

Chapter 11 - Central Asia Transcript

Transcript

Speaker 1

Marco Polo. Why is Marco Polo's name so well known? Who was he anyway? In this episode, Professor Lisa Namikas will help unpack. Exactly who Marco Polo was and what he tells us about the Mongols in particular.

Speaker 2

Marco Polo is more than a fun water game for kids. He was an actual historical figure from the city of Venice in Italy. Today, he traveled through Asia from 1271 to 1295, and he even served Kublai Khan in China. He brought back a lot of stories and a lot of things, and he's known as the world's greatest traveler.

Speaker 1

Was he the same as Genghis?

Speaker 2

No, they were definitely not the same. Genghis Khan was the original Mongol who left from Mongolia, which is a region that lies just to the north of China and borders on Siberia. And Genghis Khan conquered lands from there to the steppe grasslands just north of India. Kublai Khan was his grandson.

Speaker 1

Why did Marco Polo end up serving Kubla Khan in China? How did that?

Speaker 2

Happen. Well, Marco Polo was a trader and a merchant when he was young, he traveled with his father, Nicolo Polo, and his uncle to Asia. They'd made these travels in 12/6. After a few years, they made it to Kaifeng, where Kublai Khan lived. Kublai Khan was the head of the Mongol Empire. The polos both Marco and Nicolo stayed there for four years, but they finally decided to return home when they left, Kubley asked them to request that the Pope send more missionaries to China, and that's important because he wanted more connections with Europe. The polos were only home in Venice. For about two years and decided to go back to Asia, Nicolai's wife had died and so he had little reason to stay. In 1275, Nicola and Marco again arrived in. Anna Marco Polo with his father and his uncle remained there for a longer time. Now, this time, 24 years Marco served the emperor for 18 years and finally begged Kubley to go back home. Marco Polo brought with him jade ivory porcelain from China. He brought silk and he explained how the people used black stones. Became coal for heat. He also explained how they wore eyeglasses to correct their vision and used paper for money and sent letters all around the country. Coal, of course, will become a common way Europeans will heat their homes, and later Americans too. And where would we be without eyeglasses today?

Speaker 1

Marco Polo brought back a lot, but after so many years, he must have been happy to be back home. Was he famous? How did people learn about all these new ideas?

Speaker 2

Well, no, he wasn't famous yet. You asked a great question about how people learned about all these new things. Actually, in 1298, Marco Polo was put in prison during a war between the cities of Venice and Genoa. He told his story to a writer who was also in jail, and Marco Polo dictated to him a book, and when that writer got free, he published the book under the authorship of Marco Polo. This book spread this story of Marco Polo's travels. And his description of places and because of all this publicity, Marco Polo was freed in 1299, the next year.

Speaker 1

So his trip opened relations between Europe and China.

Speaker 2

And soon, because of all of the information in the book, Europe will have the Compass printing press, gunpowder forever changing the way things work. That's the kind of influence that Mark will polo had Marco Polo brought back a lot of history, too, about China and the Mongols.

Speaker 1

What was some of the history he brought back about the Mongols?

Speaker 2

Well, Marco Polo tells us a lot about Kublai Khan. He was the grandson of Genghis and founded the Yuan dynasty in China in 1279. This brought an end to the Song dynasty and finally completed the conquest of China, started by his grandfather Genghis Khan.

Speaker 1

That is one powerful family.

Speaker 2

You know, they were a powerful family, but one thing is curious. The Mongols are often not considered civilized or part of civilization. They conquered a lot of land, but are usually said to be more barbaric than advance. They were nomadic and they did not live in cities. It was the land only that they Yuanted, not the people or the animals on the land. And they were. Brutal and treated people that they encountered very badly. They could be violent and drank a lot of fermented milk, and they killed a lot of people in the process and a lot of animals, usually just by cutting their. Heads right off.

Speaker 1

OK, but how unusual was this professor Lisa? I watched the show the other day and it showed Charlemagne and his attacks on the Saxons slaughtering 4500. In one day after they surrendered to him. But he is considered the father of Europe in civilization there.

Speaker 2

There's a big question about how to understand civilization and violence in history. Understanding large scale violence and conflict is something we have historians have not done very well. In my opinion, focusing or blaming only one culture or another isn't the answer. This means how we understand the Mongols is important. Now, don't get me wrong, we shouldn't accept acts of violence, you know, unless it's to prevent further abuse or discrimination. But that needs to be held true for. Any group of people. Much comes down to our definition of civilization as a reminder. Culture is a way of life. It's, you know, the songs and the art and the expressions that you have. But civilization is the way it is organized into cities and governments and formal religious structures and economic practices.

Speaker 1

So let's get back to the Mongols. I remember hearing some interesting things about them. They lived on horses, right?

Speaker 2

You're right, there are some very interesting features of Mongolian culture. The Mongols in history are considered nomads. They spent a lot of their time on horses and they constantly moved around in search of food or water. Their culture is a blend of Mongolic, Turkic, and East Asian people. They herded 5 main animals including sheep, goat, horse, cow, camel and smacks the girl, or yurt, as it's more commonly called, is a felt tent, and this is part of Mongolian national identity. In fact the secret. History of the Mongols written around the time of Genghis Khan, refers to Genghis Khan as the leader of all the people who lived in the Earths. The tents have a frame inside and they can be reassembled as the Mongols move from place to place. And even today, a large number of Mongolia's population lives in yurts, even in Ulaanbaatar, the capital, and even some resorts in Colorado have copied them, so they are catching on.

Speaker 1

Did early Mongolians follow any religion? They are always portrayed as violent, so we assumed they had no God or religion. Is that true?

Speaker 2

Well, actually since ancient times, Mongolians believed in shamanism, which means connecting with gods through a spirit, and some still follow this same practice today. But in the 17th century, Tibetan Buddhism became the dominant religion in Mongolia. Only about 4% of Mongols today are Muslim, but groups of Mongols settling in India and Central Asia have retained the Muslim religion. Mongolians have a lot of superstitions too. They were afraid of misfortune and tried not to talk about negative things. They feared they might also be punished by some evil shaman who randomly saw them doing wrong, like maybe stepping on a year's threshold or desecrating in the way. Years and they feared for the lives of children. Children are sometimes given no name, like in Mongolian language. Nergui means without a name or a nebish means not this one or boys would be dressed up as girls or they would have their foreheads painted with charcoal. As a protection. People of this step received only one name in life. And that selection carried much symbolism for the child, for their character, their fate, and their identity.

Speaker 1

I've heard of something called u-vu or o-vu in Mongolia. Do you know what these are?

Speaker 2

Yes, the Mongolians made mouths called ovals. Made of piled stone, sometimes decorated with cloth on them, if they saw an Oval on a journey, they would walk around it and made sacrifices. Often times of sweet goods in order to ensure they had a safe trip, the ovals on high mountains were particularly special and the traveler would need to offer sacrifices to make sure that there was good. Feather and to ward off misfortune and things like that, the Mongols have become famous for these oboes.

Speaker 1

Rituals seem to be very important.

Speaker 2

So, for instance, for a child, the first big celebration is the first haircut, usually around the age of. Three or five. Birthdays weren't really celebrated that much in the past, and the biggest part of the wedding was handing over the yurts to the married couple. Deceased relatives were usually put to rest out in the open, where their bodies would be eaten by wild animals and birds and sent back to nature that way. But you know, nowadays they're buried.

Speaker 1

Hmm, that is some interesting culture. Like you said earlier, the country is so remote between China and Russia's Siberia today. It seems the culture was able to protect itself because it was so far from everything else going on, especially colonization in Western trade. But what about the history? Most Westerners heard that Genghis Khan marched into Europe. Was he really as terrifying as everyone says he was?

Speaker 2

Yeah, I wanted to return to that question. Let's take a look at Genghis Khan for a moment. He was called Temujin. What we know of him comes from the secret history of the Mongols, written just after he died, Genghis Khan began to spread his rule out from Mongolia and moved eastward into the European lands. He took control around 1206. At this time, the Mongols were mostly a group of tribes. They were great hunters and managed large herds, but that was. All Genghis Khan was a genius and he knew who to be friends with, so he quickly had powerful allies. He had sheer physical strength, clear goals and an unbreakable will. He listened to advice when he needed it, and he prayed to the eternal blue heaven, the Supreme God of. But he also quickly realized that he could win. Control with massacres, so he literally slaughtered defeated populations and terrorized people to a point where they couldn't resist his forces. This brought total destruction to areas like Afghanistan. Ultimately, he conquered land from Beijing and China to the Caspian Sea, Persia and the land of the Rus, or what is Ukraine and Russia Today? He was never really concerned with organizing an empire, just taking what he wanted and destroying the rest. So he achieved this in just 20 years and died in 1227. That's why he's not considered civilized. So you can have a culture and not be civilized at the same time. His son Ogedai would take over and finally crush Kiev and rose in the last resistance that they put up in 1240. Then Ogedai would March through Hungary. But in 1241, he died after a drinking boat, the empire of Genghis would then be divided and ruled by his sons and grandsons.

Speaker 1

So this is where Kublai Khan comes in, right? He started the Yuan dynasty in China you mentioned. What else did?

Speaker 2

He did. That's right, Kublai Khan did start the Yuan dynasty and he was pretty powerful. He was becoming civilized by adopting government and structure and more organization. It's a fascinating process. It's a bit different from the structures evolving themselves like we would have seen with Roman history, but Kublai Khan, in this sense is considered. And overlorded the Mongols. Lands, which included one China but also lands to the West, known as the Golden Horde in Russia and the Ilkhanate of Persia, which is Iran today, and the step lands just further beyond that, he was able to take China by defeating the Song dynasty. He initially made a truce with the Song, and the two might have coexisted and ruled side by side, but apparently Kublai sent an emissary to the Song and they were jailed and treated badly. So Kublai decided that the regime should be ended once and for all, which of course it was in 1279. So he took over and continued the process of unifying China. Kublai Khan, also known as Emperor Shizhu, said something like you can conquer an empire on horseback, but you can't govern it that way. The Mongols will adopt Chinese ways and even some of their culture. And many Mongols who settle in China will just assimilate into this society. Kublai seemed never satisfied with just holding on to China, and he wanted more. He started wars to extend his influence into Myanmar, sometimes called Burma and Nam Vietnam. Today, Java or Indonesia and Japan, the Mongols suffered some disastrous defeats and in 1274 and 1281. The Japanese typhoons and attacks completely destroyed the Mongolian fleet and warship. The wars were a big burden on the people and the peasants became even more poor. Marco Polo's writing is the first account that we have of Kublai and it tends to be complementary despite all of his conquest and all of his problems. Marco Polo sometimes is not very objective or even handed. The only thing he does mention is Kublai Khan's extensive love affairs and how expensive they are. He also mentions the hands off administration that Kublai Khan will take in the outbreaks of cruelty. He had a lot of energy and determination, was not bogged down by some of the bureaucratic traditions in China. He became more and more Chinese in his ways, and his dynasty will finally end in 1368 and the Mongols will withdraw to the north again. And at least for a little while, they'll remain out of China's affairs until the Qing dynasty comes to power in 1644. But that's beyond our talk.

Speaker 1

So what is Mongolia like today?

Speaker 2

Well, because Mongolia is located between China and Russia's Siberia, it has dramatic landscapes from the open steppe grassland to the sand dunes and to the low lying mountains. The capital is Ulaanbaatar and about half the people there are Buddhists, the rest following a number of other beliefs and faiths. Many people remain very poor, about 30% are still nomadic, and other livelihoods include agriculture, leather working or mining. You can see that Genghis Khan plays an important role in the history and culture of modern Mongolia. There's a brand new airport called the Chinggis Khan Airport and a new museum called the Chinggis Khan Museum, which boasts of a new look at Chinggis Khan and his successors in their world. In July, you can catch the Nadaam festival with its wrestling and horse racing and. Tree and perhaps then you can take a detour to the Mongolian Calligraphy Center. And despite the history of Genghis Khan or Chinggis Khan, there is a welcoming new attitude toward outsiders and an open

invitation to visit Mongolia. I've tried to use these podcasts to highlight a Louisiana connection to the topic that we've been discussing, but in the case of Mongolia. There really is no obvious connection, so we're going to have to stay with our water game of Marco Polo. But even this game is a reference to history that we now know much more about. So maybe one day one of you listeners will be that connection or become a modern day Marco Polo and stay in Mongolia. So if so, let me know. And in the meantime, I hope you've enjoyed learning a little bit more about the Mongols.

Speaker 1

Maybe I'll start planning my trip right now. Thank you, Professor Lisa.

Speaker 3

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