Wait For It...The Mongols!: Crash Course World History #17

Crash Course: World History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=szxPar0BcMo
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/szxPar0BcMo

Hi I'm John Green; this is Crash Course World History and today we're gonna discuss - wait for it - the Mongols!

So you probably have a picture of the Mongols in your head. Yes, that's the picture: brutal, bloodthirsty, swarthy, humorously mustachioed warriors riding the plains, wearing fur, eating meat directly off the bone, saying, "Bar bar bar bar bar bar bar". In short, we imagine the Mongol empire as stereotypically barbarian. And that's not entirely wrong.

But if you've been reading recent world history textbooks like we here at Crash Course have, you might have a different view of the Mongols, one that emphasizes the amazing speed and success of their conquests — how they conquered more land in 25 years than the Romans did in 400. How they controlled more than 11 million contiguous square miles. And you may even have read that the Mongols basically created nations like Russia and even Korea. One historian has even claimed that the Mongols, "smashed the feudal system" and created international law. Renowned for their religious tolerance, the Mongols, in this view, created the first great free trade zone, like a crazy medieval Eurasian NAFTA. And that's not entirely wrong either. Stupid truth, always resisting simplicity.

(Intro music)

So remember herders? We talked about them back in episode one as an alternative to hunting and gathering or agriculture. Here are the key things to remember:
1. Nomads aren't Jack Kerouac: They don't just go on like random road trips. They migrate according to climate conditions so they can feed their flocks.
2. Nomads don't generally produce manufactured goods which means they need to trade, so they almost always live near settled people.
And 3. Because they live in generally live close to nature and in harsh conditions, pastoralists tend to be tougher than diamond-plated differential calculus. Like, think of the Huns, or the Xiongnu. Or the Mongols. Okay, Stan. That's enough. Back to me. Stan. I AM THE STAR OF THIS SHOW NOT THE MONGOLS!!! Hi. Sorry about that.

Right, so one last thing: pastoral people also tend to be more egalitarian, especially where women are concerned. Paradoxically, when there's less to go around, humans tend to share more, and when both men and women must work for the social order to survive, there tends to be less patriarchal domination of women. Although Mongol women rarely went to war. I can't tell your gender. I mean you've got the pants, but then you also have the floopity flop, so... That's the technical term, by the way. I'm a historian.

If you had to choose a pastoral nomadic group to come out of central Asia and dominate the world, you probably wouldn't have chosen the Mongols. Because for most of the history we've been discussing, they just hung out in the foothills bordering the Siberian forest, mixing herding and hunting, quietly getting really good at archery and riding horses. Also, the Mongols were much smaller than other pastoral groups like the Tatars or the Uyghurs. And not to get like all Great Man History on you or anything, but the reason the Mongols came to dominate the world really started with one guy, Genghis Khan. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The story goes that Genghis or Chingus Khan was born around 1162 with the name Temüjin to a lowly clan. His father was poisoned to death, leaving Temüjin under the control of his older brothers, one of whom he soon killed during an argument. By 19 he was married to his first and most important wife, Börte, who was later kidnapped. This was pretty common among the Mongols, Temüjin's mom had also been kidnapped. In rescuing his wife, Temüjin proved his military mettle and he soon became a leader of his tribe, but uniting the Mongol confederations required a civil war, which he won, largely thanks to two innovations.

First, he promoted people based on merit rather than family position, and second, he brought lower classes of conquered people into his own tribe while dispossessing the leaders of the conquered clans. Thus he made the peasants love him. The rich hated him — but they didn't matter anymore, because they were no longer rich.

With these two building block policies, Temüjin was able to win the loyalty of more and more people and in 1206 he was declared the Great Khan, the leader of all the Mongols. How? Well, the Mongols chose their rulers in a really cool way. A prospective ruler would call a general council called a kurultai, and anyone who supported his candidacy for leadership would show up on their horses, literally voting with their feet.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! But horses don't have feet they have hooves.

I hate you, Me From the Past. Also, NO INTERRUPTING THE THOUGHT BUBBLE!

After uniting the Mongols, Genghis Khan went on to conquer a lot of territory. By the time he died in his sleep in 1227, his empire stretched from the Mongol homeland in Mongolia all the way to the Caspian Sea. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So that's a pretty good looking empire, and sure a lot of it was pasture or mountains or desert, but the Mongols did conquer a lot of people, too. And in some ways with Genghis' death, the empire was just getting started. His son Ögedei Khan expanded the empire even more. And Genghis' grandson Möngke was the Great Khan in 1258 when Baghdad, the capitol of the Abbasid Empire, fell to the Mongols. And another of Genghis' grandsons, Kublai Khan, conquered the Song Dynasty in China in 1279. And if the Mamluks hadn't stopped another of Genghis' grandsons at the battle of Ain Jalut, they probably would have taken all of North Africa. Genghis Khan sure had a lot of grandkids... It must be time for the open letter.

An Open Letter To Genghis Khan's Descendants. But first, let's check what's in the secret compartment today. Oh. A noisemaker and champagne poppers? Stan, you know I suck at these. What's all this for? Ohhh, it's because it's a BIRTHDAY PARTY!! YAY. Happy birthday to Genghis Khan's descendants.

How do I know it's your birthday, Genghis Khan's descendants? Because every day is your birthday. Because right now on the planet Earth, there are 16 million direct descendants of Genghis Khan, meaning that every day is the birthday of 43,000 of them. So, good news, Genghis Khan: Your empire might be gone, but your progeny lives on. And on, and on, and on. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!

Best wishes, John Green

Unfortunately for the Mongols, those guys weren't always working together, because Genghis Khan failed to create a single political unit out of his conquests. Instead, after Genghis' death, the Mongols were left with four really important Empires called Khanates: The Yuan Dynasty in China, the Il-Khanate in Persia, the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, and the Khanate of the Golden Horde in Russia.

If you remember all the way back to the Hellenistic period, this is similar to what happened to another good general who wasn't much for administration, Alexander the Great. Also, neither of them

ever conquered India.

The Mongols succeeded primarily because of their military skill. Genghis Khan's army, which never numbered more than 130,000 was built on speed and archery. Just like this guy. Mongol mounted archers were like super fast tanks, compared to the foot soldiers and knights they were up against.

But wait, all the military history nerds are saying, once people knew that the Mongols were coming, why didn't they just hole up in castles and forts? It's not like the Mongols had flying horses. EXCEPT THEY DID. They didn't? Stan, why are you always making history boring?

So the Mongols apparently didn't have flying horses, but they were uncommonly adaptable. So even though they'd never seen a castle before they started raiding, they became experts at siege warfare by interrogating prisoners. And they also adopted gunpowder, probably introducing it to Europeans, and they even built ships so they could attack Japan. That might have worked, too except there happened to be a typhoon.

Also, people were terrified of the Mongols. Often cities would surrender the moment the Mongols arrived, just to escape slaughter. But of course, that only happened because there were occasions when the Mongols, did, you know, slaughter entire towns.

So with all that background, let us return to the question of Mongol awesomeness. First, five arguments for awesome.
1. The Mongols really did reinvigorate cross-Eurasian trade. The Silk Road trading routes that had existed for about 1000 years by the time the Mongols made the scene had fallen into disuse, but the Mongols valued trade because they could tax it, and they did a great job of keeping their empire safe. It was said that a man could walk from one end of the Mongol empire to the other with a gold plate on his head without ever fearing being robbed.
2. The Mongols increased communication throughout Eurasia by developing this pony express-like system of way stations with horses and riders that could quickly relay information. It was called the yam system and also included these amazing bronze passports, which facilitated travel.
3. Another thing that traveled along the Mongol trade routes was cuisine. For example, it was because of the Mongols that rice became a staple of the Persian diet. Which I mention entirely because I happen to like Persian food.
4. The Mongols forcibly relocated people who were useful to them, like artists and musicians and, especially administrators. As you can imagine, the Mongols weren't much for administrative tasks like keeping records, so they found people were good at that stuff and just moved them around the empire. This created the kind of cross-cultural pollination that world historians these days get really excited about.
And 5. The Mongols were almost unprecedentedly tolerant of different religions. They themselves were shamanists, believing in nature spirits, but since their religion was tied to the land from which they came, they didn't expect new people to adopt it and they didn't ask them to. So you could find Muslims and Buddhists and Christians and people of any other religion you can think of prospering throughout the Mongol empire. And it's that kind of openness that has led some historians to go back and re-evaluate the Mongols, seeing them as kind of a precursor to modernity.

But there's another side to the story that we should not forget, so, here are five reasons why the Mongols might not be so great.
1. Here is Genghis Khan's definition of happiness: "The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters." Off-topic, but if that quote rings a bell, it might be because Oliver Stone blatantly plagiarized Genghis Khan in the movie *Conan the Barbarian*.
2. Is an extension of one. The Mongols were seriously brutal conquerors. I mean, not uniquely brutal, but still: the Mongols destroyed entire cities, and most historians estimate the numbers they killed to be in the millions.
3. Their empire didn't last. Within 80 years they'd left China and been replaced by a new dynasty, the Ming. And in Persia they blended in so completely that by the 15th century they were totally unrecognizable. I mean, they'd even taken up agriculture! Agriculture, the last refuge for scoundrels who want to devote their lives to working instead of skoodilypooping.
4. They also weren't particularly interested in artistic patronage or architecture. I mean, your palace may last forever, but my yurt can go anywhere.
5. The Mongols were probably responsible for the Black Death. By opening up trade they also opened up vectors for disease to travel, in the case of the Plague via fleas infected with *Yersinia pestis*. And at least according to one story, the Mongols intentionally spread the plague by catapulting their plague-ridden cadavers over the walls of Caffa in the Crimea. While this primitive act of biological warfare might have happened, it's unlikely to be what actually spread the plague. More likely it was the fleas on the rats in the holds of Black Sea ships that were trading with Europe. But that trade only existed because of the Mongols.

All right Stan, one last time- cue the Mongol-tage.

So the Mongols promoted trade, diversity, and tolerance, and they also promoted slaughter and senseless destruction. And what you think about the Mongols ends up saying a lot about you: Do you value artistic output over religious diversity? Is imperialism that doesn't last better or worse than imperialism that does? And are certain kinds of warfare inherently wrong? If you think those are easy questions to answer, than I haven't been doing my job. Regardless, I look forward to reading your answers in comments. Thanks for watching and I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our Graphics Team is Thought Bubble. Last week's Phrase Of The Week was "Hawaiian Pizza". If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that can be answered by our team of historians. By the way, if you want to wear your love for Crash Course there's a Mongols shirt, link in the video info.

Thanks for watching Crash Course. Nobody can beat Crash Course viewers. Well, except for the Mongols.

(Outro music)