GENGHIS KHAN

LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION

JOHN MAN

'Brilliant, vivid, erudite . . . brings conqueror and Mongols to life'
Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Daily Telegraph*

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Contemporary Mongolian strip cartoon; birthday celebrations for Genghis Khan, 1990, Ulaanbaatar, © Paul Harris.

A NOTE ON SPELLING

Genghis v. Chingis

In English the name has several spellings, the most common being Genghis, pronounced 'Djengis', with the first *g* soft as in *general*, the second *g* hard as in *guest*. Both spelling and pronunciation are faulty, a fault often compounded by English-speakers making the first *g* hard as well as the second. The soft first *g* of English (and French) derives from Persian and Arabic transliterations. There is no accepted national, let alone international norm. The old Mongol spelling of his name, still current in the vertical script of Inner Mongolia, transliterates as Chinggis, which is how some fastidious academics spell him. He is in fact pronounced Chingis (*ch* as in *church*; *g* as in *finger*, not as in *singer*), which is how he is spelled in modern Mongolian (and Russian). This usage is growing; but not, my publisher felt, fast enough to ensure universal recognition. The world, it seems, is not yet ready to abandon 'Genghis' – so thus he remains in this book.

For other Mongol names, I have mainly opted for a transliteration that best represents the modern Mongol.

Pinyin v. Wade–Giles

The two systems of transliterating Chinese still overlap. I have gone for whichever seems more appropriate in context, using pinyin mainly for modern names, Wade–Giles mainly for historical ones.

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INTRODUCTION: ON DEATH AND HOW TO SURVIVE IT

In March 2003 an extraordinary article appeared in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*. A group of 23 geneticists had been studying the DNA from some 2,000 men across Eurasia. To their surprise, they found a pattern common to several dozen of their sample men, *irrespective of where they came from*. The same genetic pattern, with slight local variations, ran through sixteen population groups scattered across the whole territory, from the Caspian to the Pacific. If the proportion of men with this pattern (8 per cent of the sixteen groups) is extrapolated across the entire population of that area, the startling conclusion is that 16 million men are in effect part of one vast family.

How are we to explain this? The data came from a study of Y-chromosomes, which men possess and women do not. Each man has a pattern on his Y-chromosome that is his unique signature, but the signatures have similarities which allow geneticists to spot family relationships and represent them in family trees called 'star-clusters'

(because they are drawn as star-bursts, not 'trees'). The first step was to analyse the star-clusters, and trace them back through time and space, pinpointing their 'most recent common ancestor'. Working with 34 generations and allowing 30 years for a generation, the team placed the common ancestor about 1,000 years ago, a median figure with a margin of error of up to 300 years either side (30 years per generation sounds a little high to me; reduce it to, say, 25, and the date of the most recent common ancestor comes down to 850 years ago). Moreover, most of the slightly different local variations were represented in just one of the selected areas – Mongolia.

This suggested a startling hypothesis: that one man living in Mongolia in the twelfth century had scattered his genetic material across half of Eurasia, with the result that it is now shared by one in 200 of all men living today.

Listen to Chris Tyler-Smith at Oxford's Department of Biochemistry on what happened next:

'We knew there was something extraordinary in the data as soon as Tatiana Zerjal, the D.Phil. student doing the analysis, drew the first network. The star-cluster stood out because of the high frequency, large numbers of neighbours, and distribution in many populations. We had never seen such a thing before. You can tell at a glance it represents a single extended family.

'Tatiana immediately said: "Genghis Khan!"

'At first it seemed like a joke, but as we accumulated more data and did the calculations to determine the most likely time and place of origin, this turned out to be the best explanation.'

Proof came when the researchers placed the 16 selected groups on a map of the empire created by Genghis in the early thirteenth century. The two made a perfect fit. Actually, one group, the Hazaras of Afghanistan, lay just outside the borders – but that fitted too, because Genghis

was in Afghanistan for a year or so in 1223–4, before retreating back to Central Asia.

It is conceivable that the common ancestor of these 16 million males was one of Genghis's immediate forebears; his brothers may have shared the same pattern. In any event, though, it was Genghis who was responsible for scattering this genetic signature across northern China and Central Asia between 1209 and his death in 1227. Beautiful women were part of the booty in warfare, and it was a statement of leadership to demand the best of the bunch and be given them by subordinate officers. Genghis was a stickler for doing this correctly: it was a way not only of asserting his authority but also of displaying his generosity, since the girls could be handed on as gifts to his loyal generals. Genghis was no libertine, but he was certainly no ascetic either, and he had access to many hundreds of girls in the course of 40 years of empire-building. Let us conservatively grant him 20 children – it could have been hundreds – 10 of whom are boys, all inheriting the same pattern on their Y-chromosomes. Let us say that each son himself produces two sons. The consequences of doubling the number of Genghis's male descendants every generation for over 30 generations are so dramatic that the calculation escapes from the real world before its conclusion. After five generations – by about 1350 – he has a trivial 320 male descendants; but five generations later, in 1450–1500, he has 10,000; after 20 generations he has 10 *million*; and after 30, impossible billions.

To find 16 million descendants today, then, is well within the confines of reality. It sounds as if our progenitor's reproductive capacity must have been terrific to achieve this. It is tempting to attribute astonishing qualities to the mutation that threw up a man who achieved such power. We might posit a ruthlessness gene

or super-stud performance. In fact, the particular genes this group of researchers studied are neutral; all they do is determine sex. So there must have been some other factor at work to ensure the survival of the Genghisid line. As Chris Tyler-Smith and his co-authors state, it can only be sheer political power with a vast geographical reach. Power did for Genghis and his close relatives what the fan-tail does for peacocks. The paper concludes: 'Our findings demonstrate a novel form of selection in human populations on the basis of social prestige.'[1] Sociologists and gossip columnists know about the sexual success of alpha males, but this is the first time it has been seen in action in evolutionary terms. Genghis was the most alpha of all alpha males.

It is fashionable these days to seek a genetic explanation of behaviour. Here, though, it is behaviour that lies behind the genetics, and it all goes back to a character – composed of strategic genius, drive, leadership skills, ruthlessness and many other traits – emerging on the Mongolian grasslands some eight and a half centuries ago.

This book is an attempt to realize an ambition conceived over three decades ago, when I wanted to travel somewhere really, really remote. Mongolia seemed as remote as I could hope for. In preparation, I started to learn Mongolian, and read something of Genghis Khan. Youth passed into middle age. Only then did the journeys start, in an attempt to understand the impact Genghis had on his world, and on ours.

Some impact, as it turned out. Genghis was driven – by poverty and humiliation (as we would say), by Heaven's

[1] Tatiana Zerjal et al., 'The Genetic Legacy of the Mongols', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 72, March 2003.

command (as he claimed) – into a life of conquest, becoming the founder of the world's most extensive land empire, and also a sort of immortal, living on not only in the genes of his descendants but also in a world that was forever changed by the outrush of his nomadic warriors. So the quest involved journeys of two kinds: back in time, with the help of as many books as I could find; and across Inner Asia, from the mountains of Genghis's youth, to the scenes of many of his conquests, to a hidden valley where he may possibly have died, and finally to the sacred mountain which he regarded as the source of his divine inspiration and where, in all probability, he lies in a secret grave. But he does not lie quietly. His empire brought Mongolia and China together, with startling social and political consequences that rumbled down the centuries, and rumble on today. Everywhere the Mongols rode, the present is haunted by the shade of Genghis.

In December 1995 the *Washington Post* proclaimed Genghis 'the most important man of the last thousand years'. Why? Because 'the big story of the past millennium is that a single species fully exerted its will upon the earth.' Back in the year AD 1000, there were fewer than 300 million people in the whole world (some estimates claim as few as 50 million), and most of them didn't even know where they were in relation to other nations and other continents. No Eurasian people, except a few dozen Vikings, knew of America; and no-one from the northern hemisphere, except perhaps a few hardy Phoenicians, had travelled to sub-Saharan Africa. Polynesians, who had peopled the Pacific, knew nothing of Australia. Though Asians traded with the eastern remnants of the Roman empire, they knew virtually nothing of Europe. Overall, every culture lived confined by climate, geography and ignorance.

Now the world has become a village. How did this

happen? Technology, economics, disease and many other vast, impersonal forces played their roles. So did countless individuals. Some leaders, inventors, explorers, thinkers and artists thrust peoples and technologies together more than others. This 'Mr Khan', as the *Post*'s researcher referred to him, certainly did.

Genghis's conquests forged new links between east and west. He and his successors built or rebuilt the foundations of modern China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Syria, Tibet, the new countries of Central Asia, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland. The conquests realigned the world's major religions, influenced art, established new trade patterns. The effects remain as keystones in Eurasian history.

But in *world* history? Surely all this does not compare to the revolution initiated by the greatest leap forward in the formation of our global village – the European discovery of America (or rather its rediscovery, the link made by the Vikings around 1000 having vanished from memory)? If one has to choose a man of the millennium, does not Columbus take precedence over Genghis?

In a word: no. Columbus was far more an expression of his age than Genghis. If he hadn't opened up the New World, someone else would have done, because many others besides Columbus were being driven to explore. They and their backers were set on reaching China. Why China? Because its wealth, carried along the so-called Silk Road, had been legendary from Roman times until the rise of Islam in the seventh century limited trade; and because Marco Polo, on his travels there two centuries before Columbus's journey, had confirmed it to be the greatest source of wealth in the world, under the command of the great khan, Khubilai (or Kubla, as he is widely known in the English-speaking world). Signor Polo managed to get to China because by the thirteenth century the route

across Eurasia was open again; and it was open because the Mongols were ruling from eastern Europe to China at the time, with Khubilai at their head; and Khubilai ruled because he had inherited his imperial role from his grandfather, Genghis.

When the Mongol empire splintered, Europeans were again barred from making the journey to China by land, blocked by newly revived Islamic cultures. Of course, trade flowed along the sea routes; but that journey was virtually impossible for Europeans, because the routes were controlled by Arabs, Indians, south-east Asians and the Chinese themselves. It was Columbus's big idea to head round the world the other way, westward, over the unknown ocean, and short-circuit the route to China. America just happened to be in the way. Thus, by a series of coincidental knock-on effects down almost three centuries, Genghis's vision of empire made a crucial contribution to the rediscovery and colonization of the New World.

And it all so nearly came to nothing. In August 1227 Genghis had already conquered much of Central Asia, and was on the point of seizing his greatest prize, northern China, which would be the key to ever-wider conquests, when he died. The news might well have put new heart into the Mongols' enemies, and brought a quick end to Genghis's imperial dream. For a moment, all Eurasia, totally unaware, was balanced between two possible universes. As it happened, the death was kept secret, as he wished, and one of those possibilities popped out of potential existence. August 1227 marks one of the most significant and little-known turning-points in history.

Secrecy is an important theme in this book, and two great secrets still underpin Genghis's current stature: how

and where he died; and how and where he was buried. The first secret allowed his heirs time to accommodate themselves to his death, and time to fulfil his dreams of conquest. The second secret explains in large measure his survival in the hearts and minds of ordinary people today.

The empire, brought to its high point by Genghis's successors, broke into separate entities – Chinese, Central Asian, Persian, Russian – and seeped away in a gradual process of transmutation and dissipation. To research the effects of the Mongol empire today is to become the historical equivalent of a radio astronomer, listening for the whispers of the Big Bang. One of those whispers has just been heard and magnified by Chris Tyler-Smith and his 22 associates. There are many others in the outlying regions of what was once the Mongol empire.

But in his heartland, Genghis's name sounds loud and clear, his brutalities forgotten or ignored in the rush of adulation. In Mongolia, after 70 years of Soviet-inspired suppression, people are free to parade his image, honour his birthday and name all manner of things after him – pop groups, beer, sports teams, institutes. In China, he is the revered founder of a dynasty, the Yuan.

And in both nations, Mongols worship him, in increasing numbers; for Genghis has become divine, the central figure in an ancient cult that now shows extraordinary signs of evolving into a new religion. Its heart lies in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia, in a remarkable building known to Chinese as the Mausoleum of Genghis Khan. It is more accurately called the Lord's Enclosure, the name the Mongols gave it, for it is not a true mausoleum, having never contained a body. Here, Genghis's spirit is honoured in a combination of Buddhist and shamanistic rituals, as ancestor, dynastic founder and divinity. A 4-metre marble statue of Genghis, seated with hands on knees, is a focal point for numerous

observances; worshippers burn incense-sticks and mutter prayers to 'relics'; murals portray Genghis as the genius who built a bridge between east and west, across which flow scholars, merchants and artists, lost in wonder, love and praise.

There are several curious things about the temple. It is modern; it is supported by China, in effect claiming the soul of Genghis as the founder of the Yuan dynasty; and, strangest of all to me, his cult has genuine religious aspirations, in which Genghis is emerging as a power through whom the true adept may make contact with the Mongols' overarching divinity, Eternal Heaven.

Genghis, reborn in spirit by the faith of his adherents, is more now than a help in ages past; he is a spiritual hope for years to come. It is a very strange transformation for a man born in obscurity, impotence and poverty.

I

ROOTS

1

SECRETS OF *THE SECRET HISTORY*

It is a hot summer's day in mid-July 1228 on the grasslands of central Mongolia. Most such days, a lone horseman would hear skylark song pouring from the clear blue sky, and the fizz of grasshoppers underfoot. Most such days, this apron of pasture, sloping down to a stream and a line of low hills beyond it, would be almost empty, save for a round tent or two, a herd of sheep, a few tethered horses. But on this day, other sounds drown the songs of skylarks and grasshoppers. The place is being transformed by a courtly gathering of epic proportions. Huge four-wheeled wagons rumble in, drawn by teams of a dozen or more oxen, 7-metre platforms bearing tents of felt and silk, some round in the Mongolian style, some square, each a mobile palace for a prince and his entourage. Commanders in chain-mail or armour of overlapping plates yell greetings. Family groups – most members on horses and camels, senior women in two-wheeled carts – accompany herds of sheep, goats, camels and horses, all spreading slowly over the steppe until they range out to

the hills in their thousands, and downstream, southwards for several kilometres, to the banks of a broad and shallow river. From groaning camels and horse-drawn carts, Muslim and Chinese slaves unload the wall-lattices and rolls of felt needed to assemble smaller tents. Guards dressed in padded gowns and leather helmets keep order from horseback, short bows and a dozen different types of arrow slung at their waists. Herdsmen, dressed in wrap-around ankle-length *deels*, slaughter sheep by the score for the feasting to come. Children gather dried dung for fuel and stack it in piles, while in the smoke-filled tents, blessedly free from the flies that pester on the steppe outside, women churn fermenting milk in leather bags to make milk-beer and milk-brandies.

There had been gatherings of this scale before, but never of this importance. The Mongols were now, after two decades of fighting, victors of campaigns in Central Asia, southern Russia and western China. Some of those meeting that summer in Mongolia came from Uzbekistan, some from Manchuria, from Xinjiang, from the newly conquered farmlands of northern China. Their leader, Genghis, had died the previous year, having raised his people from insignificance, founded a nation and set both on the path to empire. His 40-year rule and its triumphs proved the force of his claim that he was the chosen one, under the protection of Eternal Heaven. His will had now to be done. The gathering was needed to confirm the succession of Genghis's chosen heir, his third son Ogedei.

It would also mark a new beginning, to fulfil the grand strategy sketched out by Genghis when he was on the verge of the greatest conquest yet: the seizure of all China, something that no other 'barbarian' ruler from beyond the Great Wall had ever achieved. Yet even this was only a part of the vision inherited from him. Many of those gathering in 1228 had heard that westward, beyond

Muslim lands, beyond the plains and forests of Russia, there were still other worlds to conquer: the grasslands of Hungary, and then perhaps even the ripe cities of western Europe. To achieve total victory, to fulfil their manifest destiny of world dominion, would demand a skill and ferocity to match those of their departed ruler, and utter subjection to his will. A new nation, a new empire was about to emerge as Eurasia's most powerful entity.

Why meet here? There is another element in this scene, an unlikely one for a culture of wandering herdsmen and far-ranging cavalry, but central to this particular gathering. It is a collection of stone buildings running in a rough line, like one side of a street, for about half a kilometre. The buildings are overlooked by a flattened mound, surmounted by pillars supporting an open-sided roof. Steppe-dwelling herdsmen have no need for buildings. Yet these sturdy structures have obviously been standing for many years. They are in fact the permanent core of a military headquarters, surrounded on occasion by arrays *of tents and carts and men-at-arms and horses by the* thousand. The pavilion on the mound does threefold duty as a reviewing stand, conference centre and shamanistic temple.

The place, originally named Aurag, was the Mongols' first fixed capital, founded when they began to dream of unity and conquest, some time in the twelfth century. It was chosen for its strategic position, guarding a route into the northern mountains that were the tribe's womb, yet also looking southward, the auspicious direction to which Mongols turn their tents. It also offered the benefits of healing waters from an ancient spring nearby – *aurag* is an old Mongol word meaning 'source'. To the south, for 600 kilometres beyond the river, lay open steppe giving way gradually to the gravelly expanses of the Gobi desert – one vast highway for those prepared to cross – and then the

Yellow River, the final barrier before that source of wealth and danger: China. From Aurag, the Mongols could raid, gather reinforcements, conquer and, if necessary, flee to the protection of their mountain heartland.

Though Aurag has always been known to the Mongols themselves, few outsiders have ever heard of it. It has hardly rated a mention in history because it was abandoned shortly after this gathering occurred. Genghis had ordered a new capital further west, in a place better suited to dominate his growing empire. Soon, it would become famous as Karakorum, and its rise in the mid-thirteenth century would leave Aurag to collapse and vanish from history, if not from folk memory. Over the centuries, even its original name was lost. When the old Mongol word *aurag* fell from use, popular etymology seized upon something that sounded similar and had equally suitable connotations – Avraga, meaning both 'huge' and 'champion' (a term given to top-level wrestlers). Mongol orthography has its vaguenesses, so the central *ra* may be inverted. On maps, if it's there at all, you see it both ways: Avarga, Avraga. Neither properly represents its pronunciation, *avrag*, because the final *a* is an historical appendix. Let's go with 'Avraga'.

Over the centuries, Avraga's stones sank into the soil and it became a Mongolian Camelot, a place of legend with no material substance to it. But in 1992 a team of Japanese-backed archaeologists arrived with ground-penetrating radar. The Three Rivers Project, named after the three rivers that drain the Khenti mountains, aimed to find Genghis's grave. It failed; but its members made many important finds (and many claims, some of them pretty wild and contradictory, to which we shall return later in our story). Using their radar to survey Avraga's dozen enigmatic mounds, the Three Rivers team recorded echoes that suggested the presence of ditches and the

remains of walls. Their report was superficial, and actual excavation amounted to no more than a single pit that revealed some undatable stonework. Still, this was the first hard evidence that Avraga had once been a reality.

The gathering in Avraga in 1228 marked more than a strategic and political turning-point; it was an inspiration. The Mongols knew they were in the midst of great events. They were already a greater people than they had ever been, greater than any they had yet encountered except the Chinese, and they had every intention of setting their bounds wider still and wider. How had this miraculous change come about? Many of those now meeting in Avraga had been with Genghis since the start of his conquests, and a few of the oldest had known him in his childhood, almost 60 years before. Together, as a collective memory, they could surely explain the transformation to themselves and to future generations.

And this was the perfect opportunity. For among the princes, officers, guards and family members there were those whose task it was to entertain assemblies with tales drawn from legend and history. Like all societies dependent for communication on word of mouth, the Mongols had bards, poets and storytellers who commuted between grassland camps and tent-palaces. They even became the subject of their own stories:

How Tales Originated among the Mongol People

Once upon a time, plague struck the Mongols. The healthy fled, leaving the sick, saying 'Let Fate decide whether they live or die.' Among the sick was a youth named Tarvaa. His spirit left his body and came to the place of death. The ruler of that place said to Tarvaa, 'Why have you left your body while it is still alive?' 'I did

not wait for you to call me,' he replied, 'I just came.' Touched by his readiness to comply, the Khan of the Underworld said, 'Your time is not yet. You must return. But you may take anything from here you wish.' Tarvaa looked around, and saw all earthly joys and talents – wealth, happiness, laughter, luck, music, dance. 'Give me the art of storytelling,' he said, for he knew that stories can summon up all other joys. So he returned to his body, only to find that the crows had already pecked out its eyes. Since he could not disobey the Khan of the Underworld, he re-entered his body, and lived on, blind, but with the knowledge of all tales. For the rest of his life, he travelled across Mongolia telling tales and legends, and bringing people joy and wisdom.

If later traditions are anything to go by, the performances of bards, poets and storytellers brought more than joy and wisdom. They were crucial in moulding a sense of identity. Mixing legend and history, they explained traditions, recollected origins and portrayed the deeds of heroes. The repertoire was huge, as was the range of instruments and styles. In some areas, it still is. Mongols have epics, 'long songs', 'short songs' and many in between; songs for every occasion, songs in praise of landscapes, battles, heroes and horses – especially horses. They have pipes, drums, jaw's harps and horse-head fiddles with as many sizes as western orchestral ones. Women may sing in powerful strident voices crammed with trills and turns, similar to Bulgarian and Greek styles familiar to fans of 'world music'. Men often adopt the same technique, but if they come from western Mongolia or the reindeer-herding areas to the north they also specialize in overtone singing, the astonishing two- or even three-tone technique that produces flute-like nasal notes floating like birdsong above a deep chesty drone. For epics, the men

Kherlen, Khenti: these are not familiar names outside Mongolia. You can see both river and mountains on the flight from Beijing across the Gobi to Mongolia. If you glance out of a right-hand window a few minutes before touchdown in Ulaanbaatar, you will be looking north and east across an infinity of grassland marked only by the faint scribbles of car-tracks and the mushroom dot of a felt tent. In the distance the flanks darkened by fir forests and summits still whitened by snow are the Khenti mountains, the last outpost of the Siberian ranges that roll southward across the Russian frontier. This is a geographical borderland, where mountain gives way to grass, and rivers racing from high ground lose their force in gentle meanders.

One particular river runs due south from the mountains, sweeping round to head away north-east. This is the river, commonly spelled 'Kerulen' on western maps, which Mongols call the Kherlen, one of the three great rivers that drain their traditional heartland. The broad, 100-kilometre bend in the Kherlen cradles the southern tip of Countryside Island (Khödöö Aral), 4,000 square kilometres of tangled hills hemmed by the Kherlen and the Tsenkher, which flow parallel for 100 kilometres or so. Then the hills fall into grasslands, and the Kherlen swings east and north in the great bend I asked you to see in your mind's eye, and the two rivers meet around Avraga. From here a broad valley leads north-east into the heart of Genghis country. The mountains, the rivers, the valley and this particularly significant piece of pasture form the heartland of the Mongols, the region which, a little over 800 years ago, was the fount and origin of the tribe, of their greatest leader and of their nation – which was why, in the summer of 2002, I drove out to see it.

The vehicle of choice for Mongolian drivers is the Russian, or rather Ukrainian, UAZ (pronounced *wuzz*, to

rhyme with *buzz*). The UAZ minibus or jeep – the basics are the same – is the workhorse for those without a horse, a quintessence of 4×4s. There was no power steering. Driving her was like wrestling an ox. But the driver, Khishig, a cheery character with bad burn-marks on his neck and arms, was her master, churning through mud, breasting rivers, climbing banks, riding fast over open steppeland.

Half a day's journey out of the capital of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, we struck south along the Kherlen, around foothills that are the outer flanks of the Khenti massif. It was late June, the best time of year, when horses are sleek and marmots are fat. It was best to keep on the move. If we stopped and got out, grasshoppers crackled beneath our feet like static, and the flies began to pester. On the move, we were at our happiest. Goyo[1], a soft-voiced English graduate, stocky and tough as a Mongolian pony, talked of her ambition to study abroad, and Baatar, a middle-aged museum director with an elfin face and studious spectacles, hummed folk tunes in a fine high tenor. A Buryat, from the subsection of Mongols who straddle the northern borders, he revelled in the songs of his people.

Avraga turned out to be two places. The first, the modern town, is a cluster of wooden houses – for this northerly transition-land shares Siberia's domestic architecture – apparently drawn loosely together on the universe of grass by their own gravity. In fact, the town owes its existence to a nearby mineral lake where

[1] Traditionally, Mongolians had one name, usually of two elements, commonly shortened to the first. Today, professional Mongolians usually add a patronymic, which comes second in English but first in Mongolian. Thus Goyo, used to English-speaking ways, was Goyotsetseg Radnaabazar; Baatar was Dorjiin Baatartsogt; the driver, Khishignyam.

Mongolians come to bathe in summer and smear themselves with sulphurous mud. Known only to a few adventurous outsiders, it is a pretty spot, with a broad sandy beach, lawn-like banks for sunbathing and a fence to keep cattle and horses clear. Nearby on the open plain was our base, a tourist camp of a dozen Mongolian tents – *gers*, as the big round yurts are known in Mongolia.

The second Avraga, our destination, lies over the steppe 10 kilometres to the south. There is nothing to see of the old capital itself, but the site is obvious enough. Just above the low mounds surveyed by the Three Rivers Project stands a square, white-fenced enclosure, like a huge parade-ground, 200 metres across. Statues of two spear-carrying soldiers, decked out with conical helmets, little round shields, curved swords and upturned boots, guard nine tents and half a dozen scattered monuments. But the real guard was at the entrance. 'Welcome to Genghis's palace,' proclaimed a notice board in Mongolian and English. 'This is its respected site. Here you can make contact with ancient Mongol history and culture. Please pay at reception.' It was a private operation, and sadly similar in spirit to many a 'heritage site' in the West. There was nothing authentic about these monuments, no evidence that a palace had ever stood here. The nine tents – nine being the number of most significance traditionally – held amateurish portraits of Genghis and his queens, with replicas of weapons and yak-tail standards. In each, visitors could offer prayers at shrines, lit by low butter candles and draped with lengths of the blue silk that is the traditional Buddhist offering.

It was all in honour of *The Secret History*'s 750th anniversary, which officially occurred in 1990. 'According to the last sentence of *The Secret History*,' said the site's guide, baldly, 'the book was finished in 1240.' But wait: my opening scenario had the date as 1228. The difference,

the subject of much academic debate, is explained by *The Secret History*'s reference to the 'Year of the Rat', the first in the twelve-year cycle of animals that the Mongols adopted from the Chinese. Hence the twelve-year difference. But which might it be – one of these two, or some other, later rat-year? The argument centres on the fact that *The Secret History* covers the reign of Ogedei, but does not mention his death in 1241. So, if the text is taken at face value, it could only have been written in 1240. Other more technical arguments for later rat-years (1252, 1264) have also been made, but later records make no mention of any Great Assembly, and the immediacy of the writing, as we shall see, argues for a contemporary author. If we accept this, it leaves the problem of the twelve paragraphs on Ogedei's reign. In fact, scholars now widely agree that this is not really a problem: these paragraphs were a later interpolation, added just before Ogedei's death. The date we should go for is 1228.

For officialdom, however, 1240 represents an easy option, and a seductive one. During the communist years, Genghis – the man whose heirs oppressed Russia for two centuries – was *persona non grata*. But from 1989 onwards, Mongolian governments have been eager to promote anything to do with their nation's founder. In 1990, when many scholars still favoured 1240 as the year of composition, the chance of celebrating the 750th anniversary was simply too good to miss – with the result that visitors are still asked to pay a few *tugriks* to enter a tawdry enclosure that celebrates a doubtful date with spurious monuments.

Memorials aside, this is a glorious site, and that summer evening offered the best of the glory. Above, dark clouds hung ominously, but the lowering sun sank to a clear horizon and spotlit the westward slopes. Glowing herdsmen at the feet of weirdly extended shadows

rounded up glowing sheep, and a trainer yelled 'Pull back! Pull back!' to a ten-year-old boy galloping past in preparation for the National Day races two weeks hence. From the top of the rise behind, you could see across a plain made orange by the slanting light to the Seven Hills mentioned in *The Secret History*.

Ahead, down the slope, was the mound where the Three Rivers people had dug, now nothing but a shallow pit a few metres across. 'They found a few tiles, and a bit of a stone floor,' said Baatar, then stared into the middle distance, and back more than eight centuries. 'There were buildings all along here . . . Barracks . . . This was where families stayed when the men were off fighting. There was a palace . . .' His voice died, his vision faded, as Avraga itself had vanished into dream-time.

It was obviously a good place to build. In former times the Kherlen was much larger than it is now, and would occasionally have flooded and changed its course. But Avraga was well back from the river – 10 kilometres today – with its own water supply in the form of the little stream.

Down below us lay one of the reasons for building on this particular spot and the reason for its name. Across a water-meadow of tussocky grass, beyond the stream with its rickety metal footbridge, was a spring: the source, the original *aurag*, still producing the healing waters that drew Genghis's clan in the late twelfth century. It must have been old even then, having served predecessor clans and cultures for untold centuries. We filed down through a herd of horses, teetered from tussock to tussock to the footbridge, then up to the spring itself. Since nothing these days is off limits, it too had been privatized. A makeshift fence surrounded a little wooden shed topped by a Chinese-style roof. A notice proclaimed the spring's virtues and significance. Genghis drank here. The water

Ming officials, eager to preserve access to a language spoken by so many of their subjects, developed a strange system of recording Mongol so that they could train interpreters. They used bilingual scholars to transliterate – or rather trans-syllabarize – Mongolian into Chinese, with each Mongolian syllable matched by the Chinese sign that sounded most similar. This was, and remains, a standard way of writing foreign names and phrases in Chinese.

But Chinese has its limitations: each sign and syllable has to begin with a consonant and end with either a vowel or an *n*. In transliterations, the result is a gross pastiche of the original. The capital of Inner Mongolia, Hohhot, which is formed from two Mongol words (*khökh khot*) meaning Blue City, becomes a series of syllables, Hu-He-Hao-Te, each of which has its own meaning, but which together make nonsense, which tells Chinese readers that the name is foreign. America comes out as Mei-Guo, Los Angeles as Lo San Ge, Paris as Pa Li. Genghis Khan becomes Ch'eng Chi Ssu Han.

You can get a flavour of what happens to Mongolian in the sinified version of *The Secret History* by recasting a well-known soliloquy syllable by syllable into nonsensical French.

> Tu bille orne hôte tu bille, sa tisseur qu' ouest y un.
> Ou est serre tisse noble air insère m'Indes tu sous
> phare . . .

A Chinese reading the transliteration of *The Secret History* would sound as if he were speaking Mongolian with a terrible Chinese accent. Since it made no sense in Chinese, a rough guide to the meaning was added beside each vertical line.

Eventually, as Mongol influence declined, the Chinese lost interest in preserving the original Mongol version of

The Secret History remains prime. It is an intriguing and frustrating creation. Because it claims to explain Mongol origins, it invites comparison with other great 'foundation' works – the Bible, the *Iliad*, the Norse sagas, the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Mahabharata*. But it lacks their scope – it contains only 282 paragraphs, amounting to 60,000 words, one-third the length of the *Iliad*. And although it shares some elements of the 'foundation epic' – myth and legend grading into anecdote and what seems like history – it lacks both epic grandeur and historical rigour.

As an aspiring epic, *The Secret History* has strong roots in the Mongol tradition of narrative verse. It shares with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the rare distinction of being an oral work captured in writing. Clearly, by definition, there can be no *written* evidence for an *oral* tradition, but in Homer's case scholars have suggested a theory that could offer a model for the creation of *The Secret History*. After the War of Troy in about 1250 BC, Greek bards, travelling from court to court and marketplace to marketplace, spun stories about the heroes and events which portrayed the origins of Greek society, telling them who they were and what made them tick. After this storytelling had been going on for about 500 years, Homer welded some of these tales into an artistic whole just at the time when the Greeks adopted Phoenician writing. Once written, the stories were frozen, as it were, in flight. An oral medley became two unified works of literature.

The process by which song is captured in script is not entirely conjectural. A bardic tradition in the Balkans survived for another two millennia, into the 1930s, when the anthropologist and ethno-musicologist Milman Parry recorded them in the coffee-houses of Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina. As his pupil Albert Lord relates in *The Singer of Tales*, Parry discovered that bards, passing songs

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Note: initials GK refer to Genghis Khan. Page numbers in italics refer to maps. In book titles, the definite article is ignored in alphabetization.