks the rider as the khan’s messenger, and the result — 200-300 km a day across the empire; begun by Genghis Khan and organised by Ögedei

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Yam route system”; World History Encyclopedia, “The Yam system”; accessed 24 August 2026.

Check: why is a relay faster than one rider on one horse? Name two groups besides the ruler who used the yam.

Part 6 — Connections between Europe and Asia (.E11)

By about 1290 the empire had split into four **khanates**, each ruled by a branch of the family: the Golden Horde north of the Black Sea, the Ilkhanate in Persia and the Middle East, the Chagatai khanate in Central Asia, and the Yuan empire of the Great Khan in Mongolia and China. They often fought each other — but the trade roads ran through all four, so a merchant could cross from the Black Sea to China under one family’s rule. Historians have a name for this.

Contested term: Pax Mongolica.

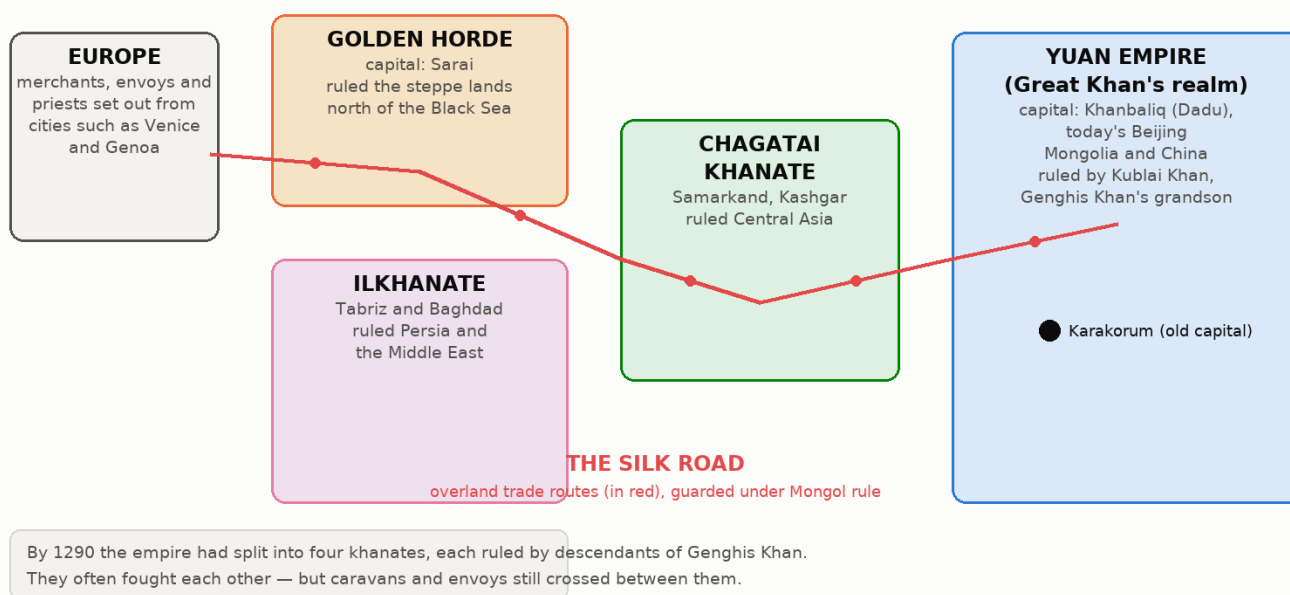
Pax Mongolica (“Mongol peace”) is the idea that Mongol rule made the roads between Europe and Asia safe enough for trade and travel to boom.

- **For:** guarded roads, one family's rule over the whole route, low fixed taxes and the yam meant merchants, envoys and ideas moved as they had not moved for centuries. The journeys in the figure below would have been near-impossible before.
- **Against:** “peace” is a big word. The khanates fought each other, towns still suffered when they resisted, and the same open roads carried the plague west in the 1340s — the outbreak you meet in Chapter 3. Safe for a merchant with a paiza was not safe for everyone.

Both sides agree that movement between Europe and Asia grew enormously under Mongol rule. They disagree about whether “peace” is the right label for it.

The Mongol world, about 1290

One empire, four ruling branches. The Silk Road ran through all of them, joining China to Europe.



sea routes joined the land routes: ships carried goods between China, India and the Middle East

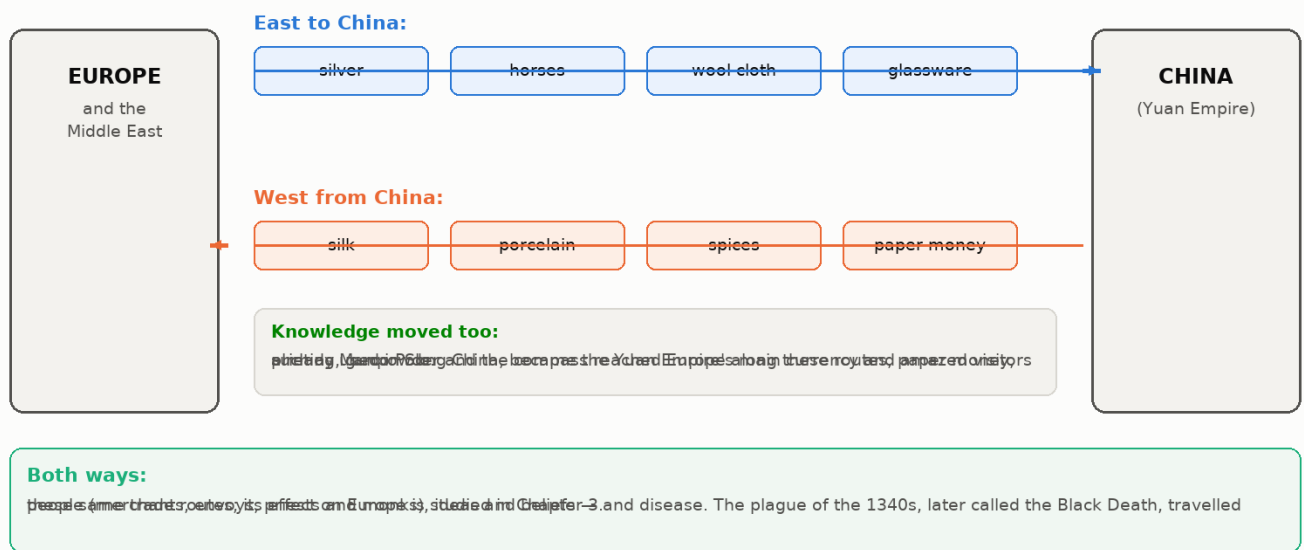
Schematic map, not to scale. Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mongol empire"; World History Encyclopedia, "Silk Road"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Schematic map of the Mongol world about 1290: Europe at the left, then the Golden Horde with its capital Sarai, the Ilkhanate with Tabriz and Baghdad, the Chagatai khanate with Samarkand and Kashgar, and the Yuan empire with its capital Khanbaliq (Dadu, today's Beijing) and the old capital Karakorum; the Silk Road in red runs through all four khanates, joining China to Europe, and a sea-route strip notes that ships also carried goods between China, India and the Middle East

The traffic ran **both ways**, and it carried more than silk. From the west came silver, horses, wool cloth and glassware; from the east, silk, porcelain, spices — and the idea of **paper money**, which Chinese states had already used and the Yuan made the main money of their realm, with metal **coinage** as well. Knowledge moved too: printing, gunpowder and the magnetic compass became known across Eurasia in this connected age. So did disease: the plague that reached Europe in the 1340s travelled the same routes as the merchants (see Chapter 3).

Connections between Europe and Asia

Under Mongol rule the roads were guarded and taxed lightly, so more people and goods moved than ever before.



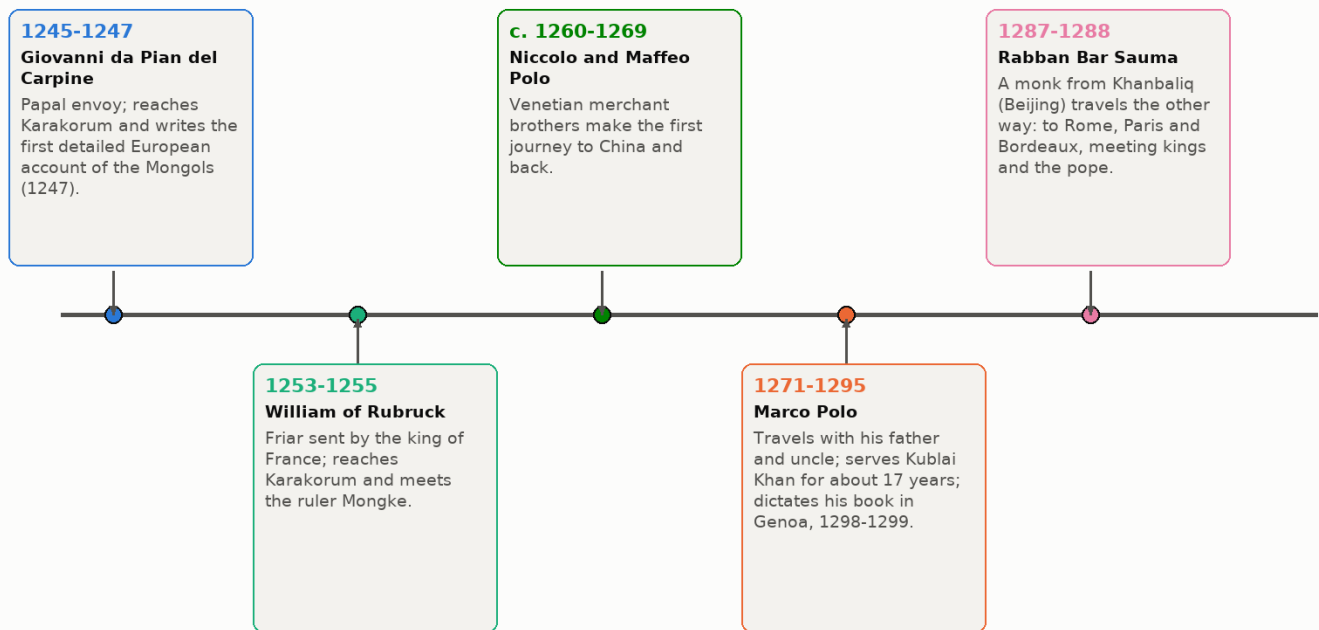
Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Silk Road" and "Mongol empire"; Marco Polo, The Travels (c. 1298-1299); accessed 24 August 2026.

Two-column diagram of exchange across the Mongol world: west to east (silver, horses, wool cloth, glassware), east to west (silk, porcelain, spices, and paper money), knowledge moving both ways (printing, gunpowder, the compass), and people, ideas and disease moving both ways, including the plague of the 1340s, cross-referenced to Chapter 3

The best proof of connection is named, dated people. Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, sent by the pope, reached Karakorum in 1245–1247 and wrote the first full European account of the Mongols. William of Rubruck, sent by the king of France, followed in 1253–1255. The Venetian merchant brothers Niccolò and Maffeo Polo reached China in the 1260s and brought young **Marco Polo** on the next journey (1271–1295); he served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years, and his book — spoken aloud in a Genoa prison in 1298–1299 and written down by Rustichello of Pisa — told Europe what China was like. And the traffic ran the other way too: in 1287–1288 **Rabban Bar Sauma**, a monk born near Khanbaliq, travelled from China to Rome, Paris and Bordeaux, meeting the pope and the kings of France and England.

Journeys across Eurasia, 1245-1288

Each journey is a named, dated person whose account survives. Notice how the traffic grows — and runs both ways.



Sources: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *History of the Mongols* (1247); William of Rubruck, *Itinerary* (1255); Marco Polo, *The Travels* (c. 1298-1299); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Rabban bar Sauma"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Timeline of five real journeys across Eurasia between 1245 and 1288: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine 1245-1247, William of Rubruck 1253-1255, Niccolò and Maffeo Polo c. 1260-1269, Marco Polo 1271-1295 (about seventeen years in the service of Kublai Khan; his book written down in Genoa 1298-1299), and Rabban Bar Sauma 1287-1288 travelling from Khanbaliq to Rome, Paris and Bordeaux

*Sources: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine, *History of the Mongols* (1247); William of Rubruck, *Itinerary* (1255); Marco Polo, *The Travels*, translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938); Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Rabban bar Sauma" and "Silk Road"; accessed 24 August 2026.*

Check: E11 says connections grew "through conquest, settlement and trade". Find one piece of evidence in this part for **each** of those three words.

Part 7 — Chinese life across the conquest: before, during, after (.E13)

Before (about 1200). China was not one state but several. The **Western Xia** held the north-west, the **Jin** the north (from their capital Zhongdu, near today's Beijing), and the **Southern Song** the south, from their capital Lin'an (today's Hangzhou). The Song were rich: rice, silk and porcelain, busy sea trade, and paper money already in use. The Mongol tribes lived on the steppe to the north — one neighbour among several.

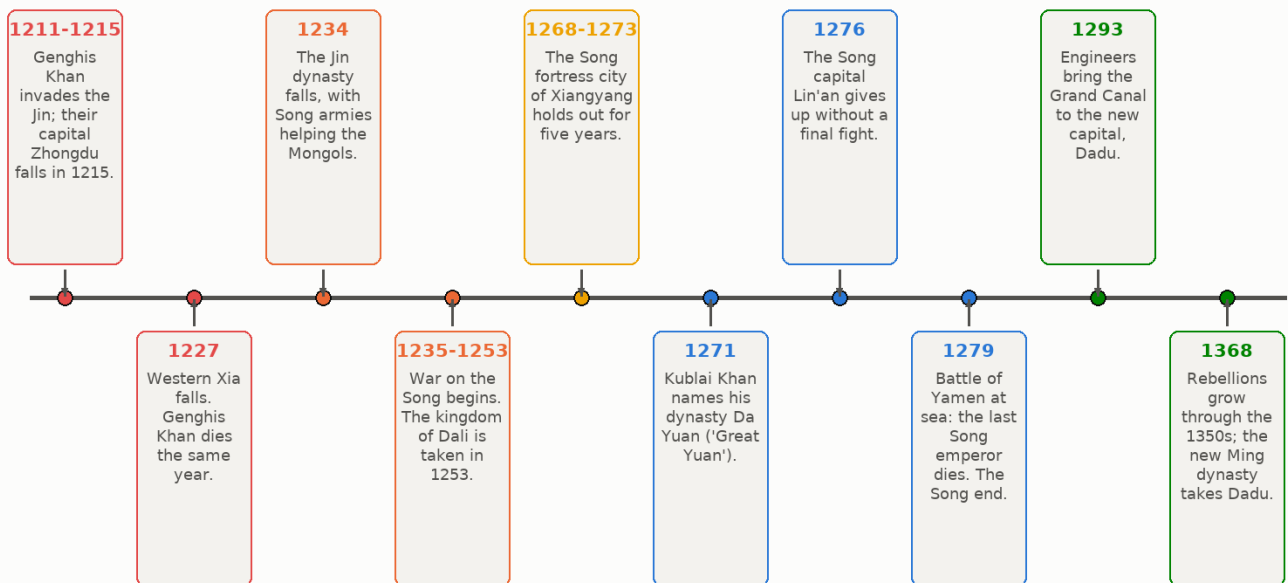
During (1211–1279). Conquest came in waves, over three generations. Genghis Khan struck the Jin from 1211; Zhongdu fell in 1215. Western Xia fell in 1227, the year Genghis died. The Jin fell in 1234. Then the long war on the Song: the fortress city of Xiangyang held out from 1268 to 1273, Lin'an gave up in 1276, and in 1279, at the sea battle of Yamen, the last Song emperor died. For ordinary people these decades meant armies living off the land, cities burned when they resisted, people killed, taken or forced to flee, and craft workers moved to Mongol workshops. How many died is strongly debated — that debate belongs to section 4E, which studies how historians have interpreted Mongol expansion.

After (1271–1368). In 1271 Genghis Khan's grandson **Kublai Khan** named his dynasty **Da Yuan** ("Great Yuan"), and the Yuan ruled all of China from a new capital, Dadu (today's Beijing), which the Grand Canal finally reached in 1293. Paper money became the main currency; the port of Quanzhou boomed with foreign merchants. People were ranked in four groups, with Mongols first and the old Song subjects last — a change you will study in 4C, which looks at rulers and ruled in the Yuan empire. Yet farming, crafts and worship went on; Hangzhou stayed one of the biggest cities on Earth. In the 1350s revolts grew, and in 1368 a new Chinese dynasty, the **Ming**, took Dadu. The Mongol way

of life itself — what changed and what continued for the Mongols — is the story of 4A, while 4D compares how Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan each led.

The conquest of China, 1211-1368

Conquest was not one battle but a lifetime of sieges, campaigns and handovers — spread over three generations.

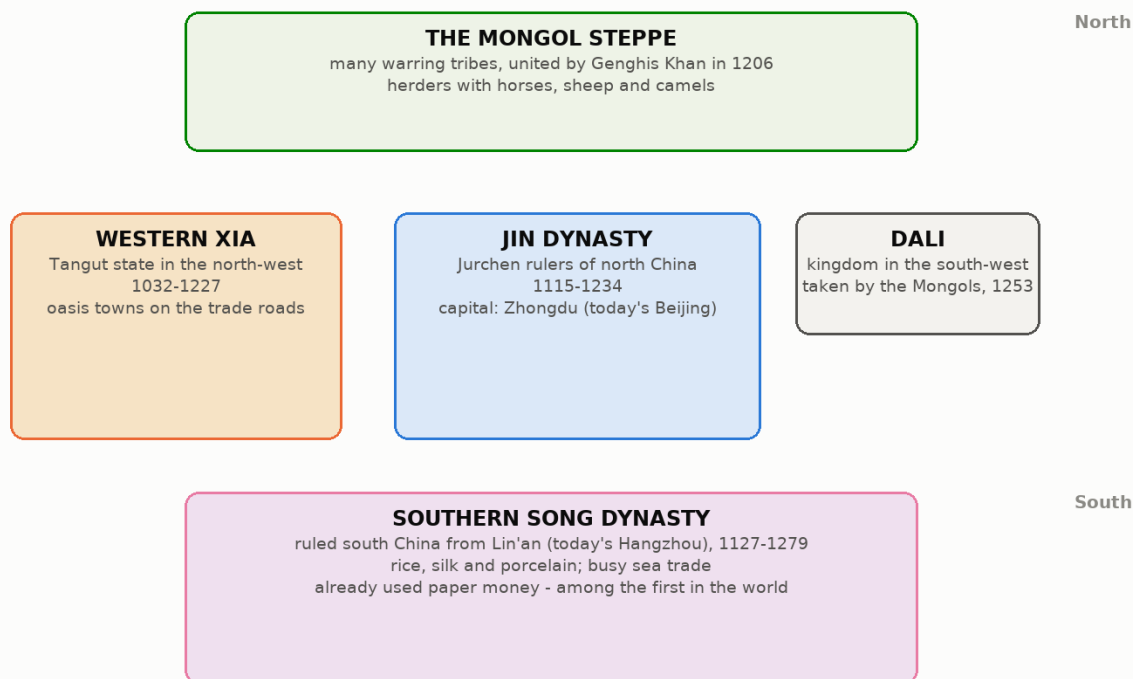


Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Yuan dynasty" and "Song dynasty"; World History Encyclopedia, "Battle of Yamen"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Timeline of the conquest of China 1211-1368 in ten alternating cards: the Jin invaded from 1211 with Zhongdu falling in 1215; Western Xia falling and Genghis Khan dying in 1227; the Jin falling in 1234; war on the Song from 1235 with Dali taken in 1253; Xiangyang holding out 1268-1273; Kublai naming the Da Yuan dynasty in 1271; Lin'an giving up in 1276; the last Song emperor dying at the sea battle of Yamen in 1279; the Grand Canal reaching Dadu in 1293; and the Ming taking Dadu in 1368

China before the conquest, about 1200

There was no single China: several states shared the region, and the Mongol tribes lived on the steppe to the north.



Schematic map, not to scale. Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Song dynasty", "Jin dynasty" and "Xi Xia"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Map-style diagram of China about 1200, before the conquest: the Mongol steppe to the north, Western Xia in the north-west, the Jin with their capital Zhongdu in the north, and the Southern Song with their capital Lin'an in the south, rich in rice, silk, porcelain and sea trade and already using paper money; the kingdom of Dali to the south-west, taken by the Mongols in 1253

Chinese life across the conquest: before, during, after

The same land, three different worlds. Consequence is not one moment — it stretches across a lifetime.

BEFORE (about 1200)	DURING (1211-1279)	AFTER (1271-1368)
Who ruled? Several states shared the land: Western Xia, Jin and the Southern Song. The Mongol tribes lived to the north.	Mongol armies move through; states fall one by one: Western Xia 1227, Jin 1234, the Song last until 1279.	One dynasty - the Yuan - rules all of China under Mongol khans, from the capital Dadu (Beijing).
Money and trade Coins and paper notes in Song lands; busy sea trade in the south.	Armies live off the land; trade roads are unsafe while war moves through.	Paper money is the main currency; the Grand Canal reaches Dadu (1293); the port of Quanzhou thrives.
Cost to ordinary people Farmers grow rice in the south, millet and wheat in the north.	Cities burned; people killed, taken or forced to flee; craft workers moved to Mongol workshops; fields ruined. How many died is debated - see section 4E.	People are ranked in four groups, Mongols first and former Song subjects last; farmers pay taxes and labour for canals and walls.
What stayed the same? Farming, festivals, local customs, belief in many forms - Buddhism, and older Chinese traditions.	Farming goes on where the war has not reached; local customs hold.	Farming, crafts and worship continue; Hangzhou stays one of the world's biggest cities.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Song dynasty", "Yuan dynasty" and "Grand Canal"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Three-column comparison of life in China before (about 1200), during (1211-1279) and after (1271-1368) the conquest, across four rows: who ruled, money and trade, the cost to ordinary people (with the death-toll debate referred to section 4E), and what stayed the same

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Song dynasty", "Yuan dynasty" and "Grand Canal"; World History Encyclopedia, "Battle of Yamen"; accessed 24 August 2026.

Check: from the last figure, name one **change** and one **continuity** for ordinary people in China. Which column shows change and continuity at the same time?

Part 8 — Cause, consequence, continuity, change

Every fact in this section is fuel for the two habits this book's skills chapters build. **Cause and consequence** (section 6B): the long-term causes and the 1218 trigger in Part 2; the consequences in Parts 6 and 7 — some intended (more trade, one rule), some unintended (the plague's road west). **Continuity and change** (section 6A): Part 7's three columns exist so that you never answer "what changed?" without also answering "what stayed the same?". When you write, use the frames: *A long-term cause was... / The trigger was... / One consequence was... / What stayed the same was...*

Check: label each sentence: cause, consequence, continuity or change. (a) "Zhongdu fell in 1215." (b) "The steppe needed grain and cloth." (c) "Hangzhou stayed one of the biggest cities on Earth." (d) "Paper money became the main currency of the Yuan."

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: explaining causes (.E11, .E13)

Task. Explain one long-term cause, the debated climate cause and the 1218 trigger of Mongol expansion, keeping the three kinds separate.

Scaffold.

1. **Pick the long-term cause.** Use Part 2: which cause made the steppe *able* to expand? (Hint: what happened in 1206?)
2. **Add the debated cause.** What did Pederson and colleagues (2014) find, and why is it only a background cause?
3. **Name the trigger.** What happened at Otrar in 1218, and why did it matter in Mongol eyes?
4. **Link with the frames.** *A long-term cause was... / Historians debate whether... / The trigger was...*

Worked response.

A long-term cause of Mongol expansion was the unification of the steppe: in 1206 a kurultai made Temujin Genghis Khan, so one ruler commanded one rebuilt army instead of many feuding tribes. Historians debate whether climate was also a cause: tree rings show the steppe was very wet in 1206–1225, which meant more grass and more horses, but wet weather is a background condition — it did not unite the tribes or choose the targets. The trigger was the Otrar affair of 1218: the town's governor seized a Mongol caravan and killed its traders, and the Khwarezm Shah then had the Mongol envoys killed, breaking the rules of trade and guest-right; from 1219 the Mongol army fell on Khwarezmia, and expansion became conquest.

Worked example 2 — model response: change and continuity in China (.E13)

Task. Using the before–during–after figure, write one paragraph on life in China across the conquest: one change, one continuity, and one cost, each with a date or date range.

Worked response.

Life in China changed sharply in who ruled and how: before about 1200 several states shared the land — Western Xia, Jin and Southern Song — whereas after 1271 one Yuan dynasty ruled all of China from Dadu, and people were ranked in four groups with Mongols first. The cost of that change fell on ordinary people during 1211–1279: cities that resisted were burned, people were killed, taken or forced to flee, and craft workers were moved to Mongol workshops. Yet much stayed the same: farming, crafts and worship continued, and Hangzhou remained one of the biggest cities on Earth. So the conquest was a turning point in government and a tragedy in war — but not a break in everyday life for everyone, everywhere.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. (.E11) Copy and complete each sentence with one key word from Part 1. Word bank: *yam, khanate, paper money, kurultai, caravan*. (a) In 1206 a great meeting of the tribes — a _____ — gave Temujin the title Genghis Khan. (b) A _____ of traders from Otrar was seized in 1218. (c) A rider on the _____ could cover 200–300 km in a day. (d) By 1290 the empire had split into four _____. (e) The Yuan made _____ the main money of their realm.

Q2. (.E12) Match each policy from Part 4 to what it did. (a) Religious freedom (b) protecting animals in the breeding season (c) written laws (d) expanding trade. 1. Kept herds — the empire's food, transport and wealth — raising their young. 2. Meant monks, priests and Muslim prayer leaders were freed from taxes and labour. 3. Kept taxes on goods low and fixed, and protected merchants on the roads. 4. Meant rules against stealing animals or betraying a guest held across the empire.

Q3. (.E11) Using the journeys figure: (a) who reached Karakorum for the pope in 1245–1247? (b) which journeys show traffic going **from** China **to** Europe? (c) what does the growing number of journeys between 1245 and 1288 suggest about connections?

Q4. (.E13) Put these events in order and give each its date: the Ming take Dadu; the Jin fall; Zhongdu falls; the Yuan dynasty is named; the last Song emperor dies at Yamen.

Q5. (.E12) Decimal organisation: (a) how many arbans make one zuun? (b) how many zuuns make one myangan? (c) how many warriors stand in one tümen? (d) a tümen is made of how many myangans?

Q6. (.E13) Using the before–during–after figure, copy and complete the “Money and trade” row. The first column is done for you. Before (about 1200): coins and paper notes in Song lands; busy sea trade in the south. During (1211–1279): _____ After (1271–1368): _____

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E11) Explain how the Mongols linked Europe and Asia. Use two named, dated journeys and one example of goods or knowledge that moved.

Q8. (.E12) Choose two of Genghis Khan’s policies from Part 4. For each, explain how it helped hold a huge empire together.

Q9. (.E13) Analyse one change and one continuity in Chinese life across the conquest — before, during and after. Support each with a date or date range.

Q10. (.E11–.E13) “Mongol expansion destroyed — and it connected.” Do you agree with both halves? Argue your answer with evidence from this section.

Source-based inquiry

Q11. (.E11, .E13) Read the extract below, then answer the questions that follow.

“The notes are made from the bark of the mulberry tree. Every note is signed by the great ruler’s officials and stamped with his red seal, and anyone who dares refuse the notes is punished with death. The ruler makes so many of them that he could buy all the treasure of the world; and with them his people can buy and sell anything, in every part of his lands.”

Adapted from Marco Polo, The Travels (also called The Description of the World), spoken aloud in a Genoa prison in 1298–1299 and written down by Rustichello of Pisa; translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938).

Meet the source: Marco Polo on paper money

Before you use a source, ask where it came from, what it is for, and what it cannot show.

THE TRAVELS OF MARCO POLO

(also known as The Description of the World)

Dictated by Marco Polo in a prison in Genoa, 1298–1299, to Rustichello of Pisa, a writer of romances.

Polo, a Venetian, had lived about 17 years in the service of Kublai Khan, travelling and reporting across the Yuan Empire.

The book describes the empire’s money: how notes are made from mulberry bark, stamped with the ruler’s seal, and accepted everywhere.

A secondary-leaning primary source: Polo saw what he describes, but wrote from memory years later, in someone else’s words.

Origin

Who: Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant in Mongol service. When: dictated 1298–1299, about three years after he left China. Where: Genoa.

Content

How paper money is made and made to work: bark into sheets, officials’ names, a red seal, and penalties for refusing a note or making a false one.

Purpose and audience

To tell European readers about the wealth and wonders of the East. Polo wants to amaze — so weigh what he chooses to describe, and how.

Limits

One man’s memory, retold through a romance writer. It shows how Mongol rule wanted money to work, not how every market actually ran. Cross-check with coins, notes and Chinese records.

Sources: Marco Polo, The Travels, translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938); Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Marco Polo”; accessed 24 August 2026.

Source-analysis card for Marco Polo on paper money: on the left, a book-page card noting that the Travels was dictated in Genoa in 1298–1299 to Rustichello of Pisa and that Polo served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years; on the right, four analysis boxes — origin, content, purpose and audience, and limits

- Origin.** Who produced this source, and when and where was it written down? (2 marks)
- Content.** According to the extract, how was paper money made to work? Give two details. (2 marks)
- Infer.** What can you infer about how the Yuan made people accept the notes? (2 marks)
- Perspective and limits.** Polo wanted to amaze European readers. Give one reason this makes the source useful and one reason it makes the source limited. (2 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) kurultai (b) caravan (c) yam (d) khanates (e) paper money.

Q2. (a)–2 (b)–1 (c)–4 (d)–3.

Q3. (a) Giovanni da Pian del Carpine. (b) Rabban Bar Sauma (1287–1288); Marco Polo's book also reached Europe when it was written down in Genoa (1298–1299). (c) Connections were growing — more people made the long journey as the roads became safer and better known.

Q4. Zhongdu falls (1215) → the Jin fall (1234) → the Yuan dynasty is named (1271) → the last Song emperor dies at Yamen (1279) → the Ming take Dadu (1368).

Q5. (a) 10 (b) 10 (c) 10,000 (d) 10.

Q6. During: armies live off the land; trade roads are unsafe while war moves through. After: paper money is the main currency; the Grand Canal reaches Dadu (1293); the port of Quanzhou thrives.

Q7. See model response — connections grew under one family's rule: name two journeys (for example Carpini 1245–1247 and Marco Polo 1271–1295) and one thing that moved (for example paper money, silk or printing).

Q8. See model response — for example, written laws gave one rule across many peoples; religious freedom stopped belief becoming a reason to rebel; protecting breeding animals protected the food supply; low fixed taxes made trade worth doing.

Q9. See model response — one change (for example who ruled: several states before about 1200, one Yuan dynasty after 1271) and one continuity (for example farming, crafts and worship going on; Hangzhou staying huge), each dated.

Q10. See model response — both halves, with evidence: destroyed (cities burned, people killed, taken or fled, 1211–1279) and connected (journeys, goods and knowledge moving both ways).

Q11. (a) Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant who had served Kublai Khan; spoken aloud in a Genoa prison in 1298–1299 and written down by Rustichello of Pisa. (b) Any two: notes made from mulberry bark; signed by officials and stamped with the red seal; refusing a note punished with death; notes accepted for buying and selling in every part of the ruler's lands. (c) Acceptance was backed by force — the death penalty for refusal — as well as by usefulness: the notes could buy anything, in every part of the lands. (d) Useful: Polo lived about seventeen years in Yuan service and saw the system working, so he is a close eyewitness to how Mongol rule wanted money to work. Limited: he wrote from memory years later, through another writer, and wanted to amaze — so details may be stretched, and the extract shows the official story, not how every market actually ran.

Model responses

Q7. The Mongols forged connections between Europe and Asia by ruling the whole road between them: by about 1290 one family's four khanates stretched from the Black Sea to the China Sea, so routes that had crossed many borders crossed one empire. That is why named people began making the journey: Giovanni da Pian del Carpine reached Karakorum for the pope in 1245–1247, and Marco Polo served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years from 1271, while Rabban Bar Sauma travelled the other way, from Khanbaliq to Rome and Paris in 1287–1288. Goods and knowledge moved with them — silk and porcelain west, silver and horses east, and printing, gunpowder and the compass becoming known across Eurasia. Connections therefore grew through conquest (one rule over the roads), settlement (Mongol courts and capitals from Sarai to Dadu) and trade (protected merchants and the yam).

Q8. Two policies held the empire together. First, written laws: Genghis Khan's rules — against stealing animals, kidnapping women or betraying a guest — were enforced across the empire, so a trader or herder in Persia and one in Mongolia lived under the same basic protections; one rule made many peoples feel one order. Second, religious freedom: conquered people kept their beliefs, and monks, priests and Muslim prayer leaders were freed from taxes and labour, so belief — a common cause of rebellion in conquered lands — was not one here; mosques, churches and temples standing side by side in Karakorum showed the people the ruler did not take sides. Both policies turned conquest into rule: they made the empire workable for the people inside it.

Q9. One change was political: before about 1200, China was divided between Western Xia, Jin and Southern Song, whereas after 1271 the Yuan dynasty ruled all of China from Dadu — and people were ranked in four groups, with Mongols first and old Song subjects last. One continuity was everyday life: farming, crafts and worship continued through and after the conquest, and Hangzhou (Lin'an) remained one of the biggest cities on Earth under Yuan rule. The during-column explains the price of the change: between 1211 and 1279 cities that resisted were burned and people were killed, taken or forced to flee. So the conquest changed the top of society — who ruled, and in whose name — much more than it changed the fields, workshops and temples below.

Q10. Both halves are true, and the evidence sits in different columns of the same story. Expansion destroyed: during 1211–1279, cities that resisted were burned, people were killed, taken or forced to flee, and craft workers were moved to Mongol workshops; at Baghdad in 1258 one of the great cities of the age fell to a Mongol army. And it connected: under one family's rule, merchants and envoys crossed from the Black Sea to China — Carpini in 1245–1247, Marco Polo from 1271, Rabban Bar Sauma in 1287–1288 — while silk, silver, paper money and printing moved along guarded roads. The two halves even joined: the same open roads that carried silk carried the plague west in the 1340s. So I agree with both halves — expansion was a tragedy for many who lived through it and a bridge for the Eurasia that came after it.

Q11. (*model for part d*) The source is useful because Polo is an eyewitness: a Venetian merchant who served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years, describing a system he saw working — so the extract is strong evidence of how Yuan rule **wanted** paper money to work. It is limited because he spoke his book aloud from memory, years after leaving China, through Rustichello, a writer of adventure stories, for European readers he wanted to amaze — so a detail like “he could buy all the treasure of the world” is a marvel, not a measurement, and the extract shows the official story rather than how every market actually ran. Cross-checking with surviving notes, coins and Chinese records is what turns a marvel into evidence.

Rulers and ruled in the Mongol Empire: the Yuan dynasty and connections across Eurasia

Curriculum focus: this section owns VC2HH8K26 and develops elaborations .E01–.E06. Following this book’s coverage decisions, it teaches .E05–.E06:

- .E05 — Kublai Khan’s reign as China’s first Mongol emperor (the Yuan Dynasty): how government ran, with administrators drawn from many backgrounds, and how Chinese culture grew in those years
- .E06 — how the Mongols joined Europe and Asia through conquest, new settlements and trade: the Silk Road, Marco Polo’s meeting with Kublai Khan, and the growth of trade

Elaborations .E01–.E04 are linkage keys retained for other sections and are not taught here.

In 1260 a Mongol prince named Kublai Khan became the **Great Khan**, the ruler of the biggest land empire the world had yet seen. Then, in 1271, he did something no Mongol ruler had done before: he named a **Chinese dynasty** — the **Yuan** — and set out to rule China not just as a conqueror but as its **emperor**. A small Mongol ruling family now stood at the top of a society of millions of Chinese farmers, craft workers and town people.

This section asks the questions a historian always asks about rulers and ruled. **How did the rulers hold on top?** and **What was it like to be ruled?** To answer them we need two words that historians argue about — *power* and *authority* — and this section sets out both sides of that argument in a box. Along the way we will also see how Mongol rule tied Europe and Asia together along the **Silk Road**, and how one Venetian merchant, **Marco Polo**, came face to face with Kublai Khan himself.

About the key words. The Victorian Curriculum uses words like *power*, *authority*, *emperor* and *dynasty* without defining them, so this section defines every key word at first use (see Part 1 and the figure that goes with it). Two of the words in this section are contested — historians argue about exactly what they mean — and where that happens, the argument is set out in a box, with both sides given equal weight.

Teaching sequence

Part 1 — The key words of this section (.E05–.E06)

These are the working definitions used throughout this section.

- **power** — the ability to make people do something, even if they do not want to. (Contested: see the box in Part 2.)
- **authority** — power that people accept as right; the right to rule. (Contested: see the box in Part 2.)
- **khan** — the title of a Mongol ruler or chief. (A title, like “king” or “queen”.)
- **Great Khan** — the supreme Mongol ruler, the highest khan of all.
- **emperor** — the ruler of an empire.
- **dynasty** — a line of rulers from the same family, one after another.
- **Yuan dynasty** — the dynasty Kublai Khan founded in 1271, which ruled China until 1368.
- **administrator** — a person whose job is to help run the government: collecting taxes, keeping records, carrying out the ruler’s orders.

- **class** — one of the ranked groups the Yuan sorted people into (Part 3).
- **capital** — the chief city from which a ruler governs.
- **Silk Road** — the network of land routes linking China with the Mediterranean Sea.

Key words of this section

Subject terms for the Yuan dynasty and the Silk Road, defined at first use. Keep these meanings in mind as you read.

power

the ability to make people do something, even if they do not want to (contested — see Part 2)

authority

power that people accept as right; the right to rule (contested — see Part 2)

khan

the title of a Mongol ruler or chief

Great Khan

the supreme Mongol ruler, the highest khan of all

emperor

the ruler of an empire

dynasty

a line of rulers from the same family, one after another

Yuan dynasty

the dynasty Kublai Khan founded in 1271, which ruled China until 1368

administrator

a person whose job is to help run the government: collecting taxes, keeping records, carrying out orders

class

one of the ranked groups the Yuan sorted people into (see Part 3)

capital

the chief city from which a ruler governs

Silk Road

the network of land routes linking China with the Mediterranean Sea

Power and authority are contested terms: the historians' debate about them is set out in the box in Part 2.

Eleven definition cards for the key words of this section: power, authority, khan, Great Khan, emperor, dynasty, Yuan dynasty, administrator, class, capital and Silk Road, each with a one-line definition

Check: which of these words name a **person or title** (khan, emperor, administrator), which name a **thing or place** (capital, Silk Road), and which name an **idea** (power, authority, dynasty)?

Part 2 — Kublai Khan: from Mongol khan to emperor of China (.E05)

Kublai Khan (1215–1294) was a grandson of Genghis Khan (the Mongol way of life that shaped him is in 4A; the conquests that built the empire are in 4B). In 1259 his brother, the Great Khan Möngke, died. In 1260 Kublai was declared Great Khan in his place — but his younger brother Ariq Böke also claimed the title, and the two fought a civil war until Kublai won in 1264.

Then Kublai made his great change. In **1271** he gave his rule a Chinese name, **Da Yuan** (“Great Yuan”), taken from an old Chinese book. This was more than a name: it told his Chinese subjects that he was not only a Mongol conqueror but a Chinese **emperor**, the head of a new Chinese **dynasty**. The war in the south went on: the Song capital Lin’an gave up in 1276, and in 1279, at the sea battle of Yamen, the last Song emperor died. Kublai Khan was now the **first Mongol to rule all of China**. He governed from a new capital, **Dadu** (also called Khanbaliq), near today’s Beijing, and kept a summer capital at Shangdu.

This is where *power* and *authority* become the tools for understanding his rule. Kublai held **power** through the Mongol army, his guards and his laws. But he also worked hard to gain **authority** — to be accepted by Chinese subjects as their rightful ruler, not just feared as a conqueror. Naming a Chinese dynasty, building a Chinese-style capital and acting like a Chinese emperor were all ways to do that.

Contested terms: power and authority.

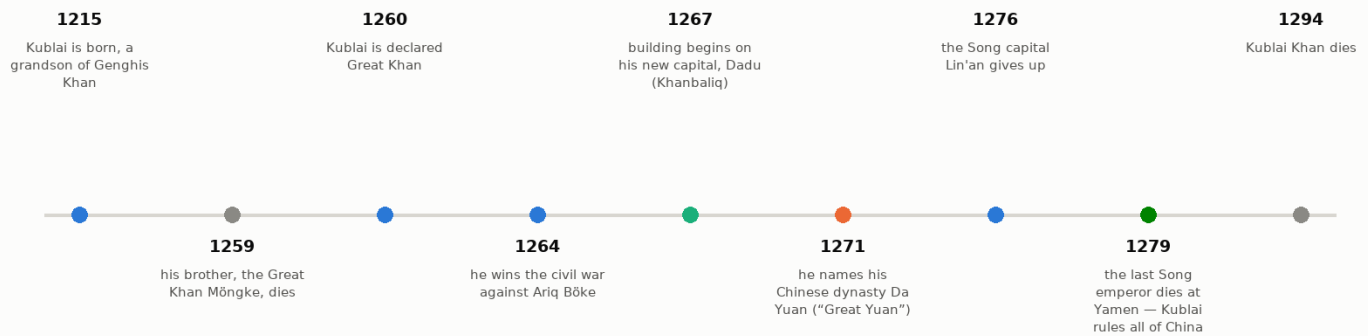
Historians and social scientists do not draw the line between *power* and *authority* in exactly the same place. This section defines both at first use and uses them the same way throughout.

- **Power** is used in the sense given by the political scientist Robert Dahl (1957): the ability to get someone to do something they would not otherwise do — through rewards, pressure or force.
- **Authority** is used for power that people accept as right. Max Weber described rule as most stable when the ruled believe it is rightful — that is, when power becomes authority.

The short version: power can make people obey; authority makes people accept. Kublai Khan had power, and this section looks at how he used it — and how he tried to turn it into authority. Other definitions exist and are not interchangeable with these.

Kublai Khan's path to emperor

From Mongol prince to the first Mongol ruler of all China — founder of the Yuan dynasty.

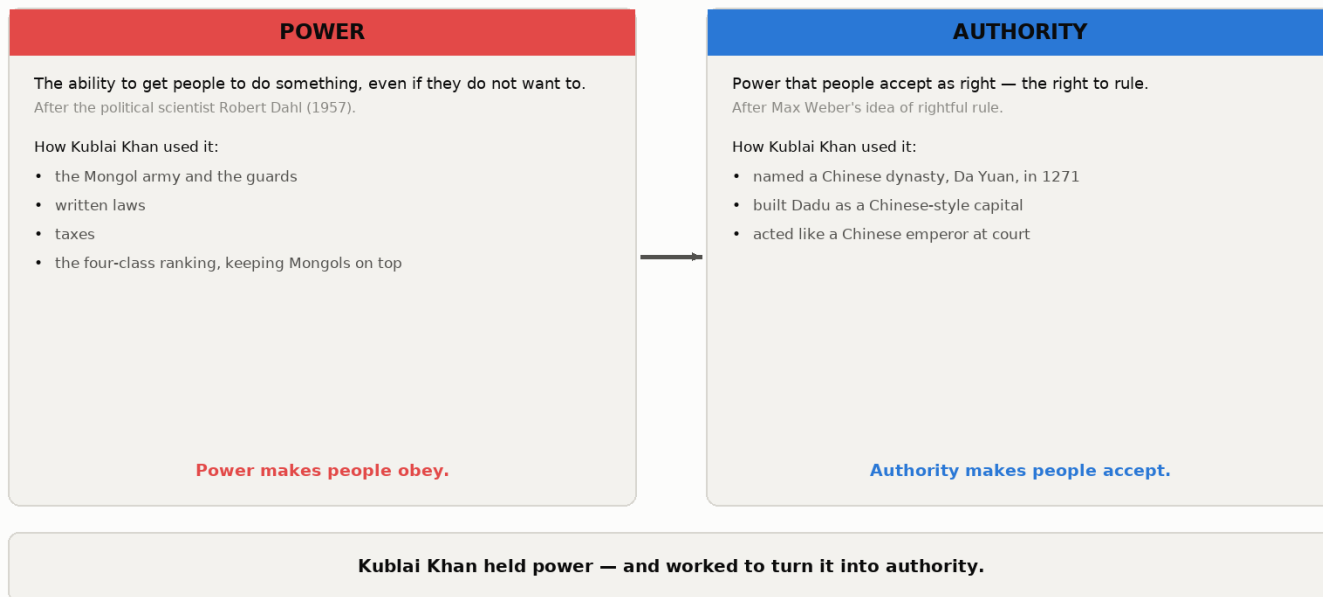


Dates from Kublai Khan's life. Section 4C teaches his reign as China's first Mongol emperor (the Yuan dynasty).

Timeline of Kublai Khan's path to emperor: born 1215; his brother the Great Khan Mongke dies in 1259; Kublai is declared Great Khan in 1260; he wins the civil war against Ariq Boke in 1264; building begins on his new capital Dadu in 1267; he names the Da Yuan dynasty in 1271; the Song capital Lin'an gives up in 1276; the last Song emperor dies at the sea battle of Yamen in 1279 and Kublai rules all of China; he dies in 1294

Power and authority — two tools for understanding rule

Both words are contested. This section defines them at first use and keeps the same meanings throughout.



See the contested-terms box in Part 2 of this section: historians do not all draw the line in the same place.

Two-panel concept diagram comparing power and authority: on the left, power — the ability to make people obey through the Mongol army, guards, laws and taxes; on the right, authority — being accepted as the rightful ruler through naming a Chinese dynasty, building a Chinese-style capital at Dadu and acting like a Chinese emperor; a centre arrow notes that Kublai Khan held power and worked to turn it into authority

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Kublai Khan” and “Yuan dynasty”; World History Encyclopedia, “Battle of Yamen”; Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power” (1957); accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: give one thing Kublai Khan did to hold **power** and one thing he did to build **authority**. Why might a conqueror want to be accepted, not just obeyed?

Part 3 — Government: administrators from different backgrounds (.E05)

A single family could not run an empire of millions on its own. To collect taxes, keep records and carry out orders, Kublai Khan needed **administrators** — and he drew them from many different backgrounds:

- **Mongols** held the highest posts, close to the khan.
- **Semu people** — Central Asians, Persians and others who had come from the west — often ran the government’s money and its trade, because they had the skills and the contacts.
- **Chinese officials** worked in local government, especially in the south, because they knew the people and the old ways of ruling.

One famous example is **Ahmad Fanakati**, a Muslim from Central Asia who ran the Yuan’s money and became one of the most powerful men in the empire. Many resented his power, and he was killed in 1282. The Venetian **Marco Polo**, a foreigner, says he too served Kublai Khan as an envoy. Kublai’s reasons for mixing backgrounds were practical: no single group had all the skills needed, and by sharing posts between groups he stopped any one of them becoming strong enough to challenge him.

The Yuan also sorted their subjects into **four ranked classes**:

1. **Mongols** — at the top.
2. **Semu** — Central Asians and westerners.
3. **Hanren** — the people of north China, who had lived under Mongol rule longer.
4. **Nanren** — the people of south China, the old Song subjects. This was by far the biggest group, yet it was ranked last.

A person's class shaped the posts they could hold and how the law and taxes treated them.

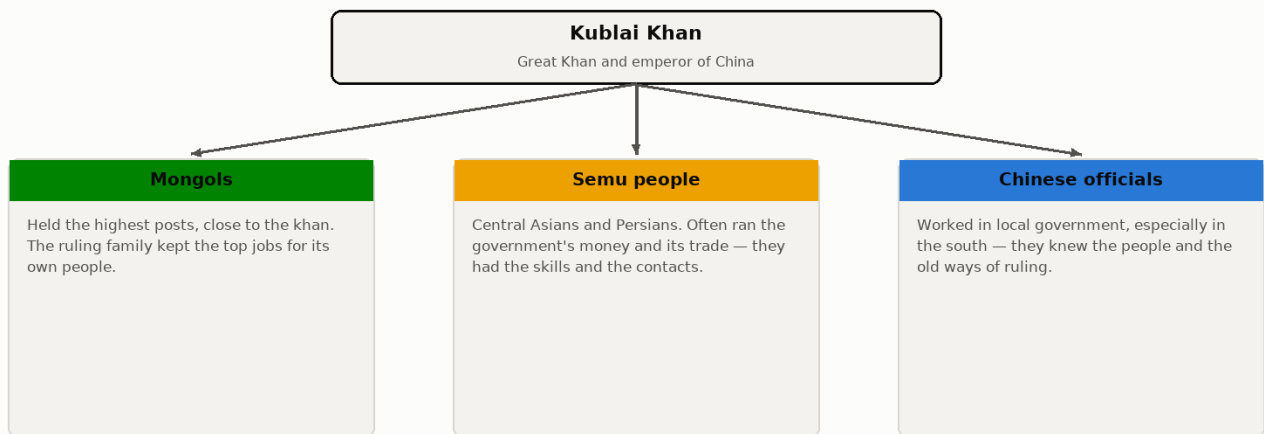
Historians' debate: how fixed were the four classes?

- **One side** reads the ranking as a real, working rule: laws and records named the four classes, set different punishments for each, and kept the highest posts for Mongols. On this reading the classes fixed a person's place in society.
- **The other side** argues the ranking was looser in daily life: plenty of Chinese men still held local posts, rich Chinese landowners kept their land, and the lines blurred where money and local custom mattered more than class.

Both sides agree the Yuan ranked their subjects and put Mongols first. They disagree about how much that ranking actually fixed a person's life.

Kublai Khan's government

He drew his administrators from many different backgrounds, and gave each group different work.



Named example: Ahmad Fanakati

A Muslim from Central Asia who ran the Yuan's money and became one of the most powerful men in the empire. Many disliked his power, and he was killed in 1282. The Venetian Marco Polo says he too served Kublai Khan as an envoy.

Sharing posts between groups stopped any one group becoming strong enough to challenge the khan.

Diagram of Kublai Khan's government: at the top Kublai Khan, then three columns of administrators he drew from different backgrounds — Mongols holding the highest posts, semu people (Central Asians and Persians) running money and trade, and Chinese officials in local government — with the example of Ahmad Fanakati, a Muslim from Central Asia who ran the Yuan's money

The four-class ranking of the Yuan

Who stood where in the society the Yuan ruled.

1 • Mongols

at the top — the highest posts went to the khan's own people

2 • Semu

Central Asians and people from the west — often ran money and trade

3 • Hanren

the people of north China, who had lived under Mongol rule longer

4 • Nanren

the people of south China, the old Song subjects — the biggest group, ranked last

Band width shows the size of each group, not its rank: the Nanren were by far the biggest group, yet they were ranked last.
A person's class shaped the posts they could hold, and how the law and taxes treated them.

Four bands, one above the other, showing the Yuan four-class ranking, top to bottom: Mongols, semu (Central Asians and westerners), Hanren (north China), and Nanren (south China, the old Song subjects) — the biggest group but ranked last; a side note says a person's class shaped the posts they could hold and how law and taxes treated them

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Yuan dynasty" and "Ahmad Fanakati"; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: why did Kublai Khan use administrators from different backgrounds instead of only Mongols? Which of the four classes was the largest, and which was ranked highest?

Part 4 — Rulers and ruled: power and authority in practice (CD)

Now we look at the two sides of the same society — the rulers and the ruled — through the lens of power and authority.

The rulers. Kublai Khan and the Mongol family at the top held **power** through the army, the guards, the written laws and the taxes, and through the ranking that kept Mongols above everyone else. They built **authority** by presenting themselves as rightful rulers: Kublai took the title of emperor, named a Chinese dynasty, built Dadu as a Chinese-style capital and carried out Chinese court ceremonies. The goal was to make Chinese subjects accept the Yuan, not just obey them out of fear.

The ruled. Most of the ruled were Chinese farmers and town people. Their experience was mixed. They paid taxes and were ranked below Mongols and semu, and the highest posts were closed to them. But everyday life went on: farming, trade, crafts and worship continued, and some Chinese men still worked in local government. The change at the top did not break the world below.

Perspectives. Because people stood in different places, they saw Yuan rule in different ways. A Mongol official near the khan saw order and reward; a semu merchant saw open roads and profit; a Chinese farmer in the south saw taxes and a ruling family from far away. A historian asking "what was Yuan rule like?" must always ask "for whom?"

Check: name one group that gained from Yuan rule and one that lost out. Why do historians ask "for whom?" when they describe life under a ruler?

Part 5 — The growth of Chinese culture under the Yuan (.E05)

Mongol rule changed who stood at the top of Chinese society, but Chinese culture did not stop — in several ways it grew during the Yuan:

- **Drama.** A form of play with songs, called **zaju**, became very popular. The writer **Guan Hanqing** wrote plays such as *The Injustice to Dou E*, which are still read today.
- **Porcelain.** Potters at Jingdezhen made the famous **blue-and-white porcelain**, which was traded across Asia and beyond.
- **The Grand Canal.** The canal that carries grain from the south to the north was extended until it reached the new capital Dadu by 1293, helping to feed the city.
- **Learning.** The astronomer **Guo Shoujing** helped make a new, very accurate calendar in 1281.

This is a key example of **continuity**: the dynasty at the top changed, but the farming, the crafts, the writing and the worship of the Chinese people carried on and even flourished. Rulers and ruled did not share the same culture, yet both lived inside it.

The growth of Chinese culture under the Yuan

The dynasty at the top changed — Chinese culture carried on and, in these four ways, grew.

Zaju drama

A popular form of play with songs. The writer Guan Hanqing wrote *The Injustice to Dou E* — still read and performed today.

Blue-and-white porcelain

Potters at Jingdezhen made the famous blue-and-white porcelain, traded across Asia and beyond.

The Grand Canal

The canal carrying grain from south to north was extended until it reached the new capital Dadu by 1293, helping to feed the city.

Learning

The astronomer Guo Shoujing helped make a new, very accurate calendar in 1281.

Continuity: farming, crafts, writing and worship carried on — and in these ways grew — even though the rulers changed.

*Four cards on the growth of Chinese culture under the Yuan: zaju drama, with the writer Guan Hanqing and his play *The Injustice to Dou E*; blue-and-white porcelain made at Jingdezhen; the Grand Canal, extended to reach the capital Dadu by 1293 to carry grain; and learning, with the astronomer Guo Shoujing helping to make an accurate calendar in 1281*

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Yuan dynasty”, “Guan Hanqing” and “Grand Canal”; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: name two ways Chinese culture grew under the Yuan. Why is this an example of continuity even though the rulers changed?

Part 6 — The Silk Road and connections across Eurasia (.E06)

The **Silk Road** was a network of land routes linking China with the Mediterranean Sea. It was not one road but many, crossing deserts and mountains. Under Mongol rule, one family controlled most of these routes, guarded them and kept taxes on trade low and fixed. Mongol armies had won these routes by conquest, and Mongol families settled in the lands they held, so towns along the routes grew. The result was that **more traders moved more goods than before**, and the routes became busier than they had been for centuries.

Goods moved **both ways**. From the east came silk, porcelain, spices and tea; from the west came silver, glass, wool cloth and horses. Knowledge travelled too: printing, gunpowder and the magnetic compass became known across this connected world. So did disease: the plague that reached Europe in the 1340s travelled the same routes as the traders (see Chapter 3).

Historians have a name for this connected age — but they argue about it.

Contested term: Pax Mongolica.

Pax Mongolica (“Mongol peace”) is the idea that Mongol rule made the routes between Europe and Asia safe enough for trade and travel to boom.

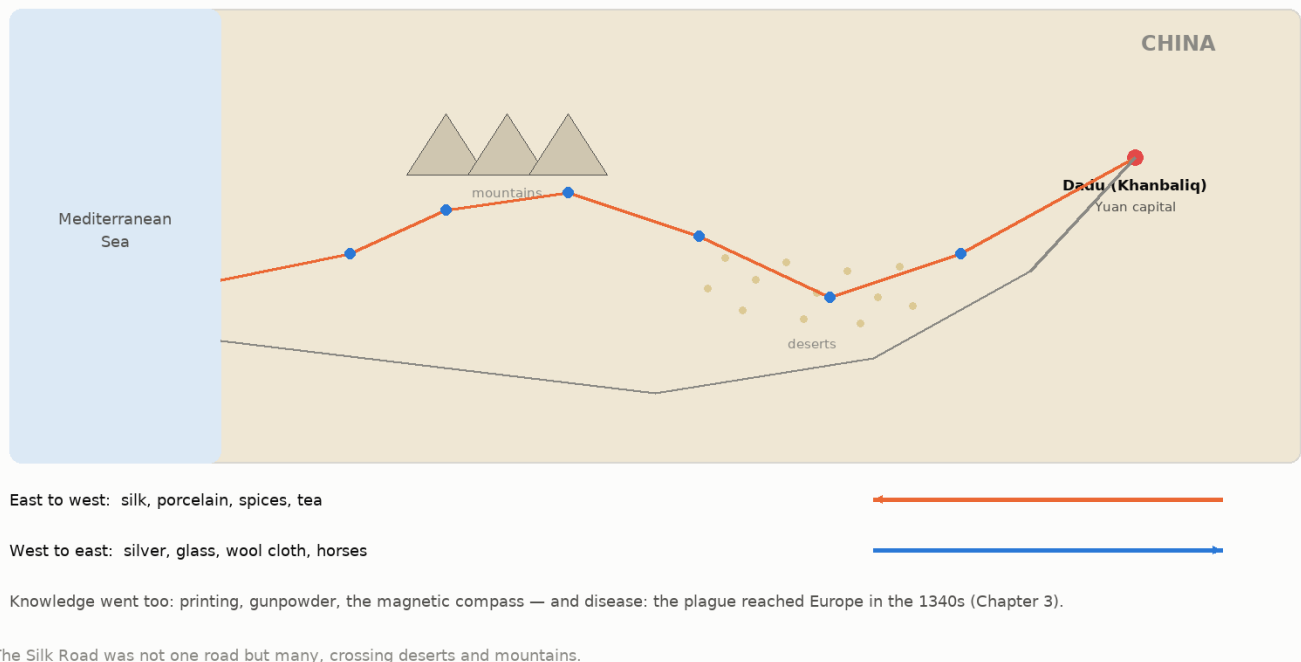
- **For:** guarded roads, one family’s rule over the whole route, and low fixed taxes meant traders, envoys and ideas moved as they had not moved for centuries. The journeys in Part 7 would have been very hard before.
- **Against:** “peace” is a big word. The Mongol parts of the empire often fought each other, towns still suffered when they resisted, and the same open routes carried the plague west in the 1340s. Safe for a trader with the khan’s permission was not safe for everyone.

Both sides agree that movement between Europe and Asia grew a great deal under Mongol rule. They disagree about whether “peace” is the right word for it.

Trade itself **developed**. The Yuan used **paper money** and metal coinage, which made buying and selling easier across long distances, and a growing number of traders from Europe made the long journey to China.

The Silk Road under Mongol rule

One family ruled most of the routes, guarded them, and kept trade taxes low and fixed.



Simple map of the Silk Road under Mongol rule: China with the Yuan capital Dadu at the right, the Mediterranean Sea at the left, and land routes crossing deserts and mountains between them; labels note that one family guarded the routes and kept trade taxes low, goods moving both ways (silk, porcelain, spices and tea east to west; silver, glass, wool cloth and horses west to east), and knowledge and disease travelling with them

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Silk Road” and “Yuan dynasty”; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: E06 says the Mongols forged connections “through conquest, settlement and trade”. Find one piece of evidence in this part for **each** of those three words. What does “Pax Mongolica” mean, and why do historians argue about the word “peace”?

Part 7 — The meeting of Marco Polo (.E06)

The clearest proof of connection is a real person. **Marco Polo** (c. 1254–1324) was a merchant from Venice. In **1271** he set out for China with his father Niccolò and his uncle Maffeo, and after a long journey they reached the court of Kublai Khan in about 1275. Polo says he **served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years**, working as an envoy and

an official. This meeting — a Venetian merchant face to face with the Mongol emperor of China — is one of history’s most famous encounters between Europe and Asia.

In **1295** the Polos returned to Venice. Then, in 1298, while held in a prison in Genoa, Marco Polo told the story of his travels aloud, and a writer named **Rustichello of Pisa** wrote it down (1298–1299). The book — called *The Travels* (or *The Description of the World*) — told Europeans about China’s wealth, its paper money, its roads and the power of the Great Khan. For many readers in Europe it was their first picture of China, and it encouraged more traders to make the journey.

Marco Polo: journey, service and book

A Venetian merchant at the court of the Mongol emperor of China.



Marco Polo's meeting with Kublai Khan is one of history's most famous encounters between Europe and Asia.

Timeline of Marco Polo’s journey and book: he leaves Venice with his father Niccolo and uncle Maffeo in 1271; they reach the court of Kublai Khan in about 1275; Polo serves the khan for about seventeen years as an envoy and official; the Polos return to Venice in 1295; and in a Genoa prison in 1298-1299 Polo tells his story aloud and Rustichello of Pisa writes it down as The Travels

Sources: Marco Polo, The Travels, translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938); Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Marco Polo”; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: how many years in total was Marco Polo away on his journey, roughly? What did his book tell Europe, and why does that matter for connections between Europe and Asia?

Part 8 — Power, authority, continuity, change

Every fact in this section is fuel for the two habits this book’s skills chapters build. **Continuity and change** (section 6A): the Yuan changed who ruled China and ranked its people, but farming, crafts, worship and culture carried on and grew (Part 5). **Causes and consequences** (section 6B): Kublai’s need to rule millions caused him to use administrators from many backgrounds (Part 3); the consequence was a government no single group controlled.

Perspective (sections 5E, 5F): rulers and ruled saw the same rule in different ways (Part 4). When you write, use the frames: *The ruler held power by...* / *They built authority by...* / *For the ruled, this meant...* / *What stayed the same was...* Section 4D compares Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan as leaders, and 4E looks at how historians interpret the cost of the conquests.

Check: label each sentence: **power**, **authority**, **continuity** or **change**. (a) “Kublai Khan kept Mongols in the highest posts.” (b) “Kublai Khan named a Chinese dynasty and built a Chinese-style capital.” (c) “Chinese farming, crafts and worship went on under the Yuan.” (d) “In 1271 Kublai Khan became the head of a new ruling family.”

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: explaining power and authority under Kublai Khan (.E05)

Task. Explain one way Kublai Khan held power and one way he built authority, keeping the two ideas separate.

Scaffold.

1. **Pick the example of power.** Use Part 2 or Part 3: what did Kublai use to make people obey? (Hint: think army, laws, taxes, ranking.)
2. **Pick the example of authority.** What did Kublai do to be accepted as the rightful ruler? (Hint: think dynasty, capital, ceremonies.)
3. **Keep them separate.** Power = making people obey; authority = being accepted as rightful.
4. **Link with the frames.** *Kublai Khan held power by... / He built authority by...*

Worked response.

Kublai Khan held power through force and law: the Mongol army and his guards could crush resistance, his written laws and taxes bound his subjects, and the four-class ranking kept Mongols above everyone else, so obedience was always backed by strength. But he also built authority so that Chinese subjects would accept him, not just fear him: in 1271 he named a Chinese dynasty, the Da Yuan, built Dadu as a Chinese-style capital and acted like a Chinese emperor. Power made the ruled obey; authority was his attempt to make them believe he had the right to rule.

Worked example 2 — model response: change and continuity under the Yuan (.E05)

Task. Using Parts 3 and 5, write one paragraph on life in China under the Yuan: one change, one continuity, and one group's experience, each with a date or example.

Worked response.

Life in China changed at the top when the Yuan took power: by 1279 Kublai Khan ruled all of China, and people were sorted into four ranked classes, with Mongols first and the southern Chinese, the biggest group, ranked last. Yet much stayed the same below: farming, crafts and worship continued, and Chinese culture even grew — zaju drama flourished and potters at Jingdezhen made blue-and-white porcelain. For one group, the experience was mixed: Chinese officials kept some local posts, but the highest offices were closed to them. So the Yuan changed who ruled and how people were ranked far more than they changed the fields, workshops and stages of everyday life.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. (.E05) Copy and complete each sentence with one key word from Part 1. Word bank: *dynasty, administrator, capital, authority, Great Khan*. (a) In 1260 Kublai became the _____, the highest khan of all. (b) An _____ helps run the government, collecting taxes and keeping records. (c) Kublai ruled China from a new _____ called Dadu. (d) In 1271 Kublai named his Chinese _____ the Da Yuan. (e) Kublai worked to gain _____, so people would accept him as the rightful ruler.

Q2. (.E05) Put these events in order and give each its date: Kublai names the Da Yuan dynasty; Kublai is declared Great Khan; the last Song emperor dies at Yamen; Kublai wins the civil war against Ariq Böke; the Song capital Lin'an gives up.

Q3. (.E05) Match each group of administrators from Part 3 to the role they often filled. (a) Mongols (b) semu people (c) Chinese officials. 1. Worked in local government, especially in the south. 2. Held the highest posts, close to the khan. 3. Often ran the government's money and its trade.

Q4. (.E05) Using the four-class figure: (a) which class was ranked highest? (b) which was the largest group? (c) give one thing a person's class shaped.

Q5. (.E06) Using the Silk Road part: name two goods that moved east to west, two that moved west to east, and one thing besides goods that travelled the routes.

Q6. (.E06) Marco Polo: copy and complete. Marco Polo was a merchant from _____. He set out for China in _____ and reached Kublai Khan's court in about _____. He served the khan for about _____ years. His book, called _____, was written down in a prison in _____ in 1298–1299.

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E05) Explain how Kublai Khan tried to turn power into authority. Use one example of his power and two examples of how he built authority, each with a date where you can.

Q8. (.E05) Why did Kublai Khan use administrators from different backgrounds? Give two reasons and one named example of an administrator.

Q9. (.E05) “The Yuan changed the top of Chinese society more than the bottom.” Use one change and one continuity from this section to argue whether you agree.

Q10. (.E06) Explain how the Mongols linked Europe and Asia. Use the Silk Road, one example of goods or knowledge that moved, and Marco Polo's meeting with Kublai Khan.

Source-based inquiry

Q11. (.E05, .E06) Read the extract below, then answer the questions that follow.

“On the Great Khan’s birthday he sits at a high table above everyone else in the great hall, and the people of his court bow down before him. All who come before him show him great respect, and he is obeyed in everything he commands, for his people hold him to be the greatest ruler in the world.”

Adapted from Marco Polo, The Travels (also called The Description of the World), spoken aloud in a Genoa prison in 1298–1299 and written down by Rustichello of Pisa; translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938).

Source analysis: Marco Polo on the Great Khan's birthday

Four questions to ask of any source: origin, content, purpose and audience, limits.

The Travels

(The Description of the World)

- Told aloud by Marco Polo in a Genoa prison, 1298–1299
- Written down by Rustichello of Pisa
- Polo had served Kublai Khan for about 17 years
- Translated by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot (1938)

ORIGIN

Who: Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant. When and where: a prison in Genoa, 1298–1299. Written down by: Rustichello of Pisa.

CONTENT

At the Khan's birthday he sits at a high table above everyone in the great hall; people bow down before him, show him great respect, and obey everything he commands.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

To amaze European readers with the wealth and power of the Great Khan's court — many had never seen China.

LIMITS

Told from memory, years later, through another writer, to amaze. The scene may be grander than it was; it shows the official picture, not how every subject felt.

Cross-check with Chinese records and surviving objects to turn a grand scene into evidence.

Source-analysis card for Marco Polo on the Great Khan’s birthday: on the left, a book-page card noting that The Travels was told aloud in Genoa in 1298–1299 to Rustichello of Pisa and that Polo served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years; on the right, four analysis boxes — origin, content, purpose and audience, and limits

- Origin.** Who produced this source, and when and where was it written down? (2 marks)
- Content.** According to the extract, how did the Khan’s people show him respect? Give two details. (2 marks)
- Infer.** What can you infer about the Khan’s authority from the way people behaved at his birthday? (2 marks)
- Perspective and limits.** Polo wanted to amaze European readers. Give one reason this makes the source useful and one reason it makes the source limited. (2 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) Great Khan (b) administrator (c) capital (d) dynasty (e) authority.

Q2. Kublai is declared Great Khan (1260) → Kublai wins the civil war against Ariq Böke (1264) → Kublai names the Da Yuan dynasty (1271) → the Song capital Lin'an gives up (1276) → the last Song emperor dies at Yamen (1279).

Q3. (a)–2 (b)–3 (c)–1.

Q4. (a) Mongols. (b) Nanren (the southern Chinese, the old Song subjects). (c) Any one: the posts they could hold; how the law treated them; the taxes they paid.

Q5. East to west (any two): silk, porcelain, spices, tea. West to east (any two): silver, glass, wool cloth, horses. Besides goods (any one): knowledge (printing, gunpowder, the compass), or disease (the plague).

Q6. Venice; 1271; 1275; seventeen; *The Travels* (or *The Description of the World*); Genoa.

Q7. See model response — one example of power (the Mongol army and guards, the written laws, the taxes, the four-class ranking that kept Mongols on top) and two examples of authority (naming the Da Yuan dynasty in 1271, building Dadu as a Chinese-style capital, acting like a Chinese emperor).

Q8. See model response — reasons such as: no single group had all the skills needed to run so big an empire; using many groups stopped any one becoming strong enough to challenge the khan. Named example: Ahmad Fanakati, a Muslim from Central Asia who ran the Yuan's money (or Marco Polo, who says he served as an envoy).

Q9. See model response — change: the ruling family and the four-class ranking (Mongols first, southern Chinese last); continuity: farming, crafts, worship and culture going on and growing (zaju drama, blue-and-white porcelain).

Q10. See model response — one family guarded the Silk Road and kept trade taxes low; goods and knowledge moved both ways (silk and porcelain west, silver and horses east, printing and gunpowder); Marco Polo reached Kublai Khan's court about 1275 and his book told Europe about China.

Q11. (a) Marco Polo, a Venetian merchant who had served Kublai Khan; spoken aloud in a Genoa prison in 1298–1299 and written down by Rustichello of Pisa. (b) Any two: they bowed down before him; they showed him great respect; they obeyed everything he commanded; they held him to be the greatest ruler in the world. (c) The Khan was treated as more than a strong ruler — he was honoured and obeyed as of right, which suggests he held authority (accepted rule), not just power (forced obedience). (d) Useful: Polo lived about seventeen years in Yuan service and saw the court for himself, so he is a close eyewitness to how the Khan wanted to be seen. Limited: he told his story from memory, years later, through another writer, and wanted to amaze — so the scene may be made grander than it was, and it shows the official picture, not how every subject really felt.

Model responses

Q7. Kublai Khan held power through force and law: the Mongol army and his guards could crush resistance, his written laws and taxes bound his subjects, and the four-class ranking kept Mongols above everyone else. But he knew that fear alone would not hold millions, so he worked to turn that power into authority. He did this in two main ways. First, in 1271 he named a Chinese dynasty, the Da Yuan, telling Chinese subjects that he was a Chinese emperor, not just a Mongol conqueror. Second, he built Dadu as a Chinese-style capital and carried out Chinese court ceremonies, acting the part of a rightful ruler. In this way Kublai tried to make the ruled accept him, so that his power would last longer than his army.

Q8. Kublai Khan used administrators from different backgrounds for two reasons. First, no single group had all the skills needed to run so big an empire: Mongols held the highest posts, semu people from Central Asia and Persia ran the money and trade because they had the skills and contacts, and Chinese officials worked in local government because they knew the people and the old ways of ruling. Second, by sharing posts between groups Kublai stopped any one of them becoming strong enough to challenge him. One named example is Ahmad Fanakati, a Muslim from Central Asia who ran the Yuan's money and became one of the most powerful men in the empire.

Q9. I agree that the Yuan changed the top of Chinese society more than the bottom. At the top, change was sharp: by 1279 a Mongol family ruled all of China, and people were sorted into four ranked classes, with Mongols first and the southern Chinese — the biggest group — ranked last. The highest posts were closed to the Chinese. At the bottom, far less changed: farming, crafts and worship went on, and Chinese culture even grew — zaju drama flourished and potters at Jingdezhen made blue-and-white porcelain. So the conquest remade who ruled and how people were ranked, but the fields, workshops and stages of everyday life carried on much as before.

Q10. The Mongols forged connections between Europe and Asia by ruling and guarding the routes between them: one family controlled most of the Silk Road, protected the traders on it, and kept taxes on trade low and fixed. Because of this, more goods moved than ever before — silk, porcelain, spices and tea westward, and silver, glass, wool cloth and horses eastward — while knowledge such as printing, gunpowder and the compass became known across the connected world. The clearest proof is the meeting of Marco Polo: the Venetian merchant reached Kublai Khan's court in about 1275, served him for about seventeen years, and his book *The Travels* told Europe about China's wealth and the Khan's power. Through conquest, settlement and trade, the Mongols tied Europe and Asia together.

Q11. (*model for part c and d*) From the way people behaved at the Khan's birthday we can infer that he held authority, not just power: they bowed, showed him great respect and obeyed everything he commanded, holding him to be the greatest ruler in the world. That is the behaviour of people who accept a ruler as rightful, not only of people who are afraid. The source is useful because Polo is an eyewitness: a Venetian merchant who served Kublai Khan for about seventeen years and saw the court for himself, so the extract is strong evidence of how the Khan wanted to be seen. It is limited because Polo told his story from memory, years after leaving China, through Rustichello, a writer who wanted to amaze European readers — so the scene may be made grander than it was, and it shows the official picture rather than how every subject really felt. Cross-checking with Chinese records and surviving objects is what turns a grand scene into evidence.

Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan: leadership that changed the Mongol Empire

Curriculum focus: this section owns VC2HH8K27 and develops elaborations .E01–.E04. Following this book’s coverage decisions, it teaches .E04:

- .E04 — in what ways the leadership styles and the successes of Genghis Khan and of Kublai Khan were alike, and in what ways they differed

Elaborations .E01–.E03 (a Polynesian group, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Jayavarman VII of Angkor) are other menu topics for this investigation. They are linkage keys retained for other sections and are not taught here.

Two men from the same family, born fifty-three years apart, each led the Mongol Empire in a different way and left it changed. **Genghis Khan** began with nothing but a hard life on the grasslands and ended as the ruler of the biggest land empire the world had yet seen. His grandson **Kublai Khan** inherited that empire and became the first Mongol to rule all of China as its emperor. This section compares them: what was the **same** and what was **different** in their leadership styles, and what counted as **success** for each.

About the key words. The Victorian Curriculum uses words like *leadership*, *leadership style* and *success* without defining them, so this section defines every key word at first use (see Part 1 and the figure that goes with it). Two of these words are contested — historians argue about exactly how to use them — and where that happens the argument is set out in a box, with both sides given equal weight.

Teaching sequence

Part 1 — The key words of this section (.E04)

These are the working definitions used throughout this section.

- **leadership** — the way a person guides other people, decides what should be done, and gets others to follow.
- **leadership style** — how a leader leads: how they gain power, how they choose helpers, and how they reward and punish. (Contested: see the box in Part 5.)
- **success** — achieving what you set out to do. (Contested: see the box in Part 6, because historians judge it in different ways.)
- **merit** — ability and effort, rather than birth or family. To promote by merit is to raise people for what they can do.
- **kurultai** — a great assembly of Mongol chiefs called to make big decisions, such as choosing a khan.

- **khan** — the title of a Mongol ruler or chief. (A title, like “king” or “queen”.)
- **Great Khan** — the ruler who stood above all the other khans.
- **founder** — the person who starts something new, such as an empire or a dynasty.
- **successor** — the person who comes after a ruler and takes their place.
- **steppe** — the huge dry grasslands of central Asia where the Mongols lived as herders (see 4A).

Key words of this section

Subject terms for comparing Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, defined at first use. Keep these meanings in mind as you read.

leadership

the way a person guides other people, decides what should be done, and gets others to follow

leadership style

how a leader leads: how they gain power, how they choose helpers, and how they reward and punish (contested - see Part 4)

success

achieving what you set out to do (contested - see Part 5: historians judge it in different ways)

merit

ability and effort, rather than birth or family; promoting people for what they can do

kurultai

a great assembly of Mongol chiefs called to make big decisions, such as choosing a khan

khan

the title of a Mongol ruler or chief

Great Khan

the ruler who stood above all the other khans

founder

the person who starts something new, such as an empire or a dynasty

successor

the person who comes after a ruler and takes their place

steppe

the huge dry grasslands of central Asia where the Mongols lived as herders

'Leadership style' and 'success' are contested terms: the arguments about them are set out in the boxes in Parts 4 and 5.

Ten definition cards for the key words of this section: leadership, leadership style, success, merit, kurultai, khan, Great Khan, founder, successor and steppe, each with a one-line definition; leadership style and success are marked as contested

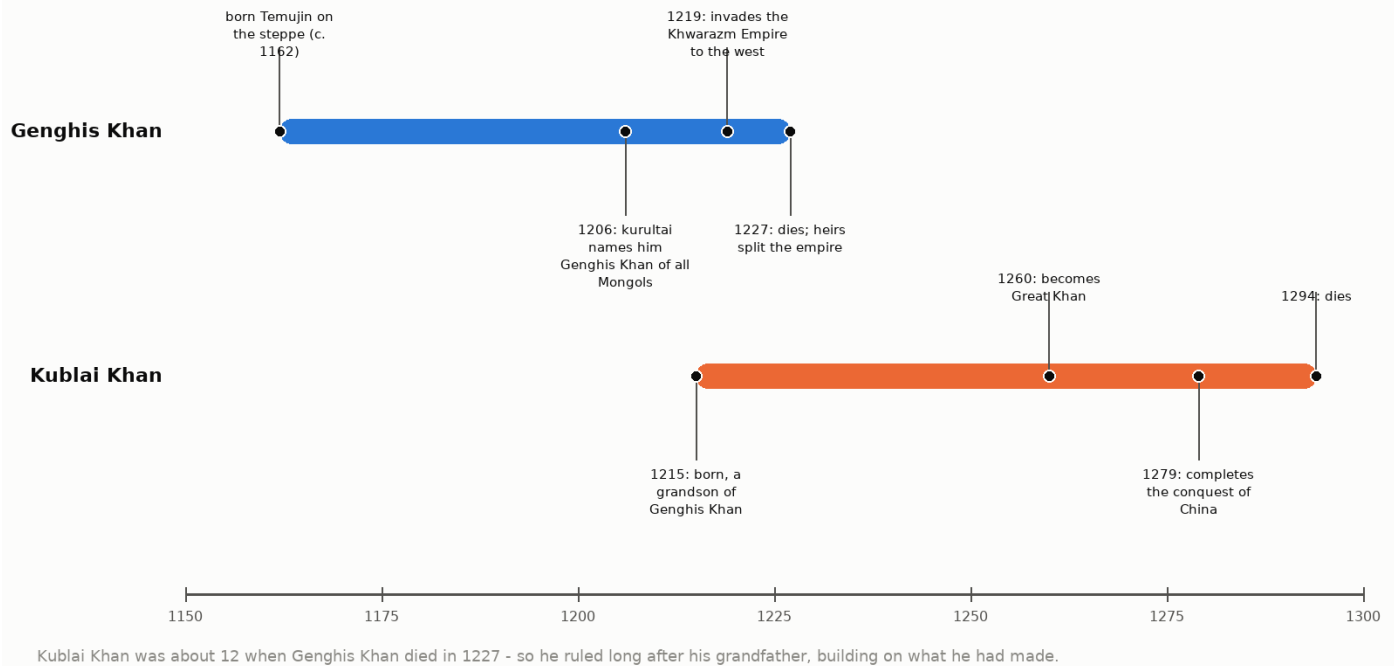
Check: which of these words name a **person or title** (khan, founder, successor), which name a **place or thing** (steppe, kurultai), and which name an **idea** (leadership, merit, success)?

Part 2 — Two lives on one timeline

Before we compare the two leaders, we need to see when each lived. Genghis Khan was the **founder**; Kublai Khan was his **successor** two generations on. The timeline below puts both lives on the same scale so the gap between them is easy to see.

Two lives on one timeline

Genghis Khan and his grandson Kublai Khan, drawn to the same scale. Watch the gap between them.



Timeline showing the two lives on one scale: Genghis Khan, born Temujin on the steppe about 1162, named Genghis Khan by a kurultai in 1206, invades the Khwarazm Empire to the west in 1219, and dies in 1227 with his heirs splitting the empire; Kublai Khan, born in 1215 as a grandson of Genghis Khan, becomes Great Khan in 1260, completes the conquest of China in 1279, and dies in 1294; a note says Kublai was about 12 when Genghis died

Kublai Khan was only about **12** when Genghis Khan died in 1227. He never led the first great conquests; he grew up hearing about them. That difference — founder versus grandson — shaped the two leadership styles we compare in this section.

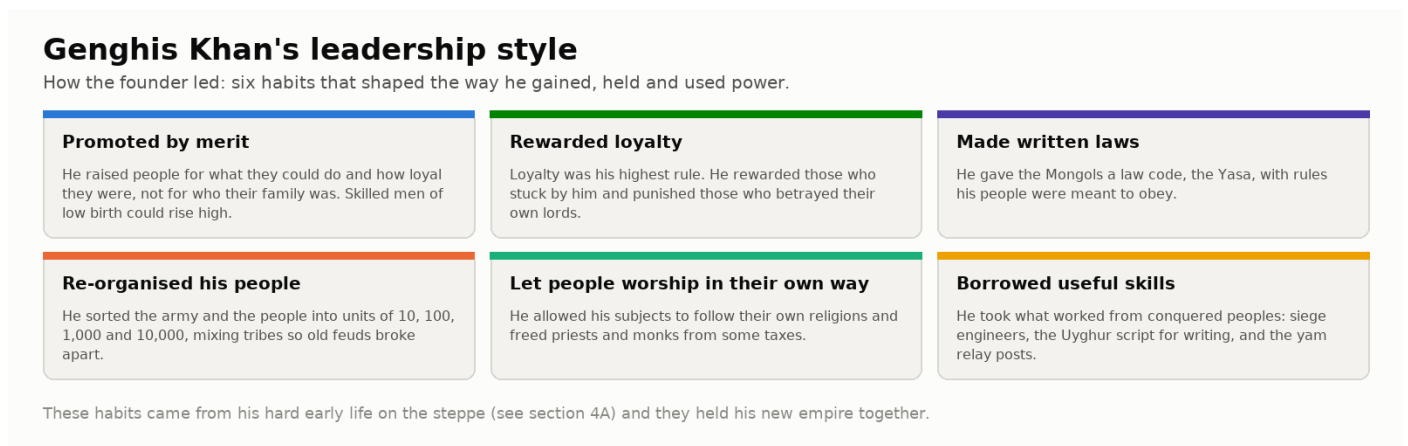
Check: which khan was alive first, and about how old was Kublai when Genghis died?

Part 3 — Genghis Khan: the founder-leader (.E04)

Genghis Khan was born **Temujin** on the steppe around **1162**. His early life was hard: his father was poisoned when Temujin was a boy, his family was left behind by their tribe, and they lived poor. That hardship shaped how he led. When he finally won power, he did not trust birth or family on its own — he trusted **loyalty** and **merit**, because those were the things that had saved him.

In **1206** a **kurultai** of the steppe leaders made Temujin ruler over all the Mongols and gave him the title **Genghis Khan**. For the first time the once-separate tribes were one people (the rise of Temujin is told in 4A; the conquests that followed are in 4B).

His leadership style is set out in the figure below.



Six cards describing Genghis Khan's leadership style: promoted by merit; rewarded loyalty; made written laws (the Yasa); re-organised his people into units of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000; let people worship in their own way; and borrowed useful skills such as siege engineers, the Uyghur script and the yam relay posts

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Genghis Khan"; The Secret History of the Mongols (c. 1240), translated by Igor de Rachewiltz (2004); accessed 25 August 2026.

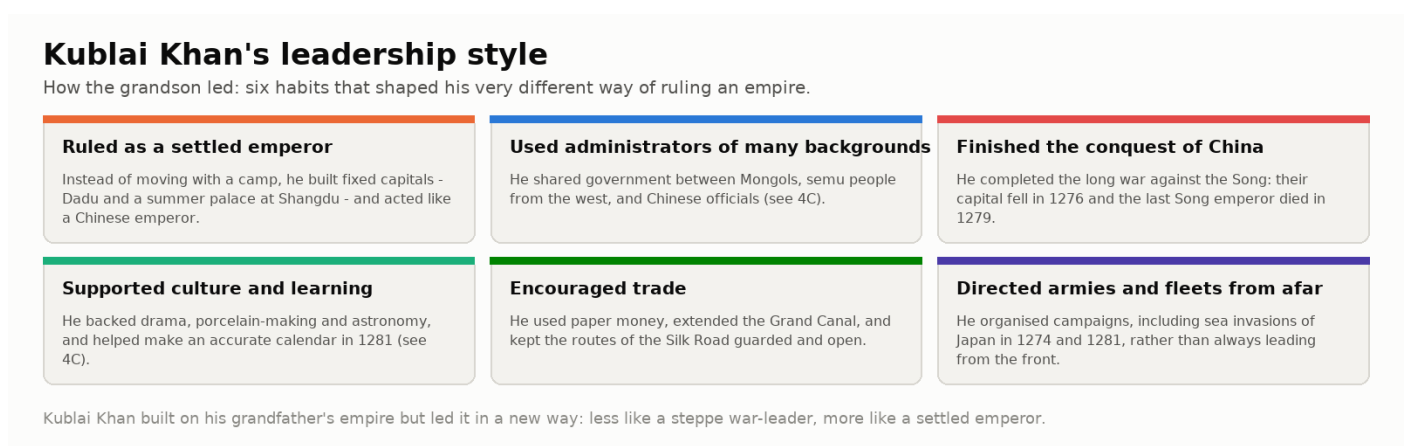
By the time he died in **1227**, Genghis Khan had built the largest connected land empire in history, stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the Caspian Sea. His burial place was kept secret. His **successors** split the empire between his sons, and one of them, Ögedei, became the next Great Khan.

Check: give two habits from the figure that show Genghis Khan valued loyalty and skill over family. Why might his hard early life explain those habits?

Part 4 — Kublai Khan: the emperor-leader (.E04)

Kublai Khan (1215–1294) was a grandson of Genghis Khan. In **1260** he was declared **Great Khan** after his brother's death, but he first had to win a civil war against his younger brother to keep the title. Then he made a very different kind of change from his grandfather: he settled down. In **1271** he named a Chinese dynasty, the **Yuan**, and ruled China as its **emperor** from a built capital, **Dadu** (his rule as emperor is in 4C).

His leadership style is set out in the figure below.



Six cards describing Kublai Khan's leadership style: ruled as a settled emperor from fixed capitals at Dadu and Shangdu; used administrators of many backgrounds; finished the conquest of China by 1279; supported culture and learning such as drama, porcelain and a new calendar; encouraged trade with paper money and guarded Silk Road routes; and directed armies and fleets from afar, including failed sea invasions of Japan in 1274 and 1281

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Kublai Khan" and "Yuan dynasty"; accessed 25 August 2026.

Where Genghis Khan had led his horsemen from the front, Kublai Khan more often directed armies and fleets from afar — and not always with success. His two sea invasions of **Japan** (1274 and 1281) were beaten back by storms and

by the defenders. His strength was not conquest but **government**: holding and running the empire his grandfather had won.

Check: name one way Kublai Khan led in a different way from a steppe war-leader. Which of his campaigns failed?

Part 5 — Comparing leadership styles: similarities and differences (.E04)

Now we put the two leaders side by side and ask the same questions of each. This is the core skill of .E04: identifying what was the same and what was different.

Contested term: leadership style.

The curriculum uses the words “leadership styles” but does not define them. This section therefore treats a *leadership style* as: the way a leader gains power, chooses helpers, and rewards and punishes. Other definitions exist and are not interchangeable with this one.

Historians do not weigh the same things in a leader. **One side** judges a leader mainly by military skill: did they win? **The other side** judges by what they built: laws, order, and institutions that outlived them. On the first measure Genghis Khan stands tallest; on the second, many would say Kublai. Both measures are reasonable — which is why the term is contested.

Comparing leadership styles

The same questions asked of both leaders. Read each row across, then read down.

Aspect	Genghis Khan	Kublai Khan
Rise to power	United scattered tribes and built an empire from nothing	Inherited an empire; won the throne in a civil war
Home base	Moved across the steppe with his camp	Lived in cities and palaces he built at Dadu and Shangdu
Choosing helpers	Promoted loyal and skilled warriors, mainly Mongols	Used administrators of many backgrounds: Mongols, semu and Chinese
War	Led his horsemen from the front; mainly won	Directed armies and fleets from afar; mixed results (Japan failed)
Law and government	Gave the Mongols the Yasa law code	Ran a government that taxed and kept records; named the Yuan dynasty
What he built	The largest connected land empire in history	The Yuan dynasty, and growing trade and culture
What was the SAME Both rewarded loyalty and punished enemies; both kept laws and clear organisation; both let people worship in their own way; both encouraged trade; and both used force to hold their empire together.		

Comparison table of leadership styles by aspect: rise to power, home base, choosing helpers, war, law and government, and what each built; Genghis Khan in one column and Kublai Khan in the other, plus a strip listing what was the same in both

Read the table across and then down. The **similarities** matter as much as the differences: both men rewarded loyalty and punished enemies, both kept laws and clear organisation, both let people worship in their own way, both encouraged trade, and both used force to hold their empire together. They were two generations of the same family, ruling the same empire.

Check: give one similarity and one difference from the table, each with a named example.

Part 6 — Comparing successes (.E04)

Both khans achieved great things, but “success” is the second contested word of this section, so we must first agree how to measure it.

Contested term: success.

The curriculum asks us to compare the “successes” of the two khans but does not say how to measure success. This section therefore measures it in **two** ways:

- **By what they built** — unity, laws, trade and culture that lasted. On this measure both khans were great successes.
- **By the cost to the conquered** — the lives lost and the cities destroyed. On this measure the conquests came at a terrible price. Section 4E weighs that cost in detail using historians’ debate about the numbers.

Both measures are real, and both sides of any argument about “greatness” must face both. A full judgement uses them together.

What did each leader achieve?

The successes of Genghis Khan and of Kublai Khan - and the two different ways to measure success.

Genghis Khan	Kublai Khan
✓ United the Mongol tribes into one people in 1206 ✓ Built the largest connected land empire in history ✓ Gave his people laws, writing and the yam relay posts	✓ Ruled the biggest share of the Mongol Empire ✓ United all of China and founded the Yuan dynasty (1271-1279) ✓ Made trade and culture grow along the Silk Road

But what counts as 'success'? Historians measure it in two ways

By what they built:

unity, laws, trade and culture grew - on this measure both khans were great successes.

By the cost to the conquered:

cities were destroyed and many people died - on this measure the conquests came at a terrible price (weighed in 4E).

A full judgement needs both measures - what a leader built, and what it cost.

Two panels listing the successes of Genghis Khan (uniting the Mongol tribes in 1206, building the largest connected land empire, giving laws, writing and the yam) and of Kublai Khan (ruling the biggest share of the empire, uniting all of China and founding the Yuan dynasty, growing trade and culture), above a strip showing the two ways historians measure success: by what they built, and by the cost to the conquered

Historians' debate: which khan changed the empire more?

- **One side** says Genghis Khan, because without the founder there is no empire at all. He made the Mongols one people, made the army that won the lands, and made the first laws. Everything later stood on his work.
- **The other side** says Kublai Khan, because he turned a conquest empire into a lasting government. He ruled the biggest share of it, completed China, and tied Europe and Asia together through trade — the connected age of Marco Polo.

Both sides agree the two men changed the empire in different ways: one by **founding**, one by **ruling and building**. They disagree about which kind of change mattered more.

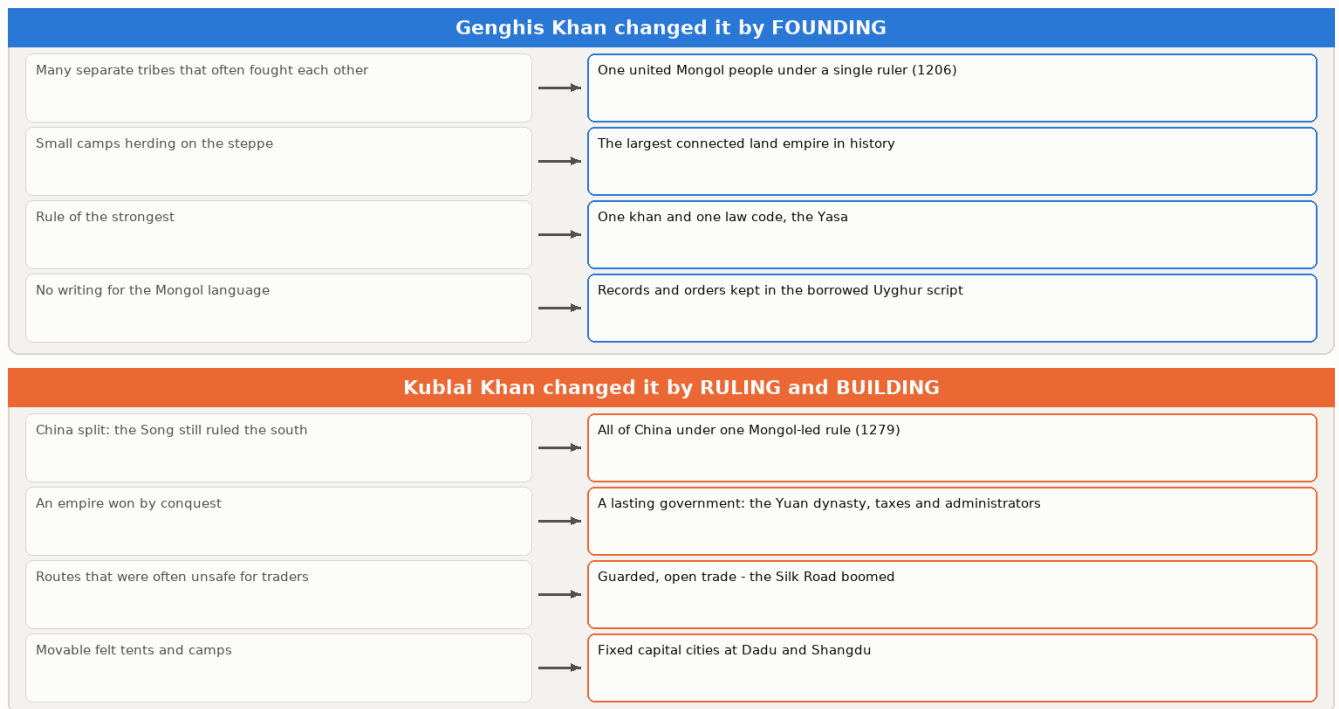
Check: measure Kublai Khan by “what he built” and by “the cost to the conquered”. Does he come out as a success on both measures? Why or why not?

Part 7 — Leadership that changed the empire, and how they are remembered (CD)

The content description asks about a significant individual's **role, contribution and achievements to change**. The figure below shows the change each leader made as a before-and-after.

How each leader changed the Mongol world

Each row shows what things were like BEFORE the leader, and what they became AFTER.



Two panels of before-and-after rows: Genghis Khan changed the Mongol world by founding (many feuding tribes became one united people in 1206; small camps became the largest connected land empire; rule of the strongest became one khan and one law code; no writing became records in the Uyghur script); Kublai Khan changed it by ruling and building (a split China became all China under one rule by 1279; conquest became a lasting government; unsafe routes became guarded Silk Road trade; movable camps became fixed capitals at Dadu and Shangdu)

But the same leaders look different to different people. The figure below shows four ways the khans are remembered — a reminder that perspective shapes every story about them (see 5E and 5F).

How are the khans remembered?

Four different people would tell the story of Mongol rule in four different ways. Whose eyes are we seeing through?

A Mongol herder

For the Mongols, Genghis Khan is the founding father who made the separate tribes into one people. He is still honoured today as a hero of Mongolia.

A scribe whose city fell

For writers in Persia and China whose cities were taken, the khan's armies were destroyers who killed people and ruined towns (see section 4E).

A Silk Road merchant

For traders, Mongol rule meant guarded routes and low, fixed taxes - a boom time for the Silk Road and the age of Marco Polo.

A historian today

Historians now hold both views at once: the khans built laws, trade and unity, but they also conquered by force and at great cost in lives.

The same rulers can look like heroes or destroyers depending on who is remembering - that is why perspective matters (sections 5E and 5F).

Four perspective cards on how the khans are remembered: a Mongol herder sees Genghis Khan as the founding father and a hero; a scribe whose city fell sees the khan's armies as destroyers; a Silk Road merchant sees guarded routes and a boom in trade; a historian today holds both views at once

Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Genghis Khan" and "Kublai Khan"; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: choose one of the four people in the figure. Would they call Genghis Khan a success? Would they call Kublai Khan a success? Explain why their answers differ.

Part 8 — Leadership, continuity, change, significance

Every fact in this section is fuel for the habits this book's skills chapters build. **Continuity and change** (6A): the dynasty at the top changed from Genghis to Kublai, and the way of ruling changed from camp to capital, but loyalty,

law and trade carried through both reigns. **Causes and consequences** (6B): Genghis's hardness was caused by his early life, and its consequence was a loyalty-and-merit style; Kublai's need to rule millions caused him to settle and use many kinds of administrator. **Significance** (6C): both men are judged significant, but by different criteria. **Perspective** (5E, 5F): the same rulers look like heroes or destroyers depending on who is remembering. When you write, use the frames: *This leader gained power by...* / *He chose helpers by...* / *He rewarded... and punished...* / *What stayed the same was...* / *What changed was...*

Check: label each sentence: **continuity**, **change**, or **perspective**. (a) "Kublai Khan ruled from a built capital instead of a moving camp." (b) "Both khans rewarded loyalty and kept laws." (c) "To a Mongol herder Genghis Khan is a hero; to a conquered scribe he is a destroyer."

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: comparing leadership styles (.E04)

Task. Give one similarity and two differences in the leadership styles of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, keeping the two ideas separate.

Scaffold.

1. **Pick the similarity.** What did both leaders do in the same way? (Hint: think loyalty, law, trade, worship.)
2. **Pick two differences.** Use the comparison table in Part 5: how did they differ in how they gained power, their home base, or how they chose helpers?
3. **Keep them separate.** Similarity = the same; difference = not the same.
4. **Link with the frames.** *Both leaders... / But Genghis Khan... while Kublai Khan...*

Worked response.

Both leaders rewarded loyalty and kept clear laws, so their people knew what was expected. But their styles differed in two ways. First, Genghis Khan gained power from nothing by uniting the tribes in 1206 and led his horsemen from the front, while Kublai Khan inherited an empire and won the throne in a civil war, then ruled as a settled emperor. Second, Genghis chose helpers for merit and loyalty, mainly Mongols, while Kublai used administrators of many backgrounds — Mongols, semu and Chinese — because no single group had all the skills he needed.

Worked example 2 — model response: comparing successes with two measures (.E04)

Task. Using Part 6, write one paragraph comparing the successes of the two khans. Use both measures of success, and one named example for each khan.

Worked response.

Measured by what they built, both khans were great successes. Genghis Khan united the Mongol tribes in 1206 and built the largest connected land empire in history, giving his people laws and writing; Kublai Khan united all of China by 1279, founded the Yuan dynasty, and made trade and culture grow along the Silk Road. Measured by the cost to the conquered, the picture darkens: the conquests that built that empire destroyed cities and cost many lives, a price weighed in section 4E. So both khans achieved what they set out to do, and both placed a heavy cost on the conquered — which is why any judgement of their success must use both measures together.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. (.E04) Copy and complete each sentence with one key word from Part 1. Word bank: *merit*, *kurultai*, *successor*, *founder*, *steppe*. (a) In 1206 a great _____ of steppe leaders made Temujin ruler over all the Mongols. (b) Genghis Khan promoted people for their _____, not for their family. (c) The Mongols lived as herders on the dry grasslands called the _____. (d) Genghis Khan was the _____ of the Mongol Empire; Kublai was his _____ two generations on.

Q2. (.E04, 5B) Put these events in order and give each its date: Kublai completes the conquest of China; a kurultai names Temujin Genghis Khan; Genghis Khan dies; Kublai is declared Great Khan; Kublai names the Yuan dynasty.

Q3. (.E04) Match each habit to the leader it best describes. (a) Genghis Khan (b) Kublai Khan. 1. Led his horsemen from the front. 2. Ruled as a settled emperor from a built capital. 3. Sorted his people into units of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000. 4. Used administrators of many backgrounds, including Chinese officials.

Q4. (.E04) Using the comparison table in Part 5: (a) give one similarity between the two leaders; (b) give one difference in how they chose helpers; (c) give one difference in their home base.

Q5. (.E04) Using the figure in Part 6: name the two ways historians measure success, and give one success of Kublai Khan measured by “what he built”.

Q6. (.E04, 5E) Using the figure in Part 7: match each view to the person who would hold it. 1. “Genghis Khan is our founding father and a hero.” 2. “The khan’s armies destroyed my city.” 3. “Mongol rule made the trade routes safe and busy.” (a) a Silk Road merchant (b) a Mongol herder (c) a scribe whose city fell.

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E04) Identify how the leadership styles of Genghis Khan and of Kublai Khan were alike and unlike. Use one similarity and two differences, each with a named example.

Q8. (.E04) Explain why “success” is a contested word for these two leaders. Then apply both measures of success to Genghis Khan.

Q9. (.E04, 6C) “Kublai Khan changed the Mongol Empire more than Genghis Khan did.” Use evidence from this section to argue whether you agree.

Q10. (CD) Choose one of the two khans. Explain his role, contribution and achievements to change, using at least two dated examples.

Source-based inquiry

Q11. (.E04) Read the extract below, then answer the questions that follow.

“You stayed with me when I had few friends and little power, and for that I will reward you. But the man who betrays his own lord and hands him over — how can I trust him? Such a man deserves death, not reward.”

Adapted from The Secret History of the Mongols, written about 1240 CE, a few years after Genghis Khan's death; the oldest surviving history written by the Mongols themselves; translated by Igor de Rachewiltz (2004).

Source analysis: The Secret History of the Mongols

Four questions to ask of any source: origin, content, purpose and audience, limits.

The Secret History of the Mongols

(the Mongols' own account of their rise)

- Written about 1240 CE, a few years after Genghis Khan died
- The oldest surviving history written by the Mongols themselves, in the Mongol language
- The author is unknown, but wrote from inside the Mongol court
- Translated by Igor de Rachewiltz (2004)

ORIGIN

Who: an unknown Mongol writer at court. When: about 1240 CE, shortly after Genghis Khan's death. Viewpoint: an INSIDER - the Mongols' own story, unlike the outsider accounts of Polo or Juvaini.

CONTENT

Genghis Khan promises to reward the companion who stuck by him when he was poor, and says anyone who betrays their own lord deserves death. Loyalty is the highest rule.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

To record and celebrate the rise of Genghis Khan and the Mongols, for the Mongols themselves - to keep alive the memory and the lessons of their founding ruler.

LIMITS

Written for the ruling family, so it praises its hero and gives the Mongols' own side, not the conquered peoples'. We cannot be sure these are Genghis Khan's exact words.

Read alongside an outsider source (such as Polo or Juvaini) to see how perspective changes the picture.

Source-analysis card for The Secret History of the Mongols: on the left, a card noting it was written about 1240 CE shortly after Genghis Khan's death, is the oldest surviving history written by the Mongols themselves in the Mongol language, has an unknown author from inside the Mongol court, and is translated by Igor de Rachewiltz (2004); on the right, four analysis boxes — origin, content, purpose and audience, and limits

- Origin.** Who produced this source, and when and where in time was it written? (2 marks)
- Content.** According to the extract, who does Genghis Khan reward, and who does he say deserves death? (2 marks)
- Infer.** What can you infer about Genghis Khan's leadership style from this extract? Give one habit from Part 3 that it supports. (2 marks)
- Perspective and limits.** This source was written by the Mongols, for the Mongols, about their own hero. Give one reason this makes the source useful and one reason it makes the source limited. (2 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) kurultai (b) merit (c) steppe (d) founder, successor.

Q2. A kurultai names Temujin Genghis Khan (1206) → Genghis Khan dies (1227) → Kublai is declared Great Khan (1260) → Kublai names the Yuan dynasty (1271) → Kublai completes the conquest of China (1279).

Q3. (a)–1, (a)–3; (b)–2, (b)–4.

Q4. (a) Any one similarity: both rewarded loyalty; both kept laws and organisation; both let people worship in their own way; both encouraged trade. (b) Genghis chose helpers for merit and loyalty, mainly Mongols; Kublai used administrators of many backgrounds. (c) Genghis moved with his camp on the steppe; Kublai ruled from built capitals at Dadu and Shangdu.

Q5. The two measures: by what they built, and by the cost to the conquered. One success of Kublai by “what he built”: uniting all of China and founding the Yuan dynasty (or growing trade and culture along the Silk Road).

Q6. (a)–3, (b)–1, (c)–2.

Q7. See model response — one similarity (both rewarded loyalty and kept laws) and two differences (founder from nothing versus inheritor; front-line horseman versus settled emperor; helpers chosen for merit versus administrators of many backgrounds).

Q8. See model response — “success” is contested because it can be measured by what a leader built or by the cost to the conquered; applying both to Genghis gives a mixed judgement.

Q9. See model response — either side can be argued with evidence; marking is on the reasoning.

Q10. See model response — role, contribution and achievements with two dated examples for the chosen khan.

Q11. (a) An unknown Mongol writer at court, writing about 1240 CE, a few years after Genghis Khan’s death — an insider account. (b) He rewards the companion who stayed with him when he was poor; he says the man who betrays his own lord deserves death. (c) It shows he valued loyalty above all and rewarded it — supporting “rewarded loyalty” (and promoting by merit) from Part 3. (d) Useful: it is the Mongols’ own near-contemporary account, so it shows how they saw their leader and what they valued. Limited: it was written to praise the ruling family’s hero, so it gives one side and may not record his exact words.

Model responses

Q7. The two khans shared one core habit: both rewarded loyalty and kept clear laws, so their people knew what was expected. But their leadership styles differed. Genghis Khan gained power from nothing: he united the feuding tribes in 1206 and led his horsemen from the front, choosing helpers for merit and loyalty, mainly Mongols. Kublai Khan inherited an empire, won the throne in a civil war, and ruled as a settled emperor from a built capital, using administrators of many backgrounds. So the founder led like a steppe war-leader, while the grandson led like a Chinese emperor.

Q8. “Success” is contested because historians measure it in two different ways: by what a leader built, and by the cost to the conquered. Applied to Genghis Khan, the first measure gives a great success — he united the Mongol tribes in 1206, built the largest connected land empire in history, and gave his people laws and writing. The second measure gives a darker picture — his conquests destroyed cities and cost many lives, a cost weighed in section 4E. So the same life can be called a triumph or a tragedy depending on the measure, which is exactly why the word is contested.

Q9. I agree that Kublai Khan changed the empire more, in one sense: he turned a conquest empire into a lasting government, completing China by 1279, founding the Yuan dynasty, and tying Europe and Asia together through guarded trade — the age of Marco Polo. But the other side is strong too: without Genghis Khan there is no empire at all, because he made the Mongols one people, made the winning army, and made the first laws. A fair answer weighs founding against building and states which measure it uses — that is what makes the debate a real historical argument.

Q10. Genghis Khan's role was founder and first Great Khan of the Mongol Empire. His contribution was to make the separate tribes one people in 1206 and to give them laws, organisation and writing. His achievements were the conquests that built the largest connected land empire in history, from the Pacific to the Caspian Sea, by his death in 1227. These changes — one people, one law, one vast empire — are his contribution to change. (*For Kublai Khan: role = first Mongol emperor of China; contribution = a lasting Yuan government using many kinds of administrator; achievements = completing China by 1279 and growing trade and culture.*)

Q11. (*model for part c and d*) From the extract we can infer that Genghis Khan's leadership style put loyalty above everything: he rewards the companion who stayed with him in hard times and refuses to trust, and even condemns, the man who betrays his own lord. This supports the habit "rewarded loyalty" from Part 3, and it also fits promoting by merit, since what counted was what a person did, not who they were. The source is useful because it is the Mongols' own account, written close to these events, so it is strong evidence of how they saw their leader and what they valued in a follower. It is limited because it was written for the ruling family to praise its hero, so it gives only the Mongols' side, may soften or sharpen the story, and cannot give us Genghis Khan's exact words. Cross-checking with outsider accounts (such as Polo or Juvaini) is what turns a hero story into balanced evidence.

Judging the Mongol expansion: death tolls, debates and legacies

Curriculum focus: this section owns VC2HH8K28 and develops elaborations .E01–.E05. Following this book’s coverage decisions, it teaches .E05:

- .E05 — weighing the different death tolls given for the Mongol expansion — one million at Nishapur, 60 million in China — against primary sources and what historians have written

Elaborations .E01–.E04 are linkage keys retained for other sections and are not taught here.

When the story of the Mongols is told, very big numbers travel with it. One city, Nishapur, is said to have lost about one million people. China is said to have lost 60 million. This section does not ask you to memorise those numbers. It asks the question a historian asks of every big number: **how well is it backed by evidence?**

That question is what .E05 calls the *validity* of a death toll. To weigh it we use two kinds of material: **primary sources** — chronicles, letters and census counts from near the time — and **historians’ interpretations** — what historians, reading those sources later, say they mean. And because a reading is not a mirror, the section ends where .E05 ends: with the **legacies** of Mongol expansion, and the different readings historians give them.

About the key words. The Victorian Curriculum uses *validity* in .E05 without defining it, so Part 1 gives the word a working meaning in a box, and defines every other key word at first use. Where historians disagree, the disagreement is set out in a box with both sides given equal weight — and marking in this section rewards the reasoning, not the side you choose.

Teaching sequence

Part 1 — The key words of this section (.E05)

These are the working definitions used throughout this section.

- **interpretation** — what someone says the past means, built from evidence; not the event itself.
- **perspective** — a person or group’s point of view; where they stand shapes what they see and say.
- **primary source** — a source made at the time being studied (the event, person or place).
- **secondary source** — a later work that interprets the past, such as a historian’s book.
- **chronicle** — a written record of events, set down in time order.
- **census** — an official count of the people of a land, ordered by its ruler.
- **death toll** — the number of people who died.
- **evidence** — what the past has left behind, used to work out what happened.
- **validity** — how well a claim is backed by evidence (defined in the box below).
- **exaggeration** — a claim stretched beyond the truth, making something seem bigger than it was.
- **legacy** — what an event or period leaves behind; its effects long after it ended.
- **bias** — leaning for or against someone in a way that shapes the story told.

A word used in this book’s other sections also appears here: a **khan** is the title of a Mongol ruler (defined in 4A) — you will meet it in names like Genghis Khan and Hulagu Khan.

Key words of this section

Subject terms for talking about the past and its readings, defined at first use. Keep these meanings in mind as you read.

interpretation

what someone says the past means, built from evidence; not the event itself

perspective

a person or group's point of view; where they stand shapes what they see and say

primary source

a source made at the time being studied (the event, person or place)

secondary source

a later work that interprets the past, such as a historian's book

chronicle

a written record of events, set down in time order

census

an official count of the people of a land, ordered by its ruler

death toll

the number of people who died

evidence

what the past has left behind, used to work out what happened

validity

how well a claim is backed by evidence (defined in Part 1 of this section)

exaggeration

a claim stretched beyond the truth, making something seem bigger than it was

legacy

what an event or period leaves behind; its effects long after it ended

bias

leaning for or against someone in a way that shapes the story told

Validity is defined in a boxed note in Part 1, because the curriculum uses the word without defining it.

Twelve definition cards for the key words of this section: *interpretation, perspective, primary source, secondary source, chronicle, census, death toll, evidence, validity, exaggeration, legacy and bias*, each with a one-line definition

Undefined term: validity.

The Victorian Curriculum uses *validity* in .E05 without defining it. This section gives the word a working meaning: **the validity of a claim is how well it is backed by evidence** — who made the claim, when, why, what kind of number it is, and what else backs it up.

- **High validity:** several different kinds of evidence — eye-witnesses, careful counts, other writers — point the same way.
- **Low validity:** the evidence is thin, late, one-sided or stretched.

Historians agree on the questions to ask. They disagree about the answers — and discussing the answers, with reasons, is exactly what .E05 asks you to do.

Check: sort the key words into three groups: **things the past left behind** (a chronicle, a census, evidence), **ways of reading the past** (interpretation, perspective, bias, exaggeration, validity) and **words for the past itself** (a death toll, a legacy). Why does “legacy” sit hardest to sort?

Part 2 — One event, three readings (.E05)

In April 1221 a Mongol army under Tolui, a son of Genghis Khan, took the city of Nishapur by storm. The Mongols were punishing the city for the death of a Mongol prince, Toquchar, killed by an arrow when the Mongols first came against the city. Nishapur fell, and it was destroyed. **That is the event.** Everything else in this section is a **reading** of the event.

Three readings sit beside the event in the figure below. A near-contemporary writer, Juvaini, says the heads of the dead were counted at 1,747,000. Modern historians read that number as a way of saying “the killing was past measuring” — not as a count anyone could have made. And many modern books round the figure to “about one million” — the number named in .E05 — which is still a vast claim, and still one the evidence cannot check.

The event happened once. The readings multiply, because each reader has a time, a place and a purpose. That gap between the event and the readings is what this section studies.

One event, three readings

The event happened once. The readings of it multiply, because each writer has a time, a place and a purpose.

THE EVENT

April 1221: a Mongol army under Tolui, son of Genghis Khan, takes the city of Nishapur by storm. The city is punished in revenge for the killing of a Mongol prince, struck by an arrow as the Mongols first came against it.

Reading 1 — a near-contemporary writer

Juvaini, a Persian official writing in the 1250s to 1260s: the order was to spare no one, and the heads of the dead were counted — 1,747,000.

Reading 2 — modern historians

The number is far too big to be a real body count. It is a way of saying the killing was huge — not a count anyone could have made.

Reading 3 — how the figure travels

Many modern books round the toll to 'about one million' — still a vast claim, and still one that evidence cannot check.

An event is what happened. An interpretation is what someone says it means, built from sources and shaped by when, where and why they wrote. Historians can never re-run the event — they can only test the readings against the evidence left behind.

The same rule holds for every death toll in this section — and for every legacy of Mongol rule.

One event, three readings: an event card (April 1221, a Mongol army under Tolui, son of Genghis Khan, takes the city of Nishapur by storm, punished in revenge for the killing of a Mongol prince struck by an arrow) with arrows to three reading cards — Reading 1, a near-contemporary writer (Juvaini, a Persian official writing in the 1250s to 1260s: the heads of the dead were counted at 1,747,000); Reading 2, modern historians (the number is far too big to be a real body count; it is a way of saying the killing was huge); Reading 3, how the figure travels (many modern books round the toll to 'about one million'); a definition strip below explains that an event is what happened, while an interpretation is what someone says it means, built from sources and shaped by when, where and why they wrote

Check: which reading sits closest to the event in time? Does being close in time make a reading correct? Give a reason from the figure.

Part 3 — The claims on the table (.E05)

Nishapur is one of eight death-toll claims linked to Mongol expansion. The figure below sets them out, and each claim names its maker and its kind of source — because a claim cannot be weighed until we know who made it, from where, and why.

Three patterns matter.

1. **Two writers, two numbers, one city.** For Merv, Ibn al-Athir, writing in Mosul about ten years after the event, gives 700,000 killed. Juvaini gives 1,300,000. Both cannot be right as counts — so at least one number is doing something else: shaping a story, not counting the dead.
2. **The conqueror's own letter.** For Baghdad, Hulagu Khan's letter to King Louis IX of France, written in 1258, the year of the siege, says 200,000 killed. Later Muslim writers, two or three generations on, say 800,000, even 2,000,000. The source nearest the event gives the smallest number — a first sign that these numbers grew in the telling.
3. **A gap between two counts.** For China, the claim is not a chronicle number at all: it is the gap between the registers of about 1200 and a Yuan census of about 1300 (Part 5). And for the whole conquest, McEvedy and Jones (1978) estimated 40–60 million dead — a figure later historians questioned.

The claims on the table

Eight death-toll claims linked to Mongol expansion. Each claim names its maker and its kind of source — the first step in testing validity.

The claim	Who makes it	When written	Kind of source
Nishapur: 1,747,000 killed	Juvaini, Persian official	c. 1252-1260	chronicle, about 30 years after the event
Nishapur: about one million	many modern books	today	secondary retelling, rounded down
Merv: 700,000 killed	Ibn al-Athir, writing in Mosul	c. 1231	chronicle, near the time but far away
Merv: 1,300,000 killed	Juvaini	c. 1252-1260	chronicle, about 30 years later
Baghdad: 200,000 killed	Hulagu Khan's own letter to Louis IX	1258	the conqueror's letter, from the year itself
Baghdad: 800,000 up to 2,000,000	later Muslim writers (e.g. Mustawfi)	c. 1330s-1340s	chronicles, generations later
China: about 60 million fewer people	modern reading of two census counts	modern	comparison of official counts, c. 1200 vs c. 1300
The whole conquest: 40-60 million	McEvedy and Jones	1978	modern estimate, later questioned

Notice the pattern: for one city (Merv) two near-contemporary writers give two numbers; for another (Baghdad) the conqueror's own letter gives a far smaller number than later writers.

Eight-row table of death-toll claims linked to Mongol expansion, each row naming the claim, its maker, its date and its kind of source: Nishapur 1,747,000 killed (Juvaini, Persian official, c. 1252-1260, a chronicle about 30 years after the event); Nishapur about one million (many modern books, today, a secondary retelling rounded down); Merv 700,000 (Ibn al-Athir, writing in Mosul, c. 1231, a chronicle near the time but far away); Merv 1,300,000 (Juvaini, c. 1252-1260); Baghdad 200,000 (Hulagu Khan's own letter to Louis IX, 1258, the conqueror's letter from the year itself); Baghdad 800,000 up to 2,000,000 (later Muslim writers such as Mustawfi, c. 1330s-1340s, chronicles generations later); China about 60 million fewer people (a modern reading comparing official counts, c. 1200 vs c. 1300); the whole conquest 40-60 million (McEvedy and Jones, 1978, a modern estimate later questioned); a note that for Merv two near-contemporary writers give two numbers, and for Baghdad the conqueror's own letter gives a far smaller number than later writers

*Sources: Ata-Malik Juvaini, *History of the World-Conqueror*, translated by J. A. Boyle (1958); Ibn al-Athir, *The Complete History* (c. 1231); the letter of Hulagu Khan to Louis IX (1258); Hamdollah Mustawfi (c. 1330s-1340s); Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (1978); Wikipedia, "Destruction under the Mongol Empire" and "Siege of Baghdad (1258)"; accessed 25 August 2026.*

Check: which two claims in the table were written **in the year of the event or within about ten years**? Which were written **two or three generations later**? What tends to happen to a number in the gap between those two groups?

Part 4 — Testing the number at Nishapur (.E05)

A rule of the room. Behind every number in this section are people. Cities burned; people died in their thousands; others were taken or forced to flee. Testing a number is not doubting that suffering — it is treating the number itself as a claim, because .E05 asks us to discuss validity, and validity is about evidence.

Who was Juvaini? Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226–1283) was a Persian official in Mongol service, born five years **after** Nishapur fell. His chronicle, the *History of the World-Conqueror*, was written c. 1252–1260, about thirty years after the event, for the very family whose deeds it records. He had access to Mongol records and to people who had seen the places — and he also served the rulers he wrote about. That is not a reason to throw the book away. It is a reason to test its numbers.

Source card: Juvaini on Nishapur

The most famous single death toll in the Mongol story, and the man who wrote it down.

THE SOURCE

Book

History of the World-Conqueror (a chronicle of the Mongol conquests)

Writer

Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226-1283), a Persian official in Mongol service

Written

c. 1252-1260, about 30 years after Nishapur fell

Where he stood

He served the Mongol rulers of Persia and travelled with their armies, so he could ask people and see places

WHAT IT CLAIMS

Toquchar, a son-in-law of Genghis Khan, was killed by an arrow as the Mongols first came against the city.

In April 1221 a larger army under Tolui, son of Genghis Khan, took Nishapur by storm, in revenge.

The order was to spare no one — Juvaini writes that not even cats and dogs were left alive.

The heads of the dead were counted, he says: 1,747,000.

Juvaini was near the time but not an eyewitness: he was born five years after the city fell. A claim like this must be tested (Part 4) — not because suffering is in doubt, but because the number itself is the claim under test.

Source card for Juvaini on Nishapur: on the left, the source (his book, the History of the World-Conqueror, a chronicle of the Mongol conquests; the writer, Ata-Malik Juvaini, 1226-1283, a Persian official in Mongol service; written c. 1252-1260, about 30 years after Nishapur fell; where he stood, serving the Mongol rulers of Persia and travelling with their armies); on the right, what it claims (Toquchar, a son-in-law of Genghis Khan, killed by an arrow as the Mongols first came against the city; in April 1221 a larger army under Tolui took Nishapur by storm in revenge; the order was to spare no one, not even cats and dogs; the heads of the dead were counted at 1,747,000); a note that Juvaini was near the time but not an eyewitness, so a claim like this must be tested — not because suffering is in doubt, but because the number itself is the claim under test

Historians test a big claim against what else is known. Four cross-checks sit in the figure below.

1. **Counting.** Counting 1,747,000 heads at three seconds each, without a pause, would take about sixty days. The army moved on within days.
2. **City size.** In the 1200s even the biggest cities on Earth held a few hundred thousand people at most. One city could not hold 1.7 million.
3. **Army and time.** Killing that many people with hand weapons takes a force and a time far beyond what the sources give for Tolui's army at Nishapur.
4. **What came after.** Nishapur lived again: within decades it was a working city under Mongol rule, with markets and mosques — not an empty ruin.

The verdict: the number is not a count. It is a way of saying the killing was past measuring — **exaggeration** in the technical sense of Part 1, a claim stretched beyond what a count could be. The true toll at Nishapur is unknown and certainly far smaller than 1,747,000 — and the destruction of the city was real, and writers of the time agree on that.

Testing the number: four cross-checks

Could 1,747,000 be a real count of the dead at Nishapur? Historians test a big claim against what else is known.

1. Counting

Counting 1,747,000 heads at three seconds each, without a pause, would take about sixty days. The army moved on within days.

2. City size

In the 1200s even the biggest cities on Earth held a few hundred thousand people at most — one city alone could not hold 1.7 million.

3. Army and time

Killing that many people with hand weapons takes a force and a time far beyond what the sources give for Tolui's army at Nishapur.

4. What came after

Nishapur lived again: within decades it was a working city under Mongol rule, with markets and mosques — not an empty ruin.

Verdict: the number is not a count — it is a way of saying the killing was past measuring. The true toll at Nishapur is unknown and certainly far smaller than 1,747,000 — but the destruction of the city was real, and writers of the time agree on that.

This is the skill of this section: test the claim, respect the people behind it.

Four cross-check cards testing the number 1,747,000 at Nishapur: counting (at three seconds a head, counting that many without a pause would take about sixty days, while the army moved on within days); city size (in the 1200s even the biggest cities on Earth held a few hundred thousand people at most, so one city could not hold 1.7 million); army and time (killing that many with hand weapons takes a force and a time far beyond what the sources give for Tolui's army); what came after (Nishapur lived again, a working city with markets and mosques within decades, not an empty ruin); a verdict strip below: the number is not a count but a way of saying the killing was past measuring — the true toll is unknown and far smaller, but the destruction was real

*Sources: Ata-Malik Juvaini, *History of the World-Conqueror*, translated by J. A. Boyle (1958); Wikipedia, "Siege of Nishapur (1221)" and "Mongol conquest of the Khwarazmian Empire"; accessed 25 August 2026.*

Check: match each cross-check to what it tests: **time, space, the size of the army, what came after**. Why does a claim fail on validity when it fails all four?

Part 5 — The China census puzzle (.E05)

The biggest claim in this section is not a chronicle number at all. Around 1200, the records of the Jin and Song states that then ruled China counted about 120 million people. Around 1300, a census of the Yuan dynasty counted about 60 million. The gap — about 60 million fewer people on paper — is where the claim "60 million died in China" comes from, and it is the second number .E05 names.

Two readings of the gap sit in the figure below.

Reading 1 — the toll. The conquest killed about 60 million people in China. This is the toll some modern writers give.

Reading 2 — the records. Most of the 60 million did not die; they left the records. Frederick Mote, in *Imperial China 900–1800* (1999), points to a breakdown in the counting system itself under the stress of conquest. Timothy Brook notes that people who lost their freedom and became bond-servants dropped off the census; others fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword.

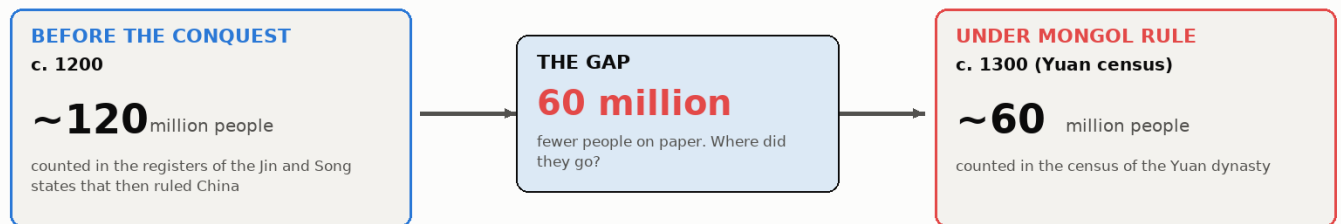
One line from the figure is worth keeping: **a census counts the people the state can see. When the state breaks, the count breaks with it.**

So the 60 million has lower validity than it looks at first sight: it is not a count of the dead, but a gap between two counts made a century apart, by different states, with different reach. That does not mean the conquest was mild —

war, famine and plague killed many millions of people in China. It means “60 million” names the size of a breakdown in records as much as the size of a graveyard.

The China census puzzle

Two official counts, a century apart. The gap between them is where the ‘60 million’ claim comes from.



Reading 1 — the toll

The conquest killed about 60 million people in China. This is the toll some modern writers give, and the number named in the curriculum.

Reading 2 — the records

Most of the 60 million did not die; they left the records. Frederick Mote points to a breakdown in the counting system; Timothy Brook notes people who became unfree dropped off the census; others fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword.

A census counts the people the state can see. When the state breaks, the count breaks with it.

The China census puzzle: two official counts a century apart — about 120 million people counted in the registers of the Jin and Song states about 1200, and about 60 million counted in the Yuan census about 1300, with a gap card of 60 million fewer people on paper; below, two readings of the gap, Reading 1 the toll (the conquest killed about 60 million people in China, the number some modern writers give and the curriculum names) and Reading 2 the records (most of the 60 million did not die but left the records: Frederick Mote points to a breakdown in the counting system, Timothy Brook notes people who lost their freedom dropped off the census, others fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword); a closing line: a census counts the people the state can see — when the state breaks, the count breaks with it

Sources: Frederick W. Mote, Imperial China 900-1800 (1999); Timothy Brook, The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties (2010); Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, Atlas of World Population History (1978); Wikipedia, “Destruction under the Mongol Empire”; accessed 25 August 2026.

Check: a census and a chronicle are both primary sources. Give one reason a census **looks** like the stronger source, and one reason a census can mislead.

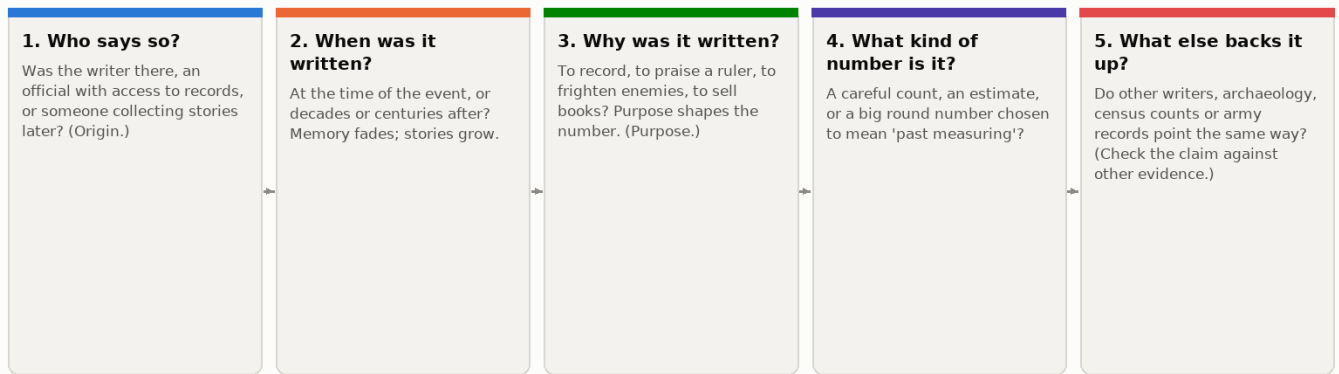
Part 6 — Five questions to weigh a claim (. E05)

The working meaning of validity from Part 1 becomes a tool in the figure below: five questions to ask of any number or story about the Mongol conquests. They are the same questions section 5D teaches for any source, here applied to the harshest claims in this book.

Worked on Baghdad: the conqueror’s own letter says 200,000 killed; writers two or three generations later say 800,000, even 2,000,000. Ask the five questions of each and the picture turns. The letter is from the year itself, by the man with the best access — but it is also the conqueror’s own account, sent to a foreign king, with a purpose: to sound mighty. The later writers are further from the event, and their numbers grow with every telling. The five questions do not pick the “right” number. They show why no one can pick it — and which claims stand on firmer ground.

Five questions to weigh a claim

Validity means how well a claim is backed by evidence. Ask these five questions of any number or story about the Mongol conquests.



Worked on Baghdad: the conqueror's own letter says 200,000 killed; writers two or three generations later say 800,000, even 2,000,000. The five questions do not pick the 'right' number — they show why no one can pick it, and which claims stand on firmer ground.

These are the same questions section 5D teaches for any source — here applied to the starkest claims in this book.

Five question cards for weighing a claim: 1 who says so (was the writer there, an official with access to records, or someone collecting stories later? — origin); 2 when was it written (at the time of the event, or decades or centuries after? memory fades, stories grow); 3 why was it written (to record, to praise a ruler, to frighten enemies, to sell books? purpose shapes the number); 4 what kind of number is it (a careful count, an estimate, or a big round number chosen to mean 'past measuring?'); 5 what else backs it up (do other writers, archaeology, census counts or army records point the same way?); a worked note on Baghdad: the conqueror's own letter says 200,000 killed while writers two or three generations later say 800,000, even 2,000,000 — the questions do not pick the 'right' number, they show why no one can pick it and which claims stand on firmer ground

Check: which of the five questions does a census answer well that a chronicle answers badly? Which does a chronicle answer well that a census cannot?

Part 7 — The historians' debate: catastrophe or connection? (.E05)

Step back from single cities to the whole of Mongol expansion, and historians give two big readings. Each is set out below at full strength, as its own supporters would make it, before any judgement.

Historians' debate: catastrophe or connection?

- **Reading A — catastrophe.** The sources point one way: cities burned and emptied — Merv and Nishapur in 1221, Baghdad in 1258. Ibn al-Athir, writing in Mosul in the 1220s, called the invasion the greatest disaster his people had ever known. In Persia, later tax records suggest the counted population fell from about 2.5 million to about 250,000 (the reading of John Masson Smith). Even allowing for exaggeration, the damage was real, vast and — in some regions — took centuries to repair.
- **Reading B — connection.** The empire that came out of the conquests joined Europe and Asia: one family ruled the whole road (see 4B). Goods, people and knowledge moved as never before — silk and silver, paper money, printing, gunpowder, the compass (Thomas Allsen, 2001). Under the Yuan, China's trade, art and cities grew; Marco Polo and Rabban Bar Sauma crossed the empire in both directions. The roads lasted longer than the khans who built them: the links they made shaped the world that came after.

Both sides agree the conquests were destructive, and both agree the empire that followed connected Eurasia. They differ over which legacy matters most, for whom, and at what price. And the same rules bind both sides: each must face the same validity questions about its own figures — Reading A about its tolls, Reading B about its picture of peaceful roads (the same roads carried plague west in the 1340s; see Chapter 3). Marking rewards the reasoning, not the side chosen.

The historians' debate: catastrophe or connection?

Two readings of Mongol expansion as a whole. Each is set out at full strength, as its own supporters would make it, before any judgement.

Reading A — catastrophe

- The sources point one way: cities burned and emptied — Merv and Nishapur in 1221, Baghdad in 1258.
- Ibn al-Athir, writing in Mosul in the 1220s, called the invasion the worst disaster his people had ever known.
- In Persia, later tax registers suggest the counted population fell from about 2.5 million to about 250,000 (John Masson Smith's reading).
- Even allowing for exaggeration, the damage was real, vast and — in some regions — took centuries to repair.

Reading B — connection

- The empire that came out of the conquests joined Europe and Asia: one family ruled the whole road (see 4B).
- Goods, people and knowledge moved as never before — silk and silver, paper money, printing, gunpowder, the compass (Thomas Allsen, 2001).
- Under the Yuan, China's trade, art and cities grew; Marco Polo and Rabban Bar Sauma crossed the empire in both directions.
- The roads even outlived the khans: the links they built fed the world that came after.

Where both sides agree — and where they part

Both agree the conquests were destructive, and both agree the empire that followed connected Eurasia. They differ over which legacy matters most, for whom, and at what price. And symmetry rules: each side must face the same validity questions about its own figures — Reading A about its tolls, Reading B about its picture of peaceful roads (the same roads carried plague west in the 1340s; see Chapter 3). Marking rewards the reasoning, not the side chosen.

Two-column diagram of the historians' debate: Reading A catastrophe (the sources point one way — cities burned and emptied, Merv and Nishapur in 1221 and Baghdad in 1258; Ibn al-Athir in Mosul in the 1220s called the invasion the greatest disaster his people had ever known; later Persian tax registers suggest the counted population fell from about 2.5 million to about 250,000 in John Masson Smith's reading; even allowing for exaggeration the damage was real, vast and slow to repair) and Reading B connection (the empire joined Europe and Asia under one family's rule; goods, people and knowledge moved as never before — silk and silver, paper money, printing, gunpowder, the compass, per Thomas Allsen, 2001; under the Yuan, China's trade, art and cities grew, and Marco Polo and Rabban Bar Sauma crossed the empire in both directions; the roads outlived the khans); a common-ground strip below: both sides agree the conquests were destructive and the empire connected Eurasia, they differ over which legacy matters most, and each side must face the same validity questions about its own figures — marking rewards the reasoning, not the side chosen

*Sources: Ibn al-Athir, *The Complete History* (c. 1231); John Masson Smith's reading of Persian tax records; Thomas Allsen, *On Exchange under the Mongol Empire* (2001); David Morgan, *The Mongols* (1986); accessed 25 August 2026.*

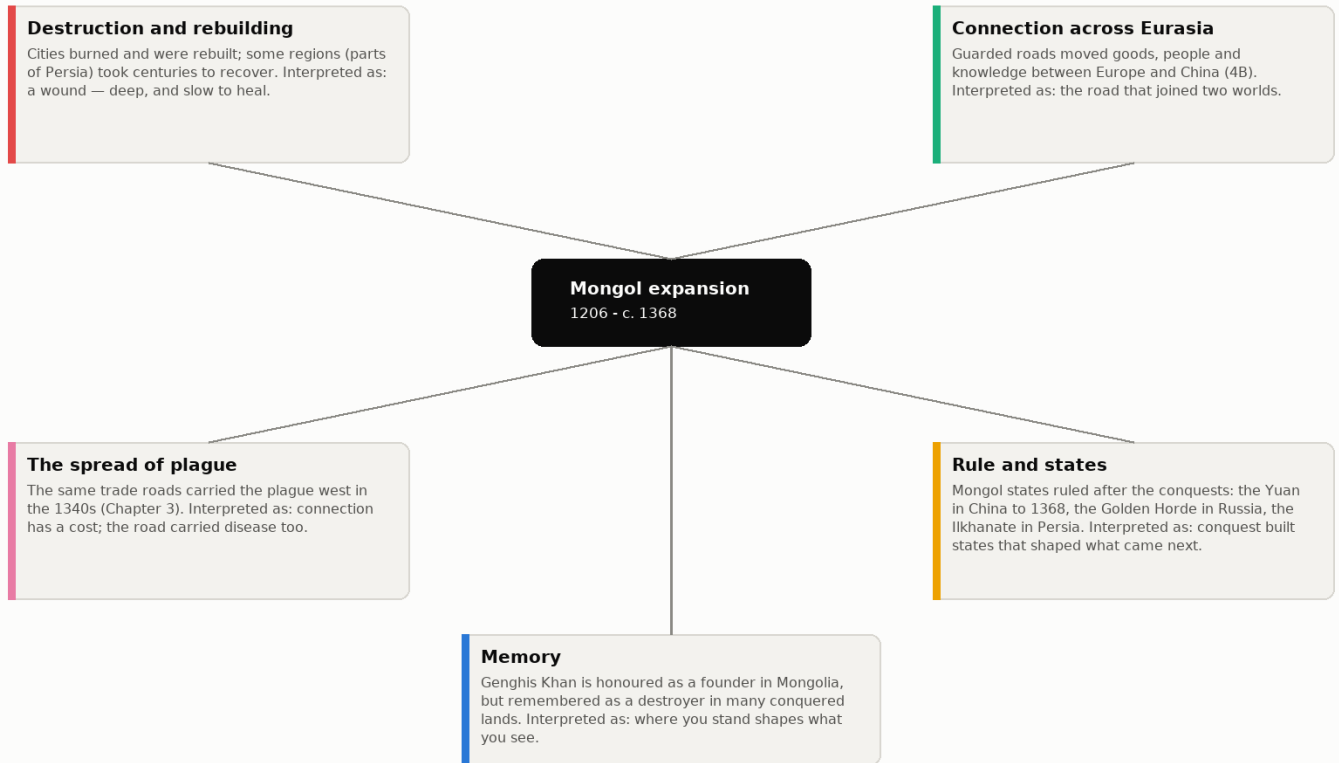
Check: name one piece of evidence each reading would have to explain away. What does that tell you about big readings of the past?

Part 8 — Legacies, and the skills this section feeds (.E05)

A **legacy** is what an event leaves behind. The figure below gives five legacies of Mongol expansion, each with the interpretation attached to it — because a legacy never speaks for itself. Destruction and rebuilding read as a wound; connection across Eurasia reads as a bridge; the spread of plague reads as the price of the bridge; rule and states (the Yuan in China to 1368, the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate in Persia) read as conquest building states that shaped what came next; and memory is read in two ways depending on where you stand — honoured as a founder in Mongolia, remembered as a destroyer in many conquered lands.

What did Mongol expansion leave behind?

Five legacies, and the interpretation attached to each. A legacy is what an event leaves behind; the interpretation is what historians say it means.

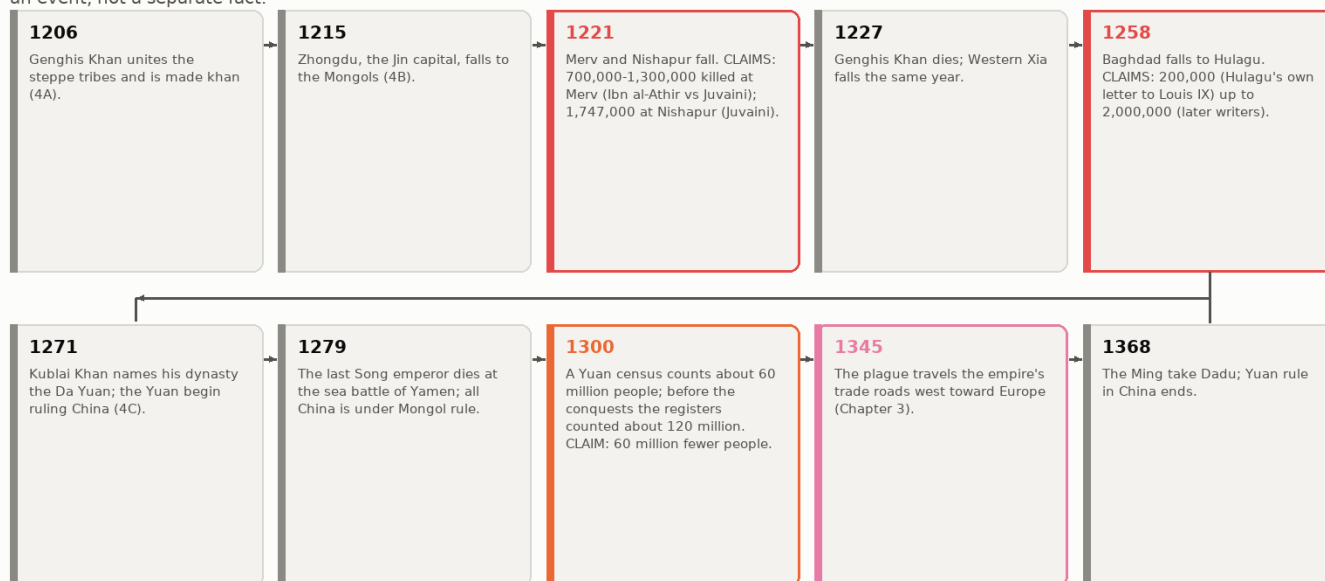


Hub-and-spoke legacy web of Mongol expansion 1206 to c. 1368: five legacy cards around a central hub — destruction and rebuilding (cities burned and were rebuilt, some regions took centuries to recover; interpreted as a wound, deep and slow to heal); connection across Eurasia (guarded roads moved goods, people and knowledge between Europe and China; interpreted as the road that joined two worlds); the spread of plague (the same trade roads carried plague west in the 1340s; interpreted as connection's cost); rule and states (the Yuan in China to 1368, the Golden Horde in Russia, the Ilkhanate in Persia; interpreted as conquest building states that shaped what came next); memory (Genghis Khan honoured as a founder in Mongolia but remembered as a destroyer in many conquered lands; interpreted as where you stand shapes what you see)

The timeline below puts every event and every claim of this section in order, 1206–1368. A claim is part of the story of an event, not a separate fact — so the claims sit on the cards of the events they belong to.

The conquests, and where the claims sit

Ten dated events, 1206-1368, in order (cards not to scale). Claims about death tolls sit with the events they belong to — a claim is part of the story of an event, not a separate fact.



Red- and orange-bordered cards carry the contested claims of this section; each is tested in Parts 3-6.

Timeline of ten dated events 1206-1368 in order, as sequence cards not to scale: 1206 Genghis Khan unites the steppe tribes and is made khan; 1215 Zhongdu, the Jin capital, falls; 1221 Merv and Nishapur fall, carrying the contested claims (700,000-1,300,000 at Merv, 1,747,000 at Nishapur); 1227 Genghis Khan dies and Western Xia falls; 1258 Baghdad falls to Hulagu, carrying the claims from 200,000 (his own letter) up to 2,000,000 (later writers); 1271 Kublai Khan names the Da Yuan dynasty; 1279 the last Song emperor dies at the sea battle of Yamen; 1300 a Yuan census counts about 60 million against about 120 million before the conquests, carrying the 60-million claim; 1345 plague travels the empire's trade roads west toward Europe; 1368 the Ming take Dadu and Yuan rule in China ends; red- and orange-bordered cards carry the contested claims tested in Parts 3-6

Finally, the skills this section feeds. **Sources and their value** (sections 5C and 5D): every figure here is built from sources weighed by origin, content, purpose and limits. **Perspectives** (5E): Juvaini served the Mongols; Ibn al-Athir watched from Mosul; Hulagu wrote to a foreign king. **Interpretations and debates** (5F): Part 7 is a worked example of exactly that skill. **Significance** (6C): choosing which legacies to study is itself a claim about what matters. And **constructing interpretations** (6D): the model responses at the end of this section are what 6D asks you to build.

Check: pick one legacy from the figure. Give one reason it supports a “wound” reading and one reason it supports a “bridge” reading. Which reading do you find better backed — and by what evidence?

Worked examples

Worked example 1 — with help: weighing Juvaini's number (.E05)

Task. Use the five questions of Part 6 to weigh Juvaini's claim that 1,747,000 people were killed at Nishapur.

Scaffold.

- Who says so, and when?** Juvaini: a Persian official in Mongol service, born 1226, writing c. 1252-1260 — near the time, but not an eyewitness.
- Why was it written?** For the Mongol rulers of Persia, to record the deeds of the family he served. Purpose shapes the number.
- What kind of number is it?** 1,747,000 looks like a careful count — but the four cross-checks of Part 4 show no such count could have been made.
- What else backs it up?** Other writers agree the city was destroyed; none can check the figure. The cross-checks point the other way.

Worked response.

Juvaini's claim has two sides. It stands on a strong origin for its time — a Persian official with access to Mongol records and to people who had seen the places, writing about thirty years after the event — and on agreement from other writers that Nishapur was destroyed. It is weak on the other questions: it was written for the very family whose deeds it records; its number looks like a count but fails every cross-check (sixty days to count the heads, a city too small to hold them, an army too small to kill them, a city that lived again); and no other evidence backs the figure itself. So its validity is mixed: high as evidence that the destruction was real and shocking, low as a body count. The number reads best as a way of saying the killing was past measuring.

Worked example 2 — model response: the 60 million in China (.E05)

Task. Using Part 5, write one paragraph discussing the validity of the claim that 60 million people died in China, using both readings of the census gap.

Worked response.

The claim that 60 million people died in China looks strong at first sight, because it sits on two official counts: about 120 million people recorded around 1200 and about 60 million in the Yuan census around 1300. But a gap between counts is not a count of the dead. Reading 1 takes the gap as a toll; Reading 2, following Frederick Mote and Timothy Brook, reads it as a breakdown in records — people who became bond-servants, fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword. The claim therefore has lower validity than its size suggests: a census counts the people the state can see, and when the state breaks, the count breaks with it. That does not make the conquest mild — war, famine and plague killed many millions — but “60 million” names a breakdown in records as much as a graveyard, and the true toll cannot be known from the census gap alone.

Practice questions

Practice with help

Q1. (.E05) Copy and complete each sentence with one key word from Part 1. Word bank: *interpretation, primary source, chronicle, census, exaggeration, legacy*. (a) A source made at the time of the event it covers is a _____. (b) Juvaini's book is a _____. (c) The Yuan count of about 60 million people came from a _____. (d) Saying 1,747,000 were killed in a city that could not hold them is _____. (e) The plague roads of the 1340s are part of the _____ of Mongol expansion. (f) A historian's reading of an event, built from evidence, is an _____.

Q2. (.E05) Match each claim to who makes it. Claims: (a) 200,000 killed at Baghdad (b) 700,000 killed at Merv (c) 1,747,000 killed at Nishapur (d) 40–60 million for the whole conquest (e) about one million at Nishapur. Makers: 1. Ibn al-Athir 2. Hulagu Khan's letter to Louis IX 3. Juvaini 4. many modern books 5. McEvedy and Jones (1978).

Q3. (.E05) Using the timeline figure, put these in order and give each its date: Baghdad falls to Hulagu; Genghis Khan is made khan; the Ming take Dadu; Nishapur falls; a Yuan census counts about 60 million.

Q4. (.E05) The five questions of Part 6: (a) which question tests **origin**? (b) which tests **purpose**? (c) apply “when was it written?” to Juvaini's chronicle and to Hulagu's letter — which is closer to the event?

Q5. (.E05) Match each Nishapur cross-check to what it tests. Cross-checks: (a) counting the heads would take about sixty days (b) one city could not hold 1.7 million people (c) Tolui's army was too small for the killing the number describes (d) Nishapur was a working city again within decades. Tests: 1. space (city size) 2. what came after 3. time 4. the size of the army.

Q6. (.E05) Copy and complete the two readings of the China gap. Reading 1 — the toll: the gap of 60 million means _____. Reading 2 — the records: most of the 60 million did not die; they left the records, because _____ (give the three reasons from Part 5).

Practice on your own

Q7. (.E05) Discuss the validity of the claim that about one million people were killed at Nishapur. Use one primary source and one historians' interpretation from this section.

Q8. (.E05) Discuss the validity of the claim that 60 million people died in China. Use both readings of the census gap, and name one historian for Reading 2.

Q9. (.E05) Two numbers survive for Baghdad: 200,000 (Hulagu's letter, 1258) and 800,000 up to 2,000,000 (later writers, c. 1330s–1340s). Which claim stands on firmer ground? Argue your answer with the five questions of Part 6.

Q10. (.E05) "Mongol expansion destroyed — and it connected." Discuss both readings, and say which legacy you judge to matter most, for whom. Marking rewards the reasoning, not the side chosen.

Source-based inquiry

Q11. (.E05) Read the extract below, then answer the questions that follow.

“When the army took the city, the order was to spare no one, and the heads of the dead were counted at 1,747,000. Not even the cats and dogs were left alive.”

Adapted from Ata-Malik Juvaini, History of the World-Conqueror, written c. 1252–1260; translated by J. A. Boyle (1958). Juvaini (1226–1283) was a Persian official in Mongol service, born five years after Nishapur fell.

Source-analysis card: Juvaini on Nishapur

Four lenses for any source. Use them on the extract in the inquiry task at the end of this section.

THE SOURCE

What

An extract from a chronicle: History of the World-Conqueror

Who

Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226–1283), a Persian official who served the Mongol rulers of Persia

When

Written c. 1252–1260; the event described happened in April 1221

Where

Persia, under Mongol rule

Kind

Secondary to the event (written about 30 years after it), but by a near-contemporary writer with access to Mongol records and people

Origin

Who made it, when, where — and how close were they to the event?

Content

What does it say and claim? What numbers does it give?

Purpose

Why was it written — to record, to please a ruler, to frighten readers?

Limits

What can it not tell us? What is missing, and who is silent in it?

The same four lenses work on any source in this book — a coin, a letter, a chronicle or a census.

Source-analysis card for Juvaini on Nishapur: on the left, the source's identity (an extract from the chronicle History of the World-Conqueror; the writer Ata-Malik Juvaini, 1226–1283, a Persian official who served the Mongol rulers of Persia; written c. 1252–1260 while the event described happened in April 1221; Persia under Mongol rule; secondary to the event but by a near-contemporary writer with access to Mongol records and people); on the right, four lenses — origin (who made it, when, where, and how close were they to the event?), content (what does it say and claim, what numbers does it give?), purpose (why was it written — to record, to please a ruler, to frighten readers?), limits (what can it not tell us, what is missing, and who is silent in it?)

- Origin.** Who produced this source, and how close was he to the event in time and place? (2 marks)
- Content.** Give two details of what the extract claims. (2 marks)
- Infer.** What can you infer about why the number was set down as a precise count? (2 marks)
- Validity and limits.** Give one reason the source is strong evidence and one reason it is limited, using the lenses of the analysis card. (2 marks)

Answers

Q1. (a) primary source (b) chronicle (c) census (d) exaggeration (e) legacy (f) interpretation.

Q2. (a)–2 (b)–1 (c)–3 (d)–5 (e)–4.

Q3. Genghis Khan is made khan (1206) → Nishapur falls (1221) → Baghdad falls to Hulagu (1258) → a Yuan census counts about 60 million (c. 1300) → the Ming take Dadu (1368).

Q4. (a) “Who says so?” (b) “Why was it written?” (c) Hulagu’s letter — written in 1258, the year of the event; Juvaini wrote c. 1252–1260, about thirty years after Nishapur fell.

Q5. (a)–3 (b)–1 (c)–4 (d)–2.

Q6. Reading 1: ...means about 60 million people were killed by the conquest. Reading 2: ...because the counting system broke down (Mote), people who became bond-servants dropped off the census (Brook), and others fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword.

Q7. See model response — weigh Juvaini’s figure: strong origin for its time, but written for the Mongol rulers, not an eyewitness, and failing the cross-checks; modern historians read it as “a way of saying the killing was huge”, and modern books’ “about one million” is still a claim the evidence cannot check.

Q8. See model response — the claim sits on a gap between two counts, not a count of the dead; Reading 2 (Mote: breakdown in the counting system; Brook: people dropped off the census) lowers its validity; war, famine and plague still killed many millions.

Q9. See model response — the letter is from the year itself but is the conqueror’s own account with a purpose; the later writers are further away and their numbers grow; so the letter stands on firmer ground as evidence, and both fail question 5 (nothing else can back either number up).

Q10. See model response — both readings with evidence (destruction: Merv, Nishapur, Baghdad, the tolls; connection: one family’s rule, goods and knowledge moving, the journeys of 4B), then a reasoned choice of which legacy matters most, for whom.

Q11. (a) Ata-Malik Juvaini, a Persian official in Mongol service; born 1226, five years after the event; written c. 1252–1260, about thirty years after, in Persia under Mongol rule. (b) Any two: the order was to spare no one; the dead were counted at 1,747,000; not even cats and dogs were left alive. (c) A precise-looking number makes the killing sound measured and total — a way of saying no one was spared and nothing was forgotten, and perhaps of honouring the fear the Mongol rulers wanted to carry to the next city. (d) Strong: a near-contemporary writer with access to Mongol records and people, agreeing with other writers that the city was destroyed. Limited: not an eyewitness, writing for the family whose deeds he records, and his number fails the cross-checks of Part 4 — so it is strong evidence of shock and destruction, weak evidence of a count.

Model responses

Q7. The claim that about one million people were killed at Nishapur has low validity as a count, though it rests on a real event. The primary source for the figure is Juvaini, a Persian official in Mongol service, writing c. 1252–1260 — near the time, with access to Mongol records, but not an eyewitness, and writing for the very family whose deeds he records. His precise figure, 1,747,000, fails the cross-checks: sixty days to count the heads, a city too small to hold them, an army too small to kill them, a city that lived again. Historians’ interpretations therefore read the number in another way: modern historians take it as a way of saying the killing was huge, not a count anyone could have made, and many modern books round it to “about one million” — the number named in E05. That rounding is still a vast claim the evidence cannot check. So the claim is strong evidence that Nishapur was destroyed and shocked the writers of the time, and weak evidence of how many people died.

Q8. The claim that 60 million people died in China sits on two official counts — about 120 million recorded around 1200 and about 60 million in the Yuan census around 1300 — and its validity depends on which reading of the gap is used. Reading 1 takes the gap as a toll: the conquest killed about 60 million. Reading 2 takes the gap as a breakdown in records: Frederick Mote points to a counting system that broke down under conquest, and Timothy Brook notes

people who became bond-servants dropped off the census, while others fled the count, moved south without papers, or died of famine and plague rather than the sword. On Reading 2 the claim has low validity as a death toll, because a census counts the people the state can see, and when the state breaks, the count breaks with it. The truth sits between: war, famine and plague killed many millions in China, but “60 million” names a breakdown in records as much as a graveyard, so the claim is valid as a picture of collapse and not valid as a body count.

Q9. The letter stands on firmer ground, though neither number can be proved. Ask the five questions. Who and when: Hulagu’s letter was written in 1258, the year of the siege, by the man with the best access; the higher numbers come from writers such as Mustawfi, two or three generations later. Why: the letter is the conqueror’s own account to a foreign king, with a purpose — to sound mighty, or merciful — while the later writers wrote for Muslim readers mourning a destroyed city. What kind of number: 200,000 looks like an estimate from the year; 800,000 and 2,000,000 are big round numbers that grow with every telling. What else backs it up: nothing independent can back either number, so both fail the last question. The letter is therefore the firmer claim — earlier, smaller, and closer to the event — but the honest answer is that the true toll of Baghdad cannot be picked from the sources, and the pattern (numbers growing as they travel) is itself the evidence.

Q10. Both readings are backed, and they are backed by different columns of the same story. Expansion destroyed: Merv and Nishapur were burned and emptied in 1221, Baghdad fell in 1258, and even allowing for exaggeration the damage was real — in parts of Persia the counted population fell from about 2.5 million to about 250,000, and some regions took centuries to repair. And it connected: one family’s rule joined Europe and Asia, guarded roads moved silk, silver, paper money and printing, and people such as Marco Polo and Rabban Bar Sauma crossed the empire in both directions. Which legacy matters most? For the people who lived through 1221 and 1258, the wound matters most — a bridge built over burned cities is still a bridge built over burned cities. For the Eurasia that came after, the connection matters most — and it carried a price too, because the same roads carried plague west in the 1340s. I judge the destruction the heavier legacy for the people of the time and the connection the heavier legacy for the long run — and the symmetry of the questions matters more than the side chosen: each reading must face the same validity tests about its own figures.

Q11. (*model for part d*) The source is strong because Juvaini is a near-contemporary with real access: a Persian official in Mongol service who travelled with the armies and could ask people and see places, and his picture of a destroyed city agrees with other writers of the time — so the extract is good evidence that Nishapur’s fall shocked the 1200s. It is limited because he was born five years after the event, wrote about thirty years later, and wrote for the very family whose deeds he records — so the precise number serves the story (total killing, total fear) rather than a count anyone could have made, and the cross-checks of Part 4 show what the number cannot be. The extract is therefore strong evidence of destruction and perspective, and weak evidence of a body count.