

CHAPTER 3

Nomadic Empires

CBSE Class 11 · History (Themes in World History) · Chapter 3 · The Mongols

CBSE · History · Class 11

WHAT THIS CHAPTER DOES

A

Describe the steppe nomads' way of life and why they depended on settled societies.

B

Trace the rise of Temujin to Chinggis Khan and explain his decimal military organisation.

Boards prep that builds confidence, not anxiety.

TODAY'S MISSION

Today's mission

- 1 Describe the steppe nomads' way of life and why they depended on settled societies.
- 2 Trace the rise of Temujin to Chinggis Khan and explain his decimal military organisation.
- 3 Explain how the empire was administered — the yam, the Yasa and borrowed scribes.
- 4 Account for the Mongols after Chinggis Khan and read the sources critically to score 7/8 marks.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Why this chapter matters

- 1 6-8 marks every term paper — and a striking contrast to the settled empires of Rome and Mesopotamia.
- 2 It shows that a NOMADIC people, through sheer organisation, could build the largest contiguous land empire ever — from the Pacific to the Caspian.
- 3 Real-world bridge: the chapter teaches how to read HOSTILE sources critically and how the image of a historical figure (Chinggis Khan) can shift over centuries.

TOPIC

A

The world of the steppe nomads

TOPIC

Who the nomads were and how they lived

THE PASTORAL NOMADS OF THE STEPPE

The Mongols came from the STEPPE — the vast belt of grassland stretching across Central Asia, including modern Mongolia. They were PASTORAL NOMADS: their wealth and livelihood lay in herds of horses, sheep, goats and cattle, which they grazed by moving seasonally

CLANS, TRIBES AND LEADERS

Steppe society was organised into CLANS and TRIBES bound by kinship, each led by chiefs whose authority depended on success in war, the hunt and the protection of their people. There was no centralised state and little fixed property; status came from herds,

WHY NOMADS NEEDED SETTLED SOCIETIES

Pastoral nomads were never fully self-sufficient. Their herds gave them meat, milk, hides and wool, but they could not grow GRAIN or make METAL tools, weapons, fine cloth and many luxuries. For these they depended on the farming and urban societies that bordered the steppe. So

TRADE, RAID AND THE BOND WITH THE SETTLED WORLD

The relationship between nomad and farmer/city was therefore one of INTERDEPENDENCE that swung between peaceful exchange and violent raid. Settled societies prized the steppe's horses and animal products; nomads prized the settled world's grain, weapons and crafts

TRY IT · SOLVE BEFORE YOU PEEK

Quick check before we move on

Work it out before you flip the answer.

SOLUTION

TOPIC

B

The rise of Temujin to Chinggis Khan

WORKED EXAMPLE

From Temujin to Chinggis Khan

1

BIRTH AND HARDSHIP:
the future conqueror was born as TEMUJIN into a Mongol clan. His early life was hard — his father was killed and his family was cast out and impoverished — so his rise owed everything to his own skill, alliances and ruthlessness, not to inherited power.

2

BUILDING ALLIANCES:
Temujin slowly gathered followers and built

TOPIC

C

Chinggis Khan's military organisation

TOPIC

Breaking the tribes, building one army

THE PROBLEM OF A DIVIDED STEPPE

Before Chinggis Khan, the great weakness of the steppe peoples was **DISUNITY**: the clans and tribes feuded endlessly, and a man's first loyalty was to his clan chief, not to any larger ruler. Such a society could raid but could not sustain a great empire, because its loyalties pulled in many

THE DECIMAL ORGANISATION

Chinggis Khan reorganised the entire fighting population into a **DECIMAL** system: units of 10, then 100, then 1,000, and the largest unit of 10,000 known as a **TUMEN**. Every able-bodied man belonged to such a unit under a commander, in a clear chain of command

MIXING THE TRIBES — THE REAL GENIUS

The truly important point is that within these decimal units Chinggis Khan deliberately **MIXED** men from **DIFFERENT** tribes and clans together. A unit of a thousand might contain men from several old tribes, so that no unit was simply one tribe under its old chief. As a result a soldier's

DISCIPLINE, MERIT AND MOBILITY

The new army was bound by harsh **DISCIPLINE** and absolute obedience, and commanders rose by **MERIT** and loyalty rather than birth. Its core were mounted **HORSE-ARCHERS**, fast and far-ranging, able to cover great distances, feign retreat and strike with

TOPIC

D

Conquest and the building of the empire

TOPIC

Campaigns and the administration of empire

THE GREAT CAMPAIGNS

With his united army Chinggis Khan launched devastating campaigns. In the east he attacked the JIN (Chin) rulers of northern CHINA, beginning the long Mongol involvement in Chinese affairs. In the west he turned on the wealthy KHWARAZM (Khwarizm) empire of Central Asia and Iran

THE YAM — COMMUNICATION

To govern so vast an empire the Mongols needed fast COMMUNICATION, and they built the YAM, a courier-relay system. Relay stations were set up at intervals along the roads, each kept supplied with fresh horses, food and shelter. A royal messenger could ride

THE YASA AND BORROWED SCRIBES

The empire was governed under the YASA, the code of regulations and customary law associated with Chinggis Khan, which set down rules for the army, the hunt, discipline and conduct and bound the many peoples to the Khan's authority. Because

TRADE, THE SILK ROUTE AND TOLERANCE

Conquest was not the whole story. By unifying a huge area under one authority and policing the roads, the Mongols made the SILK ROUTE and other trade routes SAFE, actively encouraging merchants, craftsmen and travellers to cross Eurasia. Goods, technologies (such as

TRY IT · SOLVE BEFORE YOU PEEK

Quick check — army and administration

Work it out before you flip the answer.

SOLUTION

TOPIC

E

The Mongols after Chinggis Khan, and the sources

TOPIC

Successors, the uluses, and how we know

DIVISION INTO ULUSES

On Chinggis Khan's death in 1227 the empire was divided among his SONS, each receiving a share of territory and people called an ULUS (a patrimony). The empire thereafter functioned less as one centralised state than as a CONFEDERATION of these related Mongol uluses, which over time

KUBILAI KHAN AND YUAN CHINA

The most famous of the later rulers was Chinggis Khan's grandson KUBILAI (Khubilai) KHAN, who completed the conquest of China and founded the YUAN dynasty, ruling from a magnificent court that drew travellers and merchants from across the known world. Under such rulers the Mongols

THE SOURCES — MOSTLY OUTSIDERS

Most of our written evidence about the Mongols comes from OUTSIDERS, especially PERSIAN chronicles such as those of JUWAINI and RASHIDUDDIN (Rashid al-Din) and Chinese records — often written by the very peoples the Mongols had conquered, and therefore frequently

SHIFTING VIEWS OF HISTORIANS

Because the evidence is partial and biased, the IMAGE of Chinggis Khan has changed greatly over time. To the settled societies he devastated he was long remembered as a barbaric DESTROYER. Modern scholars (such as the Russian historian Vladimirtsov) re-

TOPIC

F

The legacy of the Mongol empire

TOPIC

What the Mongol empire left behind

THE LARGEST LAND EMPIRE

The first legacy is sheer **SCALE**. At its height the Mongol empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean to the Caspian Sea — the largest contiguous land empire in human history, ruled from the steppe by a people who had begun as scattered herders. That a **NOMADIC** society could conquer and hold

A BRIDGE ACROSS EURASIA

By unifying so much territory and policing the roads, the Mongols turned Eurasia into a single connected space for a time — the so-called Mongol peace. Along the safe **SILK ROUTE** moved not only silk, spices and precious metals but also **TECHNOLOGIES** such as printing and gunpowder,

ADMINISTRATION BORROWED AND BLENDED

The Mongols also left a model of **PRAGMATIC** rule. Lacking their own bureaucracy, they borrowed scribes and administrative methods from the literate Uighurs and from conquered Persians and Chinese, blending steppe institutions like the yam and the Yasa with the

A CONTESTED MEMORY

Finally, the Mongols left a deeply **CONTESTED** memory. To the Persian and Chinese societies they devastated, Chinggis Khan and his armies were long remembered as barbaric destroyers, an image preserved in the very chronicles that record them. Yet in modern **MONGOLIA** he is

TOPIC

What 'nomad' means

TRAP → TRUTH

- × **MISTAKE** Nomads were aimless wanderers with no organisation, who simply roamed about with no purpose or society.
- ✓ **CORRECT** Nomads were NOT aimless wanderers. Steppe pastoral nomads moved in a PLANNED, seasonal pattern with their herds of horses, sheep, goats and cattle between summer and winter pastures. They had a clear social order of CLANS and TRIBES, leaders, customary law and assemblies. Their mobility was an organised economic strategy for using the grassland, not random wandering. Treat them as a structured pastoral society, not a disorganised rabble.

TOPIC

The name of the Mongol founder

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** 'Genghis Khan' was his original birth name from childhood.

✓ **CORRECT** He was BORN as TEMUJIN. 'CHINGGIS KHAN' (the spelling 'Genghis' is a later European form) was a TITLE he took only in 1206, when an assembly (quriltai) of Mongol chiefs acclaimed him as supreme ruler after he had united the tribes. The title is usually understood to mean something like 'universal/oceanic ruler'. So Temujin = the man's name; Chinggis Khan = the title he earned. Examiners reward this distinction.

TOPIC

Why the decimal military units mattered

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Chinggis Khan kept the old tribes together in his army, just letting each tribe fight as one block.

✓ **CORRECT** The OPPOSITE — and this is the key political point. Chinggis Khan DELIBERATELY BROKE UP the old tribes and clans and redistributed the men into new DECIMAL units of 10, 100, 1,000 and 10,000 (the TUMEN). Men from different tribes were mixed together so their first loyalty was to the unit and to the Khan, NOT to the old tribal chief. This destroyed the divisions that had kept the steppe weak and made a single, disciplined, loyal army. Always say the decimal system was a tool to break tribal loyalty.

TOPIC

Whether the Mongols were 'only' destroyers

TRAP → TRUTH

- × **MISTAKE** The Mongols were purely barbaric destroyers who only massacred and burned, and contributed nothing.
- ✓ **CORRECT** Conquest was brutal — cities such as those of Khwarazm were devastated — but this is only HALF the picture. The Mongols also BUILT an administration (the yam courier relay, the Yasa, Uighur scribes), unified a huge area under one peace, and ACTIVELY PROMOTED long-distance trade by making the SILK ROUTE safe; they were religiously TOLERANT and moved craftsmen, ideas and technologies (printing, gunpowder, art) across Eurasia. A balanced answer gives BOTH the destruction AND the integration and trade they fostered.

TOPIC

How the empire was held after Chinggis Khan

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** After Chinggis Khan died the empire stayed one single tightly-ruled state under one ruler.

✓ **CORRECT** Chinggis Khan divided the empire among his SONS into territories called ULUSES (the patrimony/share each son governed). After him the empire was effectively a CONFEDERATION of these uluses, which over time drifted apart and developed separately — for example his grandson KUBILAI (Khubilai) KHAN ruled CHINA (founding the Yuan dynasty) while other branches ruled Iran, Central Asia and the steppe to the north. So the post-1227 empire is a set of related Mongol states, not one centralised kingdom.

TOPIC

Nomads and settled societies

TRAP → TRUTH

- × **MISTAKE** Nomads and settled farming/city societies had nothing to do with each other and were always simply at war.
- ✓ **CORRECT** They were deeply INTERDEPENDENT. Pastoral nomads produced animals, hides, milk and wool but needed the GRAIN, metal goods, weapons, cloth and luxuries that farming and urban societies made. So they regularly TRADED with — and sometimes raided — settled peoples to get these things. The relationship swung between exchange and raid, but the nomads were NEVER self-sufficient; their need for the produce of settled lands is one reason they pressed against and conquered them.

TOPIC

How we know about the Mongols

TRAP → TRUTH

× **MISTAKE** Everything we know about the Mongols comes from neutral Mongol records written by the Mongols themselves.

✓ **CORRECT** Most of our written evidence comes from OUTSIDERS — especially PERSIAN chronicles (such as Juwaini and Rashiduddin/Rashid al-Din) and Chinese records, many written by the very peoples the Mongols had conquered, so they can be HOSTILE or exaggerated. The Mongols' own 'Secret History of the Mongols' survives but is limited. Because the sources have viewpoints, historians must read them critically — and the IMAGE of Chinggis Khan has itself shifted over time, from 'barbaric destroyer' to revered national founder in modern Mongolia.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

8-mark question: 'How did Chinggis Khan organise his army and his people into a fighting

1 THE STARTING PROBLEM — A DIVIDED STEPPE

2 m

Open with the PROBLEM Chinggis Khan faced: the steppe was split into many quarrelling clans and tribes whose feuds kept the Mongols weak. After uniting them and being acclaimed Chinggis Khan at the *quriltai* of 1206, his great achievement was to turn this fractured society into a single disciplined army. State clearly that his reforms were aimed at destroying old tribal loyalties.

2 THE DECIMAL SYSTEM — 10, 100, 1,000 AND THE TUMEN

2 m

Describe the structure: Chinggis Khan reorganised the whole fighting population into DECIMAL units — tens, hundreds, thousands and the 10,000-strong TUMEN. Crucially, he MIXED men from different tribes within each unit so that their loyalty was to the unit, its commander and the Khan, NOT to their old clan chief. This deliberately broke the tribal divisions that had weakened the steppe and created a unified chain of command.

3 DISCIPLINE, MOBILITY AND THE HORSE

2 m

Explain why this army was so effective: every able-bodied man was a soldier; the Mongols were superb horse-archers, mobile and able to cover huge distances; discipline was harsh and obedience absolute. Commanders were promoted on merit and loyalty. The army could be moved, divided and concentrated at the Khan's word, giving the Mongols speed and coordination their enemies could not match.

4 FROM ARMY TO EMPIRE — THE RESULT

2 m

Conclude with the consequence: this organisation let Chinggis Khan launch the campaigns against the Jin of north China and the destruction of the Khwarazm empire, building one of history's largest land empires. The decimal army was held together by the *yam* courier system and the *Yasa* (Chinggis Khan's code). End by noting that the genius lay not just in conquest but in REPLACING tribal loyalty with loyalty to the state — the foundation on which the empire stood.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

4-mark question: 'How did the Mongols administer their vast empire?' OR 'Explain the

1 THE YAM — THE COURIER RELAY

1 m

State the communication system: the Mongols ran the YAM, a network of relay stations placed at intervals along the roads, each kept stocked with fresh horses and supplies. A royal messenger could gallop from station to station, changing horses, and so carry orders and news with remarkable speed across the enormous empire. The yam tied the distant provinces to the centre.

2 THE YASA — THE CODE

1 m

Explain the law: the empire was governed by the YASA, the code of regulations and customary law associated with Chinggis Khan. It laid down rules for the army, the hunt, discipline and conduct, and gave the Mongols a shared body of law that bound the different peoples of the empire to the authority of the Khan.

3 SCRIBES AND BORROWED EXPERTISE

1 m

Add the administrative manpower: the Mongols, lacking a writing tradition of their own at first, used literate UIGHURS and the skills of conquered settled peoples — Persians, Chinese and others — to keep records, collect taxes and run the bureaucracy. They were pragmatic, borrowing whatever expertise made the empire work.

4 TRADE AND TOLERANCE

1 m

Conclude with policy: the Mongols made the SILK ROUTE and the roads SAFE, actively encouraging long-distance trade and the movement of merchants, craftsmen and ideas. They were broadly TOLERANT of different religions. Thus the empire was held together not only by force but by communication, law, borrowed administration, trade and tolerance.

TOPPER TEMPLATE · MARK-BY-MARK

5-mark source/extract-based question: a short passage on nomad-sedentary relations, a

1 READ TWICE; UNDERLINE NAMED TERMS AND THE KEY CLAIM

1 m

On first read, underline every proper noun and key term in the passage (e.g. 'Chinggis Khan', 'quriltai', 'tumen', 'yam', 'Khwarazm', '1206'). The sub-questions are almost always answered from these underlined anchors plus one line of your own chapter knowledge. Do not start writing yet.

2 ANSWER 'IDENTIFY / STATE' SUB-QUESTIONS TIGHTLY, THEN 'EXPLAIN'

2 m

For an 'identify/name' sub-question, answer in one line straight from the text. For an 'explain' sub-question, add ONE line of chapter knowledge to the passage's fact — e.g. the passage describes men placed in units of a thousand; you add that this decimal organisation deliberately broke old tribal loyalty. Match the length of each answer to its marks.

3 THE EVALUATE / 'IN YOUR VIEW' SUB-QUESTION

2 m

The last sub-question usually asks for reasoning ('Why was this important?' / 'What does this tell us about Mongol rule?'). Give a judgement supported by a chapter fact — e.g. 'This shows that the Mongols ruled not by force alone but by organisation: the decimal army and the yam relay let a nomadic people hold the largest land empire in history together.'

PYQ PATTERNS

Top PYQ patterns to drill

#1

How did Chinggis Khan organise his army / his people into a fighting force? OR Explain the military organisation of the Mongols. (8 marks)

Almost every term paper (SQP 2018, 2020, 2022, 2023)

#2

How did Temujin unite the Mongol tribes and become Chinggis Khan? OR Trace the rise of Chinggis Khan. (4-8 marks)

SQP 2019, 2021, 2023

#3

Source/extract-based: read a passage on nomad-sedentary relations, the yam, or the Yasa and answer 3 sub-questions. (5 marks)

Annual in the source-based section

#4

How did the Mongols administer their vast empire? OR Explain the yam courier system / the role of the Yasa. (3-4 marks)

SQP 2018, 2022

#5







How did the relationship between nomadic and settled societies work? OR Why did nomads need to trade with settled peoples? (3-4 marks)

SQP 2020, 2024

MARKS DISTRIBUTION

10-year marks distribution

10-YEAR PYQ MARKS DISTRIBUTION

Chinggis Khan's military organisation (decimal units, tumen, breaking tribal loyalty)		26%
Unification of the tribes and the rise of Temujin to Chinggis Khan (quriltai 1206)		18%
Administration of the empire (yam courier system, Yasa, Uighur scribes)		18%
Steppe nomads' social and political organisation and their relations with settled societies		16%
The Mongols after Chinggis Khan (uluses, Kubilai Khan, Silk Route, religious tolerance)		12%
Sources and the shifting views of historians on Chinggis Khan		10%

RECAP · MEMORISE THESE

5-line revision

1 Nomads and the rise of Chinggis — Steppe NOMADS (organised pastoralists) depended on settled societies for grain, metal and cloth → traded and raided. TEMUJIN united the tribes and became CHINGGIS KHAN at the QURILTAI of 1206.

2 Army and empire — He reorganised his people into DECIMAL units (10/100/1,000/TUMEN), MIXING the tribes so loyalty went to the Khan, not the clan → a disciplined horse-archer army that conquered north CHINA and the KHWARAZM empire (Pacific → Caspian).

3 Rule, after-Chinggis and sources — Ruled via the YAM (courier relay), the YASA (code) and Uighur/Persian/Chinese scribes; made the SILK ROUTE safe and was religiously TOLERANT. After 1227: ULUSES among his sons; KUBILAI ruled China (Yuan).

WHAT'S NEXT

What's next

- Chapter 4 — The Three Orders (medieval European society) shifts from a nomadic empire to the settled, hierarchical world of feudal Europe.
- Sit the 15-MCQ Quick Drill (companion PDF) — under 20 minutes, target $\geq 12/15$.
- Then the full term-pattern paper — 30 marks, Class 11 History pattern with a source-based question.

You've understood how nomads built the world's largest land empire.

Now prove it. Take the drill, sit the paper, beat the chapter.

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