



chapter five

The Silk Route of the Mongols

The Coming of Ghengis Khan



▲ A Kyrgyz tribesman of the Eurasian Steppe region, with his hunting eagle.

At the end of the Twelfth Century, in the wastes of the Mongolian steppes to the north of China, events were taking place which were to change dramatically the course of history. The nomadic tribesmen, who had produced such fearsome warriors as the Huns (Xiongnu), were coming together under a great Mongolian leader. His name was Ghengis Khan.

Ghengis Khan was proclaimed leader of the Mongols at Karakorum (near Ulan Bator, the capital of modern Mongolia) in 1196. At the time, China was split in two. The south was ruled by the Sung Dynasty, and the north was already under a Manchurian Dynasty of Mongol origin. In the West, the Muslims were divided into a number of regional powers. There was no longer a great empire to confront the growing Mongol domination, which now extended from eastern China to western Turkestan. Even so, no one foresaw the explosion of Mongol power which now took place.



▲ Horse games such as this one are often played among the nomadic tribes of Central and North-East Asia, echoing the horseback battles of their past.

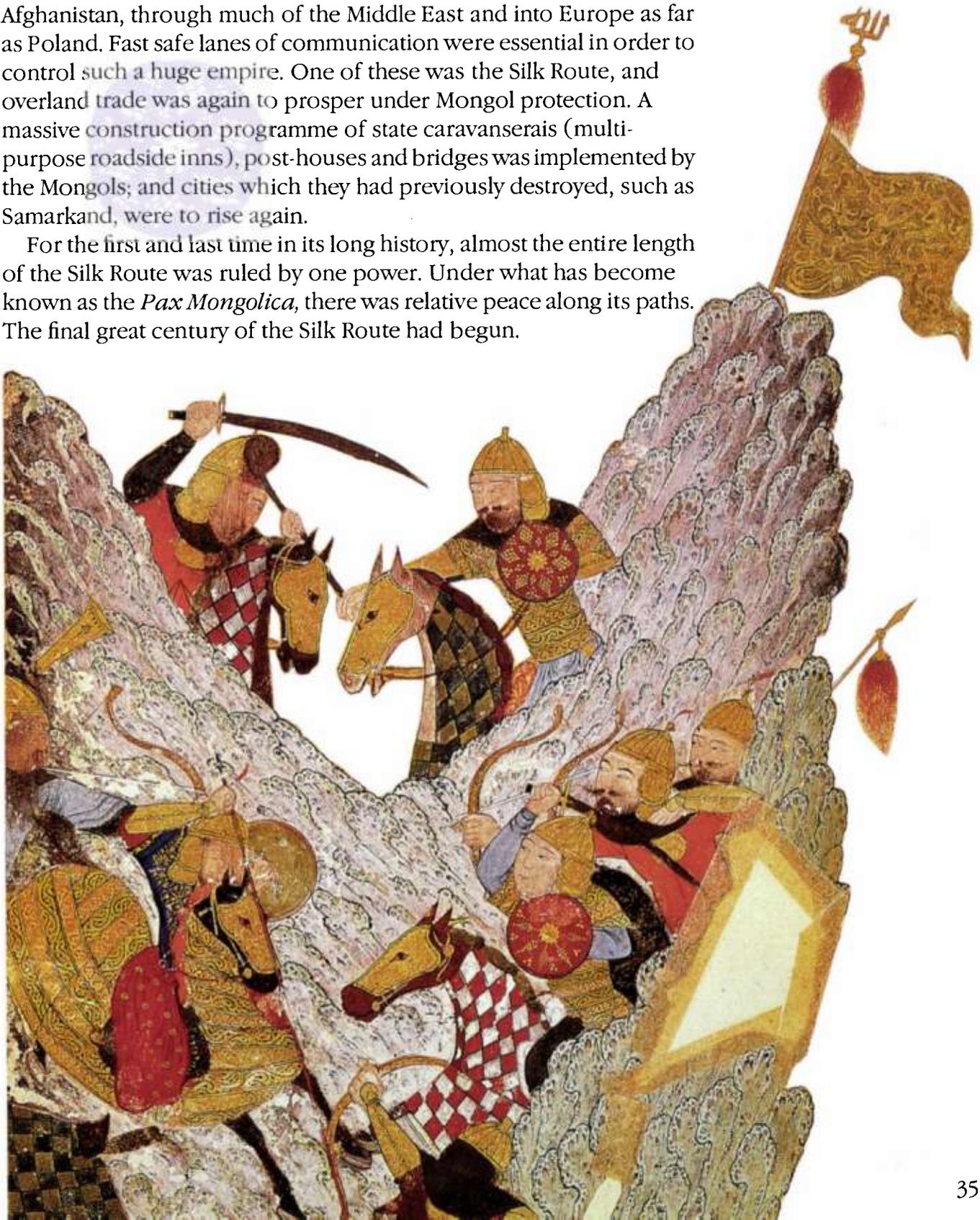
Ghengis Khan and his powerful army of Mongol horsemen spilled out of the eastern steppe and overran the surrounding territory in all directions. This was one of the most ferocious campaigns the world has ever known. Beijing, the new capital of northern China, was sacked – and its population either fled or was massacred on the spot. When offered resistance, the Mongol armies took no prisoners.

The Mongols then turned west beyond the Pamirs and attacked the Silk Route city of Merv. They are said to have massacred its 700,000 inhabitants – and even killed all the cats and dogs. Usually, however, the Mongols were careful to spare able-bodied men and craftsmen, who were systematically deported and re-employed elsewhere.

Soon the Mongol Empire stretched all over China and into Afghanistan, through much of the Middle East and into Europe as far as Poland. Fast safe lanes of communication were essential in order to control such a huge empire. One of these was the Silk Route, and overland trade was again to prosper under Mongol protection. A massive construction programme of state caravanserais (multi-purpose roadside inns), post-houses and bridges was implemented by the Mongols; and cities which they had previously destroyed, such as Samarkand, were to rise again.

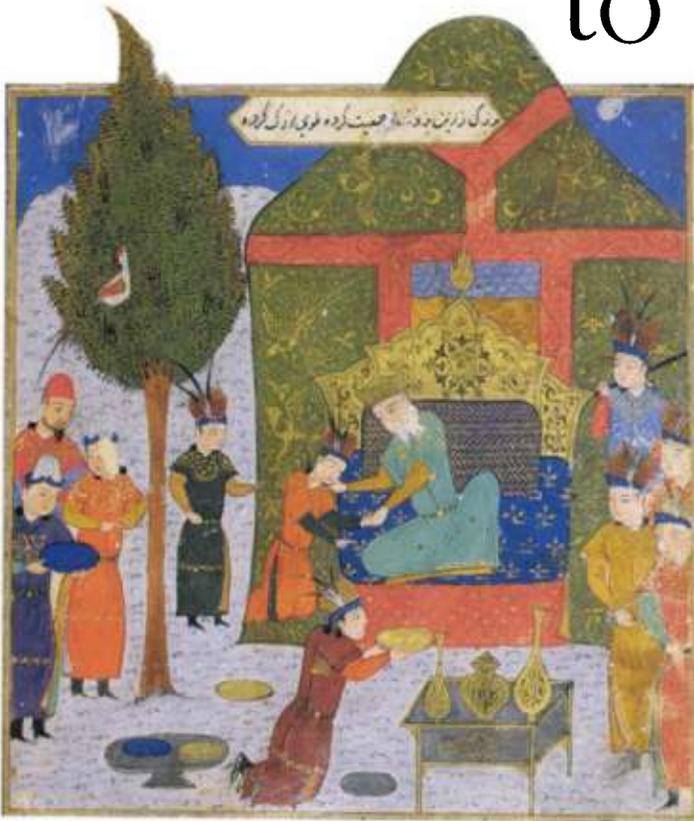
For the first and last time in its long history, almost the entire length of the Silk Route was ruled by one power. Under what has become known as the *Pax Mongolica*, there was relative peace along its paths. The final great century of the Silk Route had begun.

▼ A 14th Century Iranian manuscript illustration showing Ghengis Khan fighting the Chinese in the mountains.





The Pope's Emissary to the East



▲ Ghengis Khan on his throne surrounded by his court. John Carpini would have seen similar scenes when he attended the great international gathering at Karakorum, the Mongol capital.

Mongol aggression was frequently held in check by the death of one of their leaders. Mongol armies poised to push out the boundaries of their empire still further would have to return to Mongolia for the election of a new leader. In 1241 the death of Ogedei (Ghengis Khan's son, who had succeeded him) caused one such halt. Emissaries from all over the known world now travelled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum for the selection of a new leader. This was one of the greatest international meetings of its time, with representatives travelling from as far afield as Turkey and Korea, Russia and Rome.

Western Europe had by now emerged from the so-called Dark Ages to the more stable and prosperous Medieval period.

Cities such as Venice and Genoa had built up trading links across the Mediterranean and were looking to extend their influence further eastwards. It was perhaps with this in mind that the newly elected Pope Innocent IV felt it necessary to send an emissary from Rome. More importantly, he had hopes of forming an alliance with the heathen Mongols and converting them to Christianity, so protecting Europe from further Mongol expansion. The Pope chose as his emissary to Karakorum a friar called John Carpini.

Friar John Carpini travelled to Mongolia by way of the Eurasian Steppe Route, the branch of the Silk Route that crossed from the Black Sea north of the Caspian and skirted the Tarim Basin by a side route which kept north of the Tian Shan Mountains. In fact, geographically this was a much less hazardous and shorter route than the main Silk Route, but it had previously been vulnerable to raids from the war-like tribes who inhabited the Steppes through which it passed. The tribes

had now been defeated by the Mongols, making the route safe for caravans. During *Pax Mongolica*, the Eurasian Steppe Route was probably more popular than the main southern route. The Mongols even established what are known as the Golden Horde cities along the European end of its path, which they filled with craftsmen and other people transplanted from conquered lands.

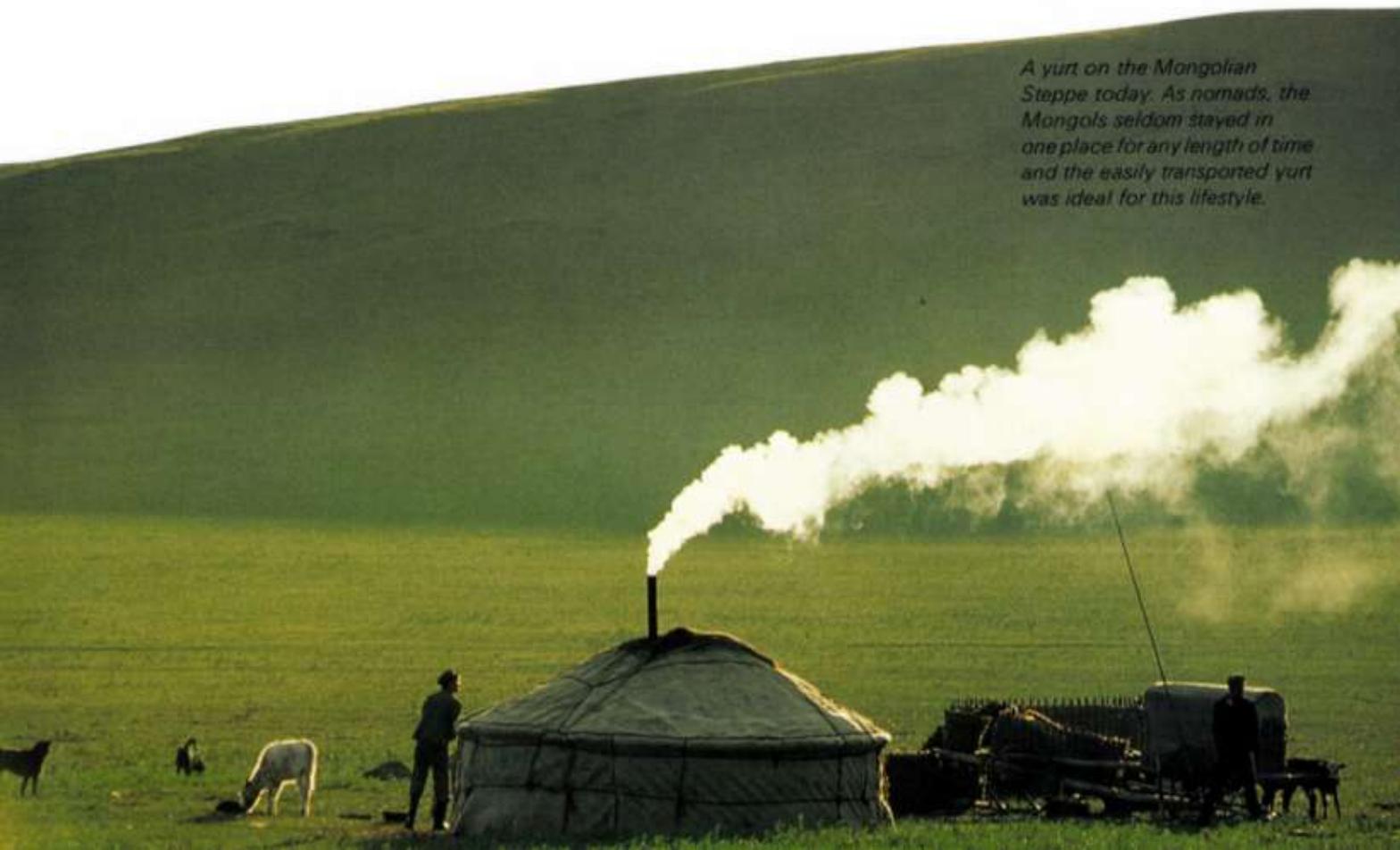
But Friar John Carpini's mission to the Mongolian capital was not a success. Unlike the emissaries from all over the Empire he had brought with him no lavish gifts for the new Khan. This was not appreciated. When the new Khan was selected, all the emissaries prostrated themselves before him – except Friar John Carpini, who said he prostrated himself only before God. The Khan was not impressed by this obstinate Christian behaviour. The Pope's hopes of forming an allegiance with the Mongols, and perhaps even converting them to Christianity, were dashed.

But despite his lack of tact, Friar John Carpini was an astute observer. When he returned to Rome, he told the Pope that he had noted signs of division amongst the Mongols. In his view, this could well divert the Mongols from further expansion into western Europe. As it turned out, Friar John Carpini was right. From now on internal power struggles effectively halted any further Mongol expansion into Europe.

▼ *The interior of a yurt, the traditional tent dwelling of the nomadic tribes of Mongolia and Central Asia.*



A yurt on the Mongolian Steppe today. As nomads, the Mongols seldom stayed in one place for any length of time and the easily transported yurt was ideal for this lifestyle.





Marco Polo's Journey



▲ A 13th Century figurine of a Chinese character actor, such as might have been found at Kublai Khan's court.



▲ A map showing the route covered by Marco Polo on his journey to and from China. The shaded area indicates the extent of the Mongol Empire at the time.

With much of Asia now under Mongol rule and European trade expanding, it was now that the most famous of all European travellers to the East made his journey along the Silk Route. In 1271 Marco Polo set off from Venice for China, accompanied by his father and his uncle.

The two elder Polos had already travelled to China by way of the Eurasian Steppe Route in search of trade. They had been well received by the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, who had never before seen any 'Latins'. The elder Polos had been quick to see the possibilities of trade with the East and promised Kublai Khan they would return.

Marco Polo has left us with a detailed description of his 9000 kilometre journey to China, filled with many adventures. He passed along the Silk Route from Turkey, down through the Persian Gulf to Hormuz, north again to Balkh, across the Pamirs to Kashgar and then took the southern route around the Tarim Basin into China itself. Even under the protection of the Mongol Empire, the Silk Route had its dangers. In remote regions of Iran, Marco Polo recorded that 'unless merchants be well armed they run the risk of being murdered, or at least being robbed of everything'. Three years after setting out, the Polos finally arrived at the court of Kublai Khan at Shang-du.

Marco Polo was impressed by the wealth he found at the Mongol court. In particular, he describes 'a very fine marble Palace, the rooms of which are all gilt and painted with figures of men and beasts . . . all executed with such exquisite art that you regard them with delight and astonishment'. This description later inspired the English poet Coleridge to write his famous poem about Kublai Khan's 'stately pleasure-dome' in Xanadu (as Marco called Shang-du).

Kublai Khan welcomed the Polos and appointed them to high posts in his administration. Unfortunately they soon discovered that this meant they were no longer free to return home. For sixteen years the Polos served Kublai Khan, travelling all over China as his ambassadors.



◀ ▼ Two illustrations (left and bottom left) taken from a famous 15th Century French edition of Marco's story. The upper picture shows the Khan's palace at Khanbalik (today the city of Beijing), the lower some nomadic shepherds met by Marco on his travels. The pictures are not accurate – the artist had no pictures to follow, just Marco's descriptions.

Finally Kublai Khan allowed the Polos to leave China. They returned to the West by sea along the Spice Route. Their ship sailed around India to the Persian Gulf, and from here they returned to Venice, arriving home in 1295.

Three years later Marco Polo was imprisoned by Venice's rivals, the Genoese. It was during his captivity that he dictated the story of his travels to one of his fellow prisoners. This account of his travels became one of the most popular books in Medieval Europe. It was known as *Il Milione* ('The Million Lies') as few believed that his fabulous stories of the East were true. But later historians and travellers have since established that most of his tale was accurate.

▼ A ceremonial trumpet greeting in Samarkand today. This form of welcome dates from Mongol times.

