

МОНГОЛ УЛС  
*Mongolia*

*Steppe Desert Mountain*

*(Mongolian Version of Rock, Paper, Scissors)*

*May 2015*

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## MONGOLIA AND THE MIGHTY STEPPE

Our tour will expose us to two distinct but historically interwoven dimensions of this mysterious and fascinating country.

One is the unique and sparsely recorded land of Western Mongolia, where we will have an “up close and personal” encounter with the geography, people and life-styles of this little-visited part of the country.

The other is the vast and complex history of the great Eurasian Steppe – well, at least, the eastern end of it – the pinnacle of which was the monumental Mongolian Kingdom of Chinggis Khaan and his sons and grandsons.

For seven of us, this latter dimension will become all the more tangible with visits to several historical sites – vestiges of key parts of that history.

### Western Mongolia

Western Mongolia covers the provinces (or Aimags) of Bayan-Ölgii, Hovd, Uvs, and Zavkhan. As you can see from the map immediately below, we pass through all these provinces.



It is the most remote region of the country with paved roads from the capital, Ulaanbaatar, ending 200 miles before reaching the eastern most point of Zavkhan. It is also the most ethnically diverse, mountainous, and scenic region of Mongolia, with thousands of years of history. The region is home to the Kazakhs, a Muslim tribe from near the Caspian Sea, and Oirats, or western Mongols, which can be divided into 10 different tribes, as well as Khalkhs, or eastern Mongols. In addition to the ethnic diversity, the region is home to the Altai Mountain Range, with the highest peaks in Mongolia, Lake Uvs, a large saltwater lake, and many smaller lakes, mountains, rivers, forests, and steppe. Spread

throughout the region are countless archaeological sites with petroglyphs, cave paintings, standing stone monuments, monasteries, and ancient.

The western region of Mongolia has for much of its history been on the boundary between civilizations, between Chinese dominated Asian culture to the east and European cultures to the west divided by the Altai mountains and the Tibetan plateau to the south with only a narrow gap just south of what is today Mongolia. This location near the crossroads of civilization has left the landscape littered with history of many groups either originating in these mountain valleys or passing through on their way to conquest. Over the last 10,000 years, the Blue Turks (the Gök Türks), Scythians, Tuvans, Hun, Mongols, Uighurs, and Kazakhs all spread out from or through the region to take over more settled peoples.

It wasn't until the 1930s that all of the Altai Mountains was firmly controlled with fixed borders by outside powers, and even then only after many years of bloody resistance. This legacy of independence can still be seen in the customs of the diverse population which can be broadly



divided into Kazakhs, Tuvans, Khalkh Mongols, and Oirat Mongols (which can be divided into roughly 10 distinct tribes). These groups have adapted their cultures to handle the difficulties of living in this cold, dry, mountainous place. This region, with the Altai Mountains in the west, Gobi Desert in the east and south, the Great Mongolian Lakes Depression in the north and centre, and forests, steppe, and deserts mixed

throughout, support some rare and spectacular wildlife. Large and endangered animals call the region home including snow leopards, the Gobi Bear, Argali sheep, ibex, antelope, gazelle, falcons, golden eagles, wolves, foxes, and many more. Many more birds use the many lakes as rest stops on their annual migration between Siberia and Southeast Asia.

## Landscape

### Mountains

The Altai Mountains form borders between China and the provinces of Bayan-Ölgii and Hovd, as well as covering most of both provinces, while the Tannu Ola Range forms the border between Russia and Uvs province, and the Khangai Mountains cover most of eastern Zavkhan. Collectively, these mountains completely surround Western Mongolia and create some of the most stunning scenery, including the 8 highest mountains in Mongolia and 12 of the top 14 highest. The highest peak, Tavan Bogd, is 14,350 ft high and straddles the border with China and Russia.

### Rivers and Lakes

Rivers and Lakes of Western Mongolia collectively form what is known as the Great Lakes Depression, a self-contained watershed that drains into several large saltwater and freshwater lakes mostly in Hovd and Uvs provinces. The largest lake is the saline Uvs Lake near Ulaangom. Other large lakes are the Khyargas Lake also in Uvs, and the interconnected Dorgon,



Khargas, Khar, and Airag lakes just east of Hovd which form the Khar Us Nuur National Park. These lakes are supplied by the Khovd River, Zavkhan Gol<sup>1</sup>, and Tesiin Gol. The Khovd River flows from Tavan Bogd Mountain in the Altai Mountains to Khar-Us Lake, the Zavkhan Gol flows from the Khangai Mountains to the Khyargas Lake, while the Tesiin Gol flows from the Tannu Ola Mountains to Uvs Lake. There are several waterfalls and glaciers near the headwaters of each of the rivers and various tributaries. These rivers and lakes support numerous species of birds and several species of fish. The lakes are a major stopping place for many endangered migratory birds.

<sup>1</sup> 'Gol' is the Mongolian for 'river'

## Archaeology

### Petroglyphs

Petroglyphs and cave drawings dating back some 15,000 years are found in abundance all over the Altai mountain region. With the region serving as a crossroads of many ancient nomadic civilizations, the images found on rocks and inside caves trace the evolution of pre-historic man as he develops tools, learns to use horses, domesticates livestock, and becomes fierce steppe warriors. Especially good collections of petroglyphs (means 'etched in stone') are inside Altai Tavan Bogd National Park and just outside of Hovd. These petroglyphs start with ancient Turkic tribes hunting mammoths, elephants, and deer with spears to drawings of the horse-bound raiders of the Mongol Empire several thousand years later. In between are images of the Scythians, Huns, Tuvans, and Uighurs, which spread out from these mountain passes, before occupying parts of Europe, the Middle East, India, and China.

### Standing Stones

Standing Stones made by ancient Turks, Tuvans, and possibly other groups mark the landscape of mountain valleys across western Mongolia. The most prevalent form of stone monolith is the Turkic Stone Men, which range in size from 2 feet to over 6 feet in height and weighing several hundred pounds with face, hands, tools, and other features carved into the rock. The Flying Deer Stones, where the deer appear to be flying, are believed to be made by reindeer-herding Tuvan tribes, and are highly regarded by archaeologists. These stones and other blank monoliths usually are part of massive stone complexes that served as either burial mounds or shamanistic temples. In 2006, an excavation at one burial mound in Bayan-Olgii turned up a complete mummified remains of a Scythian warrior and horse in full battle armour. Altogether, there are over 1,000 standing stones, including at least 50 deer stones in the Altai range of western Mongolia.



*Typical Western Mongolian Countryside in May*

Though the local nomadic tribes didn't start building permanent historic structures in great quantities until very recently, several Buddhist monasteries and Manchu forts date back a few hundred years. The mud brick walls on Manchu forts still stand outside of Hovd and Uliastai, which served as provincial capitals of western parts of Outer Mongolia up until the Revolution of 1911, and are among the only settlements in Mongolia to develop before the 1930s. These two cities also have ruins of Buddhist temples and other historical structures. Most other buildings in the region have been built by the communist government or under

democratic rule including many mosques and Buddhist temples and monasteries to replace those destroyed in the anti-religious purges of the 1930s.



## Uliastai

Uliastai is the capital of Zavkhan province, and a former provincial capital of the Manchu Empire.

Uliastai is located at the border of the desert and the forest. It is in a valley near where the Bogdiin and Chigestai converge surrounded by the Khangai Mountains, which makes travel difficult during the winter.

Alongside Hovd, Uliastai, occasionally referred to as Jibhalanta by the Manchus, is one of the 3 oldest settlements in Mongolia, and had long been an important centre of caravan trade - even into the 20th century. It was connected by camel caravan routes with Urga (now Ulaanbaatar) in the east, Hovd in the west, Barkol and other points in Xinjiang in the southwest, and Hohhot in the southeast.



The city itself was founded as a military garrison by the Manchus in 1733 during the Qing rule of Mongolia. Uliastai was the *de facto* capital of Outer Mongolia and parts of what is now Russia, as the Qing Amban, the Governor General, located its office in Uliastai to keep an eye on the Khalkh Mongols to the east and the Oirad Mongols west of the Khangai Mountains. At its peak, the fortress held up to 3500 soldiers and was surrounded by a Chinese trading quarter, or Maimaicheng. However, during the Outer Mongolian Revolution of 1911 the Military Governor of Uliastai, his staff, and military guards, fled the fort under the protection of Cossack troops. Traces of Manchu rule can still be seen in Uliastai: the stone remnants of the governors' fortress near the Bogdiin River are a short walk from town, the shackles and torture devices used by the Manchu are on display in the History Museum, and a hatag-laden stone near the central roundabout is carved with Chinese characters.

## Khovd

Hovd or Khovd is a city in the Hovd province of Mongolia.

The history of Hovd dates back about 240 years. At the north end of town there is a ruined fort where the Manchu dynasty Viceroy lived with his troops. Mongolian revolutionaries chased them out in 1912. While the Manchus were ruling, they planted trees along the main streets that can still be seen today.



Since 1912, Hovd has developed, acquiring a big hospital, a university for the youth of Western Mongolia, a quality airport, kindergartens, a cinema, and a theatre.

Hovd is unique in its diverse ethnic makeup. It consists of 17 soums (similar to a county with each county containing one larger town that also bears the soum's name). Some have their own ethnic groups including Kazakhs and seven different Mongolian ethnic groups. Many of the small ethnic groups represented in the city are from the surrounding Hovd aimag, and have their own unique dialects, clothes, dances, songs, musical instruments, and ceremonies. Uriankhais (an ethnic group concentrated in Munkhkhairkhan and Duut soums in the Altai Mountains) are of especial note; their archery is unique and involves shooting rubber-tipped arrows at leather balls.

Hovd aimag's best known attractions are the cave paintings at Tsenkheriin Agui in Mankhan soum, a little less than 100 km southeast of the aimag centre. However, cave drawings are everywhere so if you don't want to waste the two days to go to Mankhan soum, the mountain behind the airport has a great set of pictures, and locals know where others can be found. These red-ochre paintings are believed to be 15,000 years old, which would date them in the Late Stone Age (or Upper Palaeolithic Age). The drawings depict a wide variety of animals, some are readily identifiable, such as camels, sheep, bulls, and ibex; others are open to the interpretation of the viewer, such as a drawing of what appears to be an ostrich. Some of the drawings have been defaced by vandals in recent years, though copies of the drawings as they appeared before they were defaced are preserved at the Hovd Museum.

## Olgi

Ölgii is the capital of Bayan-Ölgii province and is also known as Olgii, Ulgy, or Ulgii.



Nestled in the Altai, this small city was established in the 1840s by Kazakhs fleeing the expanding Russian Empire. Current day Bayan-Ölgii was likely a wintering grounds for nomadic Kazakh herders living in what is now Xinjiang Province of China. More Kazakhs came after Stalin started suppressing traditional cultures and religion and during the Chinese Civil War in the 1930s. During this time Ölgii became a staging point for a Soviet-supported rebellion against the Nationalists in the

western Muslim region of China. After the Chinese Communists won, Kazakh rebels and religious leaders were purged, about 500 arrested and 100 murdered in Bayan-Ölgii alone. The region was largely ignored since then, allowing the Kazakh's unique culture based on nomadic herding, vibrant art and music, and large, close families. Nowhere else on earth has the traditional practice of hunting with eagles been so well preserved, with 250 active Kazakh eagle hunters in this small remote province.

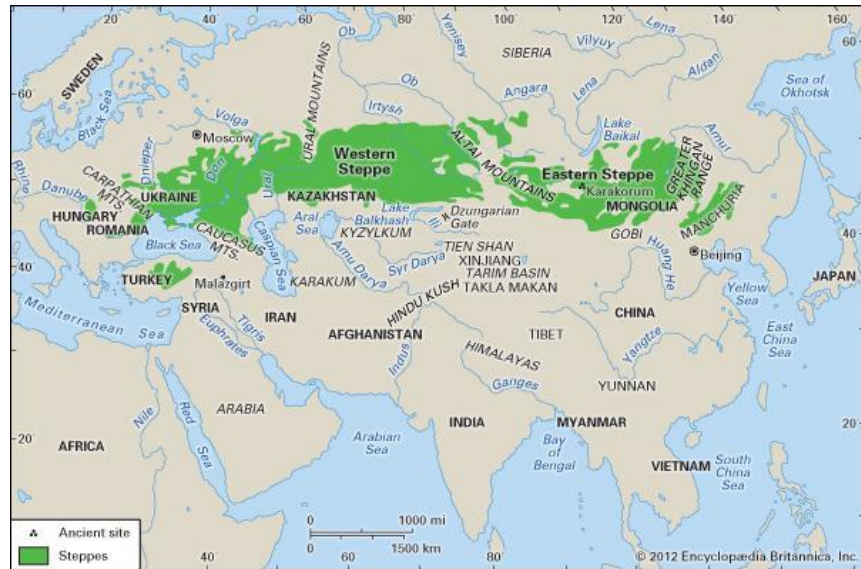
There are an estimated 1 million petroglyphs throughout the region dating back 12,000 years. Petroglyphs are images that have been carved into rocks. The images trace the history of early cavemen to more recent groups like the Blue Turks (ancestors of modern Turkic language groups) as transition from hunter gather to pastoralism to 'modern' horse-based nomadism seen today in

Mongolia. Several sites with large concentrations make up the Petroglyphic Complexes of the Mongolian Altai UNESCO World Heritage Site inside Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, though other sites are only a short drive outside of the city.

## The Eurasian Steppe

Entry onto this steppe has us entering a portal that will take us from our mostly duocentarian, city-soaked existence to the multimillennian traditional life and warfare of the great Eurasian Steppe.

While the term *Eurasian Steppe* is well-sourced, *Eurasian* might be superfluous as other continents describe their similar terrain as plains or prairies or pampas. The term *steppe* is idiocratic to a 10,000km x 600-800km stretch of homeland to successive nomadic peoples and their livelihoods and battles that has its terminals in the Carpathian Mountains and the grasslands of today's



Hungary in the west and the edge of the Manchurian forests in the east. (That small non-green patch west of Karakorum (Kharkhorin) must be the Great Lakes Depression.)

You might begin to wonder why this portal is programmed to take us to the entirety of this mighty steppe when all we're visiting is Mongolia – essentially the Eastern Steppe. Well, although the Mongolians were relative late-comers to the Steppe, they came to dominate it from one end to the other. By 1294, at the time of Kubilai Khan's death (apart from being the inspiration for STC's poem, KK was Genghis Khan's (Chinggis Khaan's) grandson), the Mongolian Empire stretched the length and breadth of the Eurasian Steppe – and some more. The empire's centre, its imperial capital, was Karakorum (Kharkhorin), which, by that time, had changed from the tent city of Genghis Khan to a permanently structured metropolis.

## Origins of the Steppe People

Archaeological finds suggest humans moved into the "Pontic Caspian Steppe" (roughly from the western shores of the Black Sea to the Aral Sea) *circa* 6500-5000BC, changing from hunter-gatherers to stock-raisers; and adopting nomadic life-styles that would eventually spread across all the steppe.

From round this period, several developments ebbed and flowed east and west across the steppe that would transform it into a massive cauldron of linguistic diversity; transigrations and integration of peoples; exchanges of knowledge, cultures, religions, foods, artefacts, technologies; and the inevitable constant fight for land, influence, power and domination.

The early humans of the Pontic Caspian Steppe "spoke" Proto Indo European. They didn't in reality. It's a term philologists have invented to represent a notional starting point for the myriad of languages (some 75% of those spoken today) that have (at times very slim) roots to this common



linguistic concept. At various times for various reasons and in various ways, a group went west and then south into Asia Minor taking Anatolian dictionaries (about 4000-3500 BC); while another group headed east with Iranian and nascent Turkic dictionaries. One of the earliest of the latter was Tocharian speakers of the Tarim Basin.

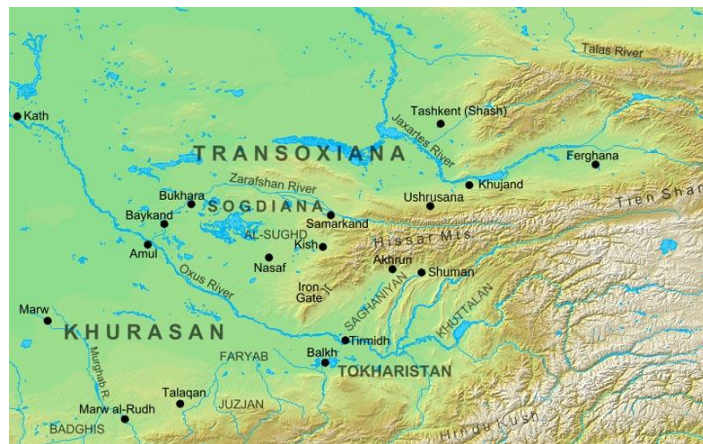
While the initial migrations of people – at the heart of which was always the search for better grazing – moved east and west from the Pontic Caspian Steppe, there were other nomadic people scattered way out east, probably living at first more on the fringes of the Manchurian forests than being steppe nomads. They would eventually emerge onto the steppe and move west.

A few random things that impacted significantly on the life, welfare and warfare of the steppe nomads:

- Domestication of the horse (c. 4800-4200BC)
- Development of spoked wheels, which led to light chariots for battle and carts for transporting camp equipment
- Development of the composite bow, which led to very effective light cavalry
- Development of saddles and stirrups, which allowed for more effective use of the bow from horseback

## Steppe Peoples down the Centuries

One aspect of the history and categorisation of the steppe peoples that seems evident and consistent is that there is a deal of uncertainty about specific origins, movements and terminology. A case in point, given their significance, is the Scythians. They get called by different names, their origin is uncertain; and, in the end, the term Scythian gets used both as a generic nomenclature of a combination of tribes and confederacies; and as an archaeological term without necessarily referring to people of any particular ethnicity. So, don't get too hung up on precision!



The more substantial movements in all directions had got under way by 2500-2000 BC. The outcomes would eventually lead to the Germanic and Celtic tribes of Europe, the Greek and Mediterranean civilisations, and the ancestors of the Baltic and Slavic peoples. Of more immediate interest to us is the great eastern expansion by people who spoke a version or two of the Indo-Iranian languages. They drifted north of the Aral Sea and down into Transoxiana between the Oxus and Jaxartes Rivers.<sup>2</sup> (I mention this detail because this is today's Uzbekistan where two of us will wander as a prelude to Mongolia.) We're now into the original homeland of the ancestors of Iranian speakers and the speakers of the Indic languages that gave rise to Sanskrit and the languages of modern India: Hindi and Urdu – and the Iranian and Indian peoples.

Transoxiana also saw the rise of a group of people known as the Sacae (or Scyths). It is thought that they might have originated from Iran and had earlier moved into the Tarim Basin and intermixed

<sup>2</sup> Today's Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers respectively.

with Tocharian people. The Scythians, spread their way of nomadic life across the whole of the Eurasian steppe. There have been discoveries of Scythian culture and peoples as far east as the eastern side of the Altai Mountains; and only very recently have there been discoveries of Scythian warrior tombs in the western Altai (in Mongolia). While tombs excavated west of the Altai have revealed Scythians of European origin, those in the Western Altai are of mixed Euro/Asian origin. Eventually, the Scythians were present right across the steppes.

Of particular interest to us is that by the time Kublai (or Kubilai) Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan (I should call him Chinngis Khaan), died in 1294, the Mongol Empire stretched from the lower Danube, in the Carpathian Mountains — essentially the grasslands of Hungary today to the forests of Manchuria.

To the north were the vast taiga and tundra of Siberia. To the south were the arid deserts that split the central Asian steppes, and to the west were the great forests of Russia and Central Europe.

However, long before that happened, there were many developments across the eastern steppes that have left remnants for us to discover.



## The Beginnings of the Mongolian Steppes

### Xiongnu

In contrast to evidence of nomadic tribes in the western and central steppes going back millennia BC, history is a bit light on with regard to the eastern steppes. About the earliest we have are Chinese sources from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC referring to a group of people called the Xiongnu (pron something like *shi-ung-nu*). By that time they were a large and powerful confederacy occupying all and more of today's Mongolia. Chinese sources identify their leader as Modu Chanu who seemed to be the linchpin that brought them to their peak of size and power. Their subsequent history is filled with conflicts with successive Chinese emperors until their ultimate breaking up and being pushed west. Some scholars claim that the core tribes of the Xiongnu, as they moved further and further west, transformed themselves into the Huns who attacked Europe, meaning, of course, that the Huns had their origin in the eastern Eurasian steppe, although the precise ethnicity or language of the Xiongnu is unknown.

In the meantime, amongst the Xiongnu there were shatterings and scatterings, civil wars and comings and goings in and out of tributary relations with Chinese emperors...until somewhere round the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century when it all ended for the Xiongnu.

There have been excavations in western Mongolia that have revealed the presence of the tomb of the last Xiongnu emperor. I would expect to find something about this in the history museum in Ulaanbaatar; and about the Xiongnu in general.

## Turkics

I don't think that's quite a legitimate term, but at some short time after the decline of the Xiongnu, the steppe was gradually taken over by groups who had more identifiable ethnicity and languages: Turkic. (Some sources use the word Turkish, but I find this confusing. I think Turkish is best kept for the much later emergence of modern day Turkey, although, of course, there is a linking lineage of both ethnicity and language.)

There would seem to be a degree of dispute about when the Turks started to take hold on the eastern steppes. The Great Courses lecturer suggests the Avar Khagans were the earliest group of Turkic people to emerge; and did so by controlling the Mongolian steppes from about 330AD to 551 or 552AD. They replaced the earlier Xiongnu as the main power in the region.



Other sources talk of the Rourans as the confederacy that, in effect, replaced the Xiongnu. Then there seems to be some dispute as to whether the Rourans were Turkic or proto-Mongol.

What does seem to have more general acceptance is that the Avars appeared in strength in the Central Steppes round the 6<sup>th</sup> century; and possibly

included elements of the Rourans. Whether the Avars moved from the Mongolian Steppes or whether it was the Rourans who moved west, the basic driver was the emergence of the Gök Türks (pron the Gök to rhyme with *türk*).

The Gök Türks (also called Blue Turks as in sky blue) under the leadership of Bumin Qaghan (Khan) and his sons established their Turkic state around 546. They were the first Turkic tribe to use the name "Türk" as a political name. Not that it was any sort of straight-forward process. Bumin was in a vassal state relationship with the Rourans or the Avars – depending on which scholarly view one takes. He first fought off Uyghurs and Tiele then revolted against the Rourans or Avars and later had to secure victories over Hephthalites, Khitans and Kyrgyz. This was every day steppe life!

It would seem that these guys had their original stronghold in the Altai Mountains and were noted for their expertise in metal work (aka armoury). Once they had secured their revolt against the Rourans or Avars, they centred their Turkic Khagnate on what would become the great Turkic, if somewhat mythical, seat of power: Ötüken<sup>3</sup>. This would become the homeland of the Turks.

<sup>3</sup> The word was used to describe the sacred mountain of the ancient Turks. It was mentioned by Bilge Khagan in the Orkhon inscriptions as "the place from where the tribes can be controlled." A force called *qut* was



Some sources say the Khagnate descended into civil war and fractured into a western and an eastern part around 600. Others describe the split in more amicably strategic terms. Either way, each part in turn had their wars with China; and both parts eventually succumbed to the forces of the Chinese empire. By 659 the Tang Emperor had it all under his control and could claim to rule the entire Silk Road.

But in 679, the Gök Türks revolted against the Tang Dynasty and set up the Second Turkic Khagnate also centred on Ötüken. After the second Khagan was killed, his son Inel took the throne but the legal claimant (son of the 1<sup>st</sup> Khagan) was Molijian. Conveniently his brother Kul Tigin staged a coup,



killed Inel and paved the way for Molijian to become khagan with the name Bilge Khagan. He was a strong leader and expanded the empire considerably until he was poisoned.

I mention this small complexity because after his death in 734, the Gök Türks erected two memorial installations in honour of Bilge Khagan and his brother Kul Tigin. The inscriptions, in both Chinese and Old Turkic, relate the legendary origins of the Turks, the golden age of their history, their subjugation by the Chinese, and their liberation by Bilge Khagan. **These are at Khöshöö Tsaidam which we visit on our three day tour.** They are the earliest examples of the old Turkic language.

After Bilge Khagan's death, the Second Turkic Khaganate declined. The Gök Türks ultimately fell victim to a series of internal crises, renewed Chinese campaigns and another Turkic tribe – the Uyghurs.

## Uyghurs

With the obvious fragmenting of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Turkic Khaganate, a neighbouring Turkic leader, Kul Bilge Qaghan of the Uyghurs, allied himself with two other Turkic tribes, the Karluks and Basmyls. Although the alliances fairly quickly fell apart, leaving the Uyghurs in sole command, they were effective in seizing power from the Gök Türks in 744, capturing their heartland and dispatching their king. In a space of the following few years, the Uyghurs gained mastery of Inner Asia and established the Uyghur Khaganate.

The Uyghur Khagan took the title of *Qutlugh Bilge Köl Kaghan* (Glorious, wise, mighty kaghan), claiming to be the supreme ruler of all the Turko-Mongol tribes. In 747, the *Qutlugh Bilge Köl Kaghan* died, leaving his youngest son, Bayanchur Khan to reign as Khagan *El etmish bilge* ("State settled, wise"). After building a number of trading outposts with the Chinese, Bayanchur Khan used the profits to build a great capital, which was called Ordu Baliq ("City of Court").

Now for the really interesting part: The Uyghur capital of Ordu Baliq.

One entry of Wikipedia says: "Ordu-Baliq (meaning "city of the court", "city of the army"), also known as Mubalik and Karabalghasun, was the capital of the first Uyghur Khaganate, built on the site

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believed to emanate from this mountain, granting the local potentate the divine right to rule all the Turkic tribes. Although never identified precisely, Ötüken probably stretched "from the Khangai Range of Central Mongolia to the Sayan Mountains of Tuva, at the centre of which is the Orkhon Valley", which for centuries was regarded as the seat of the imperial power of the steppes



of the former Göktürk imperial capital, 17 km north-to-northeast of the later Mongol capital, Karakorum. Its ruins are known as Kharbalgas in Mongolian, that is, "black city". They form part of the World Heritage Site Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape."

Not sure about being built on the site of the former Göktürk imperial capital since there are several



sources that suggest the so-called capital was somewhat mythical. Perhaps the more pertinent point is that the Uyghur capital was built in the heartland of the Orkhon Valley further cementing that region's significance as the seat of imperial power of the steppes – as also would Kharkhorin soon after.

**It's the Kharbalgas ruins that will feature in Day 3 of our Kharkhorin tour along with the Turkic inscriptions at Khöshöö Tsaidam.** All this following a day at Kharkhorin.

Ordu Baliq was a fully fortified command post and commercial entrepôt typical of the central points along the length of the Silk Road. It occupied at least 32 square kilometres. The ruins of the palace or temple complex indicate that Ordu Baliq was an affluent and large town.

As is life on the steppes, all went well for a while until fragmentation, decay, border skirmishes and power-grabbers prevailed and it all ended. Ordu-Baliq flourished until 840, when it was reduced to ruin by an invading tribe from the north: the Yenisey Kyrgyz.

### Yenisey Kyrgyz

The Yenisey Kyrgyz are an ancient Turkic people who had been in existence for centuries and lived north of Mongolia. They had a history of interaction with the Xiongnu and Chinese dynasties. By the time of the Gök Türk and Uyghur empires, they had a well-established khagnate of their own up north.

In the days of the Uyghurs there had been less than friendly dealings between them and the Yenisey Kyrgyz culminating in 840 with the sacking the of Uyghur capital and driving the Uyghurs out of Mongolia entirely. But rather than replace the Uyghurs as the lords of Mongolia, the Yenisei Kirghiz continued to live in their traditional homeland and exist as they had for centuries.

When Chinggis Khaan came to power in the early 13th century, the Yenisei Kirghiz submitted peacefully to him and were absorbed into his Mongol Empire, putting an end to their independent state. During the time of the Mongol Empire, the territory of the Yenisei Kirghiz in northern Mongolia was turned into an agricultural colony called Kem-Kemchik.

### Khitans

The Khitans were not technically steppe peoples; they were originally from the Manchurian forest, and they learned nomadism through contact with the ancestors of the Mongols and Turks. They came to dominate parts of northern China in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century and eventually ruled as Chinese-style emperors.

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century they had carved out a state in a couple of the north-eastern provinces of China. Their history from there seems to be dogged by set-backs from squabbles with other nomadic tribes and Chinese dynasties. They even got caught up in the infamous An Lushan rebellion that started the downfall of the Tang Dynasty. (An Lushan – a Tang governor – had invaded the Khitans in 751 and 755 – the first time unsuccessfully; the second successfully, whereupon he then led a rebellion against the Tang with the help of Khitan soldiers and set up a competing kingdom (755-763).)



The Khitans then came vassals of the Uyghurs but also paid tribute to the Tang. At least until the Uyghurs were routed in 840.

From the early 900s, the Khitans grew in strength and consolidated their power base in the Liao Dynasty in the north-eastern part of China. From there they spread their control over parts of China, across Mongolia and into Kazakhstan. I'm guessing that during this period the Yenisey Kyrgyz, who you will recall opted to keep their 'capital' in their own northern homelands, were conveniently sanguine enough not to worry too much about the Khitans. Eventually everything changed once Chinggis Khaan took over.

**The point of flagging the Khitans is that we visit the ruins of one of their citadels (Khar Bukh Balgas) on Day 3 of our 3 day tour.**

Remember that all these sites/sights are marked on the map at:

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zhmU0FplyZRI.kmoMUocQUrEI>

You need to scroll east to find the three day tour.

## The Mongols

Since you will have by now watched all the videos, there isn't much more to add. So, the following is a cut (copied then drastically cut) and paste from the Great Courses lecture summary.

The Mongol Empire was largely the creation of Temujin, who would later be declared Genghis Khan, and his successors. It was Genghis Khan who united the various Mongol tribes into a new confederation and launched a remarkable career of world conquest.



## The Tatars

The Tatars were subjects of the Khitan emperors and, later, the Jin emperors. When Temujin was born in 1162, the Mongols shared the eastern steppes with a group of neighbouring tribes, some speaking Mongol, others speaking Turkish. At the time of Temujin's birth, the most important tribe

was the Tatars. They are better known by a corruption of that name, Tartars, which Christian authors used to describe them when the Mongols invaded Russia in 1236 and overran Eastern Europe.

The Tatars spoke a version of Turkish and dwelled in the steppes to the west of the Mongols. The Tatars represented a major power.

### Merkits, Oirats, Naimans, and Keraits

To the northeast of the Mongols was another important tribe, the Merkits. They were regarded as some of the best warriors on the steppes. They were not as numerous as the Tatars, but they were notorious for stealing wives and horses. In fact, they stole the wife-to-be of Genghis Khan early in his career. (The movie "[Mongol](#)" is worth a watch for the life of Temujin before he became GK.)



The Oirats dwelled on the western steppes, and farther west were the Naimans. The Naimans were perhaps the second most important tribe in Mongolia in 1162. The Naimans and the Tatars would both oppose the unification of the tribes by Genghis Khan.

The Keraits had originally dwelt in the Altai Mountains, regions that were once home to the Turks. The Naimans pushed the Keraits up against the Mongols. There was much intermarriage between them and the Mongol tribes.

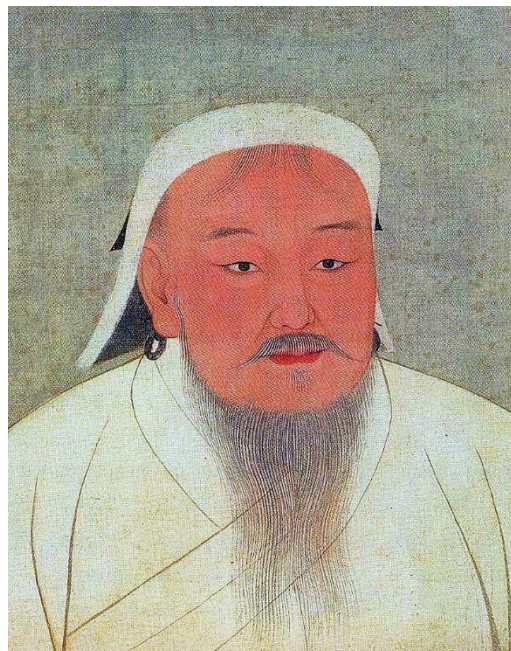
Politically, the situation was very unstable. Successive Chinese emperors wanted to incite wars among the tribes and keep them all weak. This allowed the emperors to posture as masters of the steppes. This, in effect, created the conditions that would allow for someone like Genghis Khan to emerge. He would come forward to unite the tribes engaged in incessant tribal.

### Genghis Khan

To his rivals, Genghis Khan was a terror. They saw him as the fearsome embodiment of the barbarian of the steppes. Even by the standards of the rules of war during the 13th century, Genghis Khan, his sons, and grandsons waged war on a scale hitherto unseen. He terrorized the Chinese, the Muslim, and the Christian worlds.

Genghis Khan also created a vision of world conquest by the time of his death. He was able to transmit this vision to his sons and grandsons, who proved very worthy successors.

Before becoming the Great Khan, he had many savage battles to subdue opponents and would-be rivals. But by 1203–1204, his victories had cemented Tem domination on the steppes.





I won't detail his conquests etc. Suffice it to say that it all started from his tent city of Kharkorin. This was later to become a built city, but that didn't happen until after his death.

## Ulaanbaatar

Finally, a few words on Mongolia's capital, Ulaanbaatar.

This is taken from Lonely Planet:

If Mongolia's yin is its pristine countryside, then Ulaanbaatar (UB) conforms nicely to its yang. An enormous city of pulsating commerce, wild traffic, sinful nightlife and bohemian counter-culture, the Mongolian capital elicits as much shock as it does excitement. The contrasts within the city can be exasperating too; Armani-suited businessmen rub shoulders with mohawked punks and *del*-clad nomads fresh off the steppes. One minute you're dodging the path of a Hummer H2 and the next you're mystified by groaning Buddhist monks at Gandan Khiid. It's a wild place that bursts into life after slumbering through a long winter. This chaotic capital is not the easiest city to navigate, but with a little patience, travellers can take care of all their logistical needs, watch traditional theatre, sample international cuisine and party till three in the morning. This ever-changing city may be the biggest surprise of your Mongolian adventure.

