

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Tamerlane moved like a whirlwind through Eurasia and left a name familiar throughout the world. The record of his campaigns is long and vivid. From 1382 to 1405 his great armies criss-crossed Eurasia from Delhi to Moscow, from the T'ien Shan Mountains of Central Asia to the Taurus Mountains in Anatolia, conquering and reconquering, razing some cities, sparing others. His activity was relentless and unending. Throughout his life he kept his armies on the move – sometimes together, sometimes divided and dispersed throughout the countryside, but almost never at rest or at home. His fame spread quickly to Europe, where he remained for centuries a figure of romance and horror, while for those more intimately involved in his career his memory still remains green – whether as the destroyer of Middle Eastern cities, or as the last great representative of nomad power.

Tamerlane is more correctly called by his Turkic name, Temür; the western version of his name comes from the Persian *Timūr-i lang*, Temür the lame. He was born in Transoxiana near Samarqand probably in the 1320s or 1330s.¹ Transoxiana had been part of the Chaghadayid khanate, the region of Chinggis Khan's second son Chaghadai, and the Barlas tribe to which Temür belonged was descended from the Mongol Barulas tribe of Chinggis Khan's confederation. The Barlas and the other tribes of Transoxiana had remained nomadic but lived in close contact with the settled population, and through the adoption of Islam had come to participate in its culture.

Temür's career belongs to the history both of the Middle East and of the steppe and marks an important watershed in each. On the one hand Temür represents the culmination of an old tradition – he is the last of the great nomad conquerors. He rose to power within a nomad confederation and the members of this confederation formed the backbone of his army throughout his career. However, Temür's conquests were in one crucial sense different from those of Chinggis Khan and most other earlier nomad conquerors; the world he conquered was not an alien one, but a known entity, almost all of which had been previously ruled by Mongols. Temür moreover aspired to rule not over the steppe, but over the sown. He made no effort to secure his gains in Zungaria or the territory of the Golden Horde, but in his Middle

2 The rise and rule of Tamerlane

Eastern territories – Iran, Khorezm, Afghanistan – he established governorships and permanent garrisons. Other great steppe conquerors had also arisen in the borderlands between steppe and sown, but most consolidated their hold first over the steppe. Temür on the other hand overran the steppe but never aspired to rule it.

Within the Middle East Temür's conquests in the eastern Islamic world coincided approximately with the Ottoman conquest of its western regions, and represent a similar phenomenon. These were Turkic conquests from within, by tribal groups who were able to manipulate both steppe and Islamic traditions and institutions. They could constitute themselves as a separate ruling stratum over the subject population but they had sufficient knowledge of local traditions to rule directly and to participate from the start in Islamic culture. It is from this time that the Turkic people and the traditions of the steppe became truly indigenous to the Middle East.

Despite the extent of Temür's conquests, the realm which he left to his successors was neither enormous nor secure. His death brought a bitter succession struggle among his sons and grandsons which emptied the royal treasury and reduced the extent of the Timurid realm. Yet the ambiguities of his legacy did not dim the glory of Temür's achievement. What the Timurid dynasty lacked in power it made up for in cultural prestige, and its rulers actively cultivated the charisma of their ancestor as an integral part of their own legitimacy. Temür's successors ruled within the Islamic tradition, but continued to glorify their Turco-Mongolian culture, using its titles, its political institutions and its emphasis on dynastic charisma for their own purposes. In this mixed culture of Islamic and Turco-Mongolian origins, the figure of Temür retained a central place, along with that of Chinggis Khan. Temür now became a legendary figure, equipped with an elaborate and partly supernatural genealogy.

Temür's myth proved highly useful to the Turkic dynasties which followed the Timurids in the Middle East and Central Asia, and it continued to flourish in the eastern Islamic world into the nineteenth century. Temür's conquest marked the completion of the period of nomad conquest in the Middle East. While the Seljukid and Mongol sultans had ruled as outsiders Temür's successors ruled as indigenous leaders, and under their rule the mixed Turco-Mongolian culture from which they sprang became entrenched in the Islamic world as part of a mature cultural complex. The great empires of the early modern era – the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals – owed much of their success to this new synthesis.

The Turco-Mongolian heritage

Both the tribal confederation within which Temür rose to power and the world he conquered were the products of the Mongol Empire; Mongol history and traditions defined his goals, his methods and his ideology. By the

Cambridge University Press
0521633842 - The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane
Beatrice Forbes Manz
Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 3

middle of the fourteenth century the Mongol empire had fallen apart but much of Eurasia still bore its imprint. Despite the decline of the Chinggisid dynasty, the steppe nomads they had led retained much of their power and prestige. They held the balance of power not only in the steppe but also in many of the surrounding areas of the Middle East and the Russian lands. These nomads preserved the Mongolian heritage of their ancestors in a new guise suitable to the rule of settled people, with whom most were now intimately involved.

As the Mongol rulers had adapted to the needs of the individual regions they ruled, they had not abandoned their nomad heritage, but had created a new culture combining steppe principles with strong elements of the heritage of their subject populations – both the Turkic nomads of the western steppe, and the settled peoples of their agricultural regions. The spoken language of this new culture was Turkic, its religion Islam and its political legitimation Mongolian. The Turco-Mongolian tradition became predominant throughout all the western Mongol domains from Central Asia to Russia, with only Mongolia and China remaining apart. In most of the lands it affected the Turco-Mongolian heritage was not the only cultural system. It coexisted with Persian culture in the Middle East and with Russian culture in Russia and the Ukraine, but it affected all aspects of political and military life throughout the large area of its influence.

The Turco-Mongolian heritage owed much of its success to the strength and adaptiveness of steppe traditions developed over centuries of contact with settled cultures. This tradition had its origins in the pre-Mongol period, and achieved its classic formulation during the rule of Chinggis Khan (1206–27). Chinggis Khan's career brought profound and lasting changes to the steppes of Eurasia. What determined his importance in the history of the steppe and its surrounding regions was not so much his military prowess as his great administrative ability and his astute use of steppe traditions. Chinggis began the organization of his realm well before he won it, while he was still struggling to gain control over his own tribe, so that by the time he had attained power he had a governmental system already tested and refined. Although he was in contact with the Chin dynasty of Northern China early in his career, he chose to base his administration on nomad customs and this gave him and his successors independence from the institutions of the settled societies they conquered. Their empire therefore had a central organizational tradition which could withstand its conquest of settled lands and even its own political breakdown.²

The administration which Chinggis developed became the model for the government of nomad states down to the nineteenth century. Its original basis was his personal following: the band of people whom he had gathered around himself during his rise to power, and whose loyalty attached to him personally. From these people he chose his household officers – his cook, his falconer, his stablemaster – whose positions soon expanded to become part

4 The rise and rule of Tamerlane

of an institutionalized tradition of court administration. Chinggis adopted the decimal military organization common in the steppe, using it to break up the tribal structure of his nomadic subjects, and placing his personal followers at the head of many of the larger units. For his chancellery he adopted the script used by the settled Uighur Turks of the Turfan basin.

With the rapid acquisition of new regions after 1209 Chinggis had to control an ever growing dominion of varied population from Turkic and Mongolian nomads to the settled populations of Iran and northern China. To do this he developed a system which moved individuals and populations thousands of miles from their place of origin, settling Persians in China and nomads deep in settled territories. In the cities of his conquered regions he stationed military governors, mostly of Inner Asian provenance, with Mongol militias. To further secure unity and control within his realm he garrisoned the settled regions with separate elite units (*tamma*) drawn usually from a number of different tribes and areas and representing the whole of his army. At the same time, Chinggis made use of the expertise of Chinese and Iranian bureaucrats in the administration of his realm; a few of these men rose to positions of great power over regions far from their native lands and wielded influence in the central administration. In this way he began the opening of horizons and the mixing of sedentary and nomad populations which wrought a profound change in the social structure of Eurasia during the Mongol period.

Chinggis divided his steppe empire into four great territories, later known as the four *uluses*, which he assigned to his sons along with sections of his army. The descendants of his eldest son Jochi received the western portion of the empire, "as far as Mongol hoofs had beaten the ground," his second son Chaghadai received the steppe portion of Transoxiana with the territories north of the Pamir and T'ien Shan mountains, and his third son, Ögödei, received the territory east of Lake Balkhash (Zungaria). In agreement with Mongol traditions the youngest son, Tolui, received the original center of Chinggis Khan's power in Mongolia, along with Chinggis's personal thousand and the greatest part of his army. These four *uluses* remained at the base of Mongol organization and politics throughout the centuries of Mongolian influence and rule.

Although Chinggis Khan was extraordinary for both his military and his administrative abilities, his career of conquest was not unique. What was exceptional was his ability to pass on his power undiminished to his successors, who raised the nomads of the Eurasian steppe to a position of unprecedented power. After Chinggis Khan's death in 1227 his appointed successor Ögödei became the Great Khan of the Mongol empire. Under him and the next two Khans, Güyüg and Möngke, the Mongol empire retained its basic unity and continued to expand to become the largest empire ever known, comprising the Eurasian steppe from Russia to Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan, China, and Korea.

It is this period, from 1227 to 1260, which gave to the Chinggisid dynasty its unique charisma as the rulers of most of the known world. It also established the basis for a common political culture throughout the Eurasian steppe and neighbouring settled lands. Among Turco-Mongolian populations from the Crimea to Mongolia the Chinggisid tradition survived as long as nomads held power. Through the nineteenth century the supreme titles of rule in the steppe, “khan” and “khaqan,” were reserved for those who claimed descent from Chinggis Khan, and the cult of Chinggis has lasted even into this century.

Despite the existence of separate *uluses* and constant quarrels within the dynasty the great khans were able to maintain considerable unity of administration. Reforms instituted by Ögödei and Möngke imposed a fairly standard and regular administration within the conquered territories – China, Russia, Turkestan and Iran – with similar systems of taxation, military support and local government.³ The empire was further linked through its famous postal system, the *yam* (Mongolian, *jam*), and subject both to universal censuses and conscription, and to the ideology of the Mongol law, the *yasa* (Mongolian, *jasagh*).⁴ Even the steppe traditions which worked against strong central rule could be manipulated at this period to enhance the unity of the empire. The settled regions of the empire had remained the joint property of the members of the Chinggisid dynasty. In these areas – Iran, Transoxiana and China – the early khans developed what have been called “satellite administrations.” These were governments containing agents representing the princes of the four main *uluses* as well as the Great Khan.⁵ This system did much to create a common system and common experience in widely different parts of the empire.

The khans further strengthened joint interests in conquered territories through their choice of the troops sent to conquer and to garrison them, drawn from all the *uluses* of the empire and led by princes chosen from several dynastic lines.⁶ The system of joint conquest and administration provided a common population and system for the whole of the empire. The same offices and institutions were found throughout the Mongol dominions and different territories also contained members of the same tribes and adherents of the same dynastic and political factions.

With the death of Möngke Khan in 1259 the unity of the Mongol empire collapsed. The primary cause of the breakdown was a protracted succession struggle between two of Möngke’s brothers, Arigh Böke, based in the steppe, and Qubilai, who based his power on his possession of northern China. Qubilai won this contest largely because of his superior resources, but he was unable to win recognition from the heads of all the other Mongol *uluses*, and ruled only over part of Mongolia and over China, where he founded a new dynasty, the Yüan. He and his successors still claimed the title of Great Khan but only the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty of Iran recognized their claim.

6 The rise and rule of Tamerlane

Qubilai's reign began a new era in the history of the Mongol empire, which had lost not only its unity but also its center of gravity. The peripheral areas, supported by income from their agricultural and urban populations, now emerged as the crucial centers of power. By 1309 the center of the Mongol empire had become the property of the Mongol khanates which ringed it. Most was controlled by the Yüan khans of China and part went to the Chaghadayid khanate which controlled eastern and western Turkestan. Iran was now an independent region under the descendants of Qubilai's brother Hülegü, who bore the title Ilkhan. The western part of the Mongol empire, the Golden Horde, had long been almost independent under the powerful descendants of Jochi. These Mongol dynasties were not only separate; they were most usually at war with one another.

The breakup of the Mongol empire did not bring an immediate decline. The Mongol khanates continued to increase their holdings and to improve the control and exploitation of the regions they held. Chinggis Khan's descendants still monopolized power throughout much of Eurasia and imposed their own political and military traditions over their dominions. Nor did the political dissolution of the empire destroy its cultural unity. Despite the enmity among the Mongol khanates the different regions of the empire continued to share much common experience. The *uluses* within the Mongol empire now began to adapt themselves to local conditions and to the populations they ruled. Many scholars have seen this process as the end of a common Mongol experience, but a closer look shows strong similarities in the process of adaptation in different areas; the changes during this period occurred at much the same time in different areas and often took very similar forms.

In adapting its rule to settled ways the Mongol ruling class retained its own traditions while adding the elements of foreign culture it could best assimilate. This process marks the creation of a new heritage, often called Turco-Mongolian, which combined the two great steppe cultures. One can date the beginning of the Turco-Mongolian age approximately from the early fourteenth century; this was the age when the Mongol rulers began to deal directly with their settled subjects while these subjects on their side began to accept some of the traditions of the Turco-Mongolian elite who ruled over them.

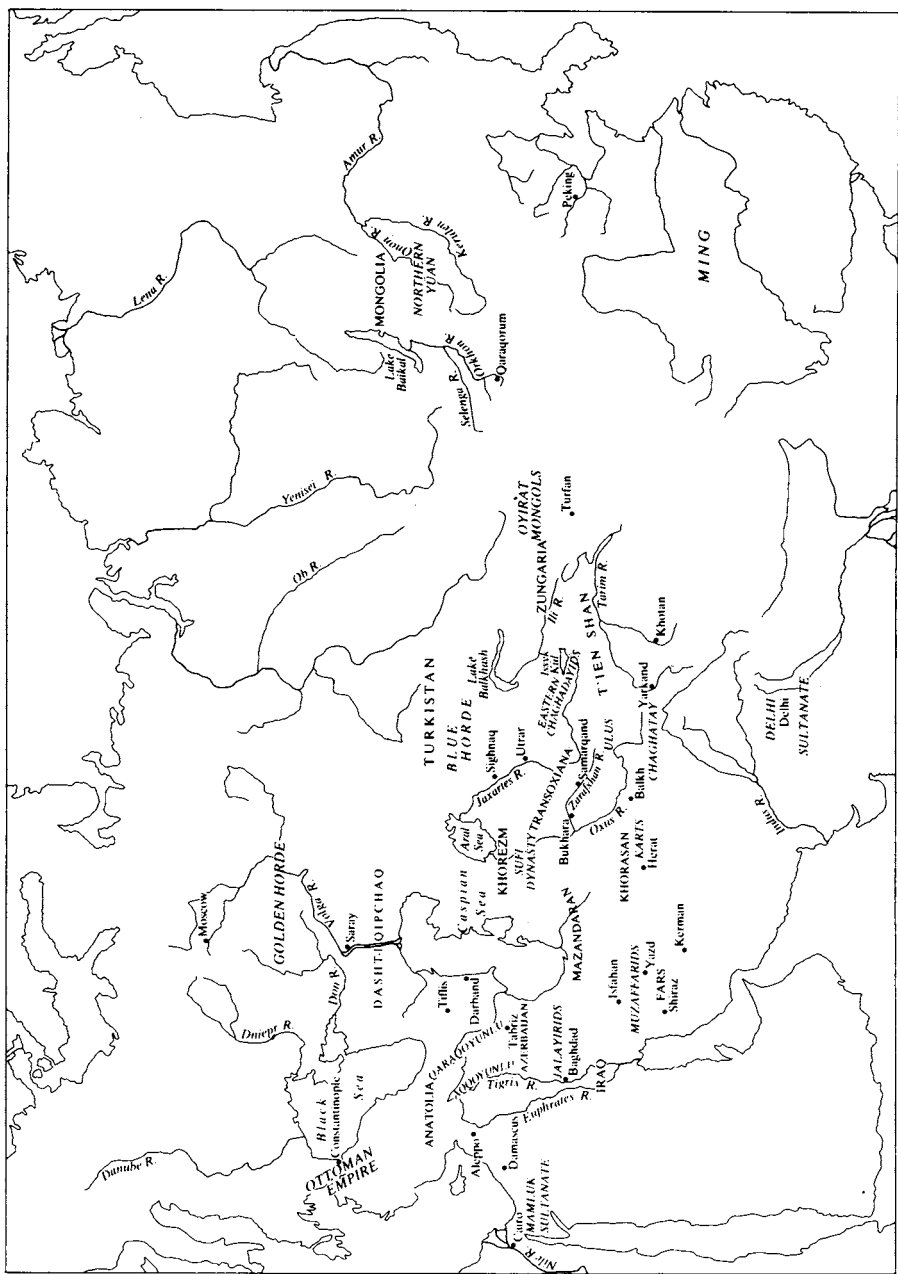
The first of the changes leading to the formation of the Turco-Mongolian tradition was the formal conversion of the shamanistic Mongols to the faiths of their new subjects. The first official Mongol conversion was to Buddhism; in 1253 Qubilai Khan became closely associated with the Tibetan 'Phags-pa Lama and when he took the title of Great Khan in 1260, he gave great power and honour to the Buddhist church. This was a formal and political conversion limited probably to the members of the dynasty, for whom it proved highly useful.⁷ The official institution of Islam in the western Mongolian

khanates began later, at the very end of the century, and had much more lasting consequences. In 1295 the Ilkhan Ghazan made a public confession of Islam and decreed the destruction of the churches, synagogues and Buddhist temples constructed by his infidel predecessors. His actions were imitated later by Özbek Khan of the Golden Horde (1312–41), then in the Chaghadayid khanate, within the western section under Tarmashirin Khan (1326–34) and within the eastern section a generation later, under the khan Tughluq Temür (1347–63).⁸

Another process occurring at the same time in the western part of the Mongol empire was the gradual replacement of Mongolian by Turkic as the spoken language of the ruling class. Unlike the official conversion to Islam, which was a public and political act, the Mongols' adoption of Turkic is hard to trace and date, and it is the subject of some controversy among scholars. The written evidence is particularly hard to evaluate because Mongolian retained its prestige for several centuries as the language of the Great Khans, and Mongolian scribes were maintained in chancelleries long after Mongolian had probably ceased to be a common spoken language.⁹ In the Golden Horde, where much of the conquered population was Turkic, the adoption of Turkic apparently began very early. There is evidence that by the late thirteenth century its rulers knew and used Turkic and in the early fourteenth century Turkic titles had begun to replace Mongolian ones, although the formal language of administration may still have been Mongolian.¹⁰ At this time the Mongol rulers of several other khanates also spoke primarily Turkic; this is the language in which their utterances are recorded by the travelers and scholars who visited them.¹¹

By the fourteenth century then the ruling class throughout the Mongol empire had begun to assimilate itself to the population of its conquered territories, adopting the religions of its settled subjects¹² and the language of its nomadic ones. In the sphere of government on the other hand Mongolian prestige remained paramount and the Chinggisid order retained its overwhelming prestige. Both the written language developed under Chinggis and the offices which he established continued in use throughout the Mongol dominions. The same Turco-Mongolian titles – *beg*, *bahadur*, *noyan* – the same administrative and military terminology – *tümen*, *qoshun* – and the same offices of *darugha*, *yarghuchi* (Mongolian *jarghuchi*), were used throughout the empire. Mongol dynastic law, the *yasa*, likewise continued in force despite the adoption of settled religions with separate legal traditions.

The strength of the common Turco-Mongolian tradition is well illustrated in the reforms instituted by the rulers of different Mongol states during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. These reforms, introduced first in China by Qubilai (1260–94), then in Iran by Ghazan Khan (1295–1304), in the Golden Horde by the khans Toqta (1290–1312) and Özbek



i. Eurasia in 1370.

(1312–41) and in the Chaghadayid khanate by Kebeg (1318–26) had much in common. The similarity and the timing of these reform programs suggest that the Mongol leaders looked as much to each other for models as to the traditions of the regions they ruled.

One of the crucial needs in each emerging Mongol state was a consistent currency accepted throughout the realm. In 1264 Qubilai introduced paper money into Yüan China and fixed the value of the most important products; about thirty years later in 1294 his great-nephew the Ilkhan Geikhatu attempted the same experiment in Iran, with the help of Qubilai's representative in Tabriz, Bolad Ch'eng-hsiang.¹³ Shortly thereafter Geikhatu's successor Ghazan introduced a more successful currency reform together with a major revision and systematization of the tax structure. Similar currency reforms were introduced in Transoxiana first in the 1270s then more fully under Kebeg Khan, and later in the Golden Horde by Toqta Khan.¹⁴

Other reforms enacted in this period further illustrate the importance of Mongolian tradition. The systematization of regional administration undertaken by Kebeg and Özbek Khan was designed according to steppe models. Kebeg reorganized and systematized the *tümens* of the Chaghadayid realms; these were at once administrative and military entities based on the nomad decimal system. Özbek developed hereditary regional governorships throughout the Golden Horde with bureaucracies containing both Islamic and Turco-Mongolian offices.¹⁵

The military reforms which Ghazan instituted in Iran, giving hereditary land grants to the commanders in his army for the support of his troops, are usually compared to the earlier Middle Eastern tradition of the *iqṭāʿ*, but they are even more similar to the system of military colonies which the Mongols had developed in China. They could well have been inspired by the Chinese system, as we know that Ghazan's minister, Rashīd al-Dīn, was closely associated with Qubilai's official Bolad, whose influence on currency reforms I have mentioned above.¹⁶ It seems likely that the Chaghadayid khanate had a similar system, as I shall discuss later in this work.¹⁷

The khans of the Mongol successor states then, while they regularized their governments to improve the administration of their subject populations, used very similar models in their different areas. The Mongols had adapted to the cultures they ruled; they had converted to major religions and become adept at ruling over settled populations, they had intermarried with many of their nomadic subjects and had adopted their spoken language. In doing so they had not lost the Mongol heritage but replaced it with a similar Turco-Mongolian tradition, containing elements of the subject cultures they ruled over and fitted to the needs of a more evolved and sophisticated society in which nomad and settled lived closely together. This new culture held sway throughout the western regions of the former Mongol empire, from eastern Turkestan to Hungary.

The Turco-Mongolian world at Temür's time

By 1360 when Temür began his career, the Mongol khanates had become fragmented and large areas – Iran, Transoxiana and after 1368 also China – were no longer ruled by descendants of Chinggis Khan. The Mongol empire as such had ceased to exist. Only in the northern steppe territories did Chinggisid khans vie with each other for control over diminished realms.

Despite the collapse of the empire, the nomads retained power and prestige even in the lands now lost to the Chinggisid dynasty, and in many cases it was Turco-Mongolian tribes who assumed power in the place of Mongol khans. Instead of a royal dynasty and a small foreign ruling class, governing through intermediaries over a strange population, the western regions of the Mongol empire now had a relatively homogeneous population of Turkic nomads controlling a population whose languages and ways they had come to know.

A hundred and fifty years of Mongol and Turco-Mongolian rule had blurred the differences between nomad rulers and settled subjects, and had softened the boundary between the steppe and the settled regions which surrounded it. They remained separate in character and in consciousness, but they were now closely in contact, sharing common traditions and experience and acutely aware of each other's activities. The Mongol empire had left behind itself a fractured world, but a single one. It was this world which produced Temür, and which he set out to conquer. Despite the enormous extent of his campaigns Temür passed out of the territory of the Mongol empire only briefly, in his campaigns into Syria, Anatolia and India, and even these territories were ruled by Turkic dynasties, connected to an earlier steppe tradition.

Just as the whole of the Mongol empire was bound together by common traditions, the regions within it, though ruled by innumerable dynasties, remained connected through complex political ties and struggles. The easternmost regions of the former Mongol realm were the most separate and distinct. Here most of the Mongols had abandoned their settled territories. China was ruled by a dynasty of settled origins – the Ming – while the Mongols in the steppe regions raided, traded and bargained with the Chinese in much the same way they had always done. The Mongols of Mongolia and Zungaria, north of the T'ien Shan, had remained eastern in their outlook; most had remained unconverted and they retained the Mongolian language. This region was not totally separated from the Islamic and Turco-Mongolian sections of Eurasia. The Ming dynasty had a wide world view and an aggressive interest in the western regions. It maintained diplomatic relations with the Chaghadayid realm, and kept its eye on the silk road through the Tarim River basin, a region officially under the rule of the Chaghadayids and of great interest also to the Oyirat Mongols in Zungaria, north of the T'ien Shan mountains.