WHY DID THE MONGOLS CONQUER SO MUCH?

Why did the Mongols pursue such extensive conquests? To answer this question, we have to know something about how Mongolians lived in the 1200s. Because of their geography, Mongols were usually herders and nomads. Why would herding require nomadism? Mongolians had to be able to move frequently in order to find pasture for their animals, primarily sheep, so they needed mobile housing. They made (and still make) felt from wool and use this felt to make the tent-like rounded houses called ger, or yurts by the Russians. Ger can be set up and taken down quickly and packed to be moved.

Nomadic life isn’t easy. For one thing, it requires cooperation that binds people together, since they depend on each other to help them sustain life. At the same time, this kind of climate and terrain will not provide enough food in any one area to support a large population. This encourages the development of small tribal groups, people who can depend on each other but who do not have too large a footprint on the environment, since they will survive best when they are not all together. If a herd gets too large, it will destroy the grassland and not be able to graze in one place.

Also, this climate makes it difficult to accumulate a large enough surplus that you could afford to pay someone else for services. For one thing, you would need to move everything you owned. It was not possible to stockpile any surplus, even if it were possible to accumulate some in a particularly good year. In the conditions of this harsh nomadic life, it was not possible to create a social class of artisans who would manufacture goods. People were needed for herding and moving. And although there was some very limited agriculture, it was not possible for Mongolians to rely on farming for foodstuffs either. What do you think are typical Mongolian foods? [Animal products predominate – meat, milk products. Berries and vegetation that grows wild or with very little cultivation play less of a role in the traditional diet. ]

In ancient Mongolia raiding other tribes or settlements in neighboring areas was an important part of the economy. If military might, necessary both to raid and to protect your own tribe, were such an essential part of your society, how would it affect the culture? One thing that contributed to Mongolian military success was the fact that the men were always ready and available for war.

Raiding wasn’t the only contact they had with settled agricultural society; they also had to trade in order to get many of the goods they needed. Since they didn’t farm much, they needed to trade or raid for some foodstuffs as well as for manufactured goods. Two things happened in the early 1200s to make both nomadism and trading more difficult. One was that the temperature of the steppe declined a little, not enough to threaten human life directly, but enough to affect the fragile balance of the environment and reduce the length of time during the year that grass grew. With less grass, herders had to move. In addition, the neighboring Chinese decided to cut off trade with the Mongols. This trade was not important to the Chinese, but it provided essential goods for the Mongols.

The other singular development in Mongolia in the early 13th century was the rise of a man called Temujin. He introduced the momentous political innovation of uniting all the Mongolian tribes under his leadership. Previously they had been scattered into separate tribes, a logical political system since the ecosystem would not sustain a large group gathered together, and they had frequent warfare among themselves. But in 1206, after years of preparation, Temujin was named the Great Khan, or ruler over all the tribes at a meeting of tribal elders. He claimed to have blessed ancestry and took the name of Genghis Khan or Ruler of the Universe. His line was established as supreme and having the inherent right to rule. This political development influenced societies in many different areas for hundreds of years.

Genghis Khan took control in a period of economic and political crisis for the Mongolians. Not only was climate change pushing them to move away from their usual areas in search of better pasture. In addition, the northern Chinese ruling dynasty had cut trade with the Mongols. The Chinese did not need Mongolian products – but the Mongols needed to obtain things from the Chinese. In this unequal relationship the Mongolians were vulnerable. Forced by climate to search for better pastures, cut off by their usual trade partners, Mongolians faced severe challenges to their lifestyles and even their lives. These were the conditions when Genghis Khan took control over a mobile, dedicated and militarily adept population. The stage was set for the Mongolians to sweep south, east and west throughout Asia and into Europe, conquering as they went.

**Discussion Questions:**

• **Why** did the Mongols take over other lands?

* How did being **nomadic** influence their decision to take over other lands?
* How did the **climate** influence their decision to take over other lands?
* How did their **relationship with China** influence their decision to take over other lands?
* How did the **change in leadership** influence their decision to take over other lands?