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The Death of Chinggis Khan  
in Mongolian, Chinese, Persian, and European Sources

The particular circumstances of the death of the great Mongolian hero Chinggis Khan will probably always be mysterious.<sup>1</sup> Several versions of his death exist. The official Chinese-language history of the Mongol or Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in China records simply that the khan died in a tent in the summer of 1227.<sup>2</sup> A Mongolian chronicle entitled *Altan Tobči* gives a similarly brief account of his death.<sup>3</sup>

According to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, the thirteenth-century Mongolian-language record of the Mongols' exploits and conquests, Chinggis Khan died in 1227 of a fever that set in when he was thrown from his horse during his final campaign against the Tanguts<sup>4</sup>:

“Wintering that winter, saying, «I shall set forth against the Tang'ud people», newly numbering the number, in the autumn of the year of the dog [1226], Činggis Qahan set forth against the Tang'ud people. From the *qadund*, [taking with him] Yesüi qadun, he departed. As, on the way, in the winter, he hunted the many wild horses of [1v] Arbuqa, Činggis Qahan was riding Josotu Boro.<sup>5</sup> When the wild horses came, passing by, Josotu Boro being terrified, when Činggis Qahan fell from the horse, his flesh paining exceedingly, he pitched [at] Čo'orqad. As he

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<sup>1</sup> An important study of the death of Chinggis Khan is Eric Haenisch, “Die letzten Feldzüge Chinggis Han's und sein Tod” *Asia Major* (ser. 1) 9 (1933):503-551. Paul Pelliot's review of this article can be found in *T'oung Pao* 31 (1934-35):157-167.

<sup>2</sup> Sung Lien (ed.), *Yuan-shih*. Peking: Chung-hua Shu chü, 1976. v. 1. *chüan* 1:25.

<sup>3</sup> The account reads: “He died in the Bing Pig year, on the twelfth of the seventh month, being sixty seven years old.” Charles Bawden (trans.), *The Mongolian Chronicle Altan Tobchi*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955:143.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Woodman Cleaves (trans.), *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982:205-209. Another English version of *The Secret History* has been done by Paul Kahn, who reworked the very scholarly Cleaves translation into more readily readable English: Paul Kahn, *The Secret History of the Mongols: The Origin of Chinggis Khan*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> This is the name of a horse, signifying ‘Red-Earth Grey’.

passed that night, when, on the morrow, [2r] Yesüi Qadun spake, she said, «Princes and chiefs, talk [ye] unto one another. The Qahan, at night, hath passed the night, [his] flesh [being] hot.»<sup>6</sup>

Despite his fever, Chinggis Khan ordered an attack on the Tangut kingdom. He died soon after the Tangut king was captured and executed. This version of his death is sometimes regarded as the “official” or standard one.<sup>7</sup>

The Persian historian Juvaini has Chinggis Khan falling ill due to a “disease arising from the insalubrity of the climate”:

“When Chinggiz-Khan returned from the lands of the West to his old encampment in the East, he carried out his intention to proceed against the Tangut. And after the whole region had been purged of the evilness of his enemies and they had all been conquered and subjugated, he was overcome by an incurable disease arising from the insalubrity of the climate. He called to him his sons Chaghatai, Ogetei, Ulugh-Noyan, Kölgen, Jürchetei and Orchan, and addressed them as follows: «The severity of my illness is greater than can be cured by treatment, and, of a truth, one of you must defend the throne and the power of the State and raise up that pedestal which has received so strong a foundation.»”

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<sup>6</sup> Cleaves 205. Kahn's reworking of the *Secret History's* account of Chinggis Khan's death is found on 176-181. His account of the fatal injury is much more readable than the scholarly Cleaves translation:

“Chinggis Khan was hunting wild horses in the Arbukha region, riding his horse known as Red-Earth Grey. As some soldiers drove the wild horses from the bush, Red-Earth Grey bolted and threw Chinggis Khan to the ground. The fall caused him a great deal of pain, and he pitched his camp there at Chogorkhad. That night his condition grew worse, and the next morning Yesui Khatun called the princes and commanders together. «Talk among yourselves and decide what to do», she said. «The Khan has spent a bad night and his flesh has grown hot.»” (176)

<sup>7</sup> Walther Heissig calls this version the “official” one; see his *A Lost Civilization: The Mongols Rediscovered* (J. S. Thomson, trans.). London: Thames and Hudson, 1964:112-114.

Chinggiz then designated Ogodei as his successor, and the other brothers made a promise in writing to be obedient and loyal to Ogodei. Soon after this Chinggiz died of his illness:

Chingiz-Khan's illness grew worse, and it being impossible to remove him from where he was he passed away on the 4th of Ramazan, 624 [18th of August, 1227].<sup>8</sup>

Rashid al-Din, another Persian historian, related Chinggiz Khan's death in a straightforward manner, with no apparent illness or circumstance other than human mortality as the cause of his death:

"In the *qaqa yil*, that is, the Year of the Pig, falling within the months of the year 624/1126-1127, Chingiz-Khan, by reason of that condition which no mortal can escape, passed away in the region of Tangqut, having set out for the country of the Nangiyas [China] and having reached the frontier [of that country]."<sup>9</sup>

European sources also do not agree on the cause of his death. The well-known Venetian traveller Marco Polo wrote that Chinggiz was hit in the knee by an arrow during a siege on a castle of "Prestor John" (Ong Khan) and eventually died of the wound.<sup>10</sup> John of Plano Carpini, a Franciscan friar sent by Pope Innocent IV to Mongolia in 1245, perhaps wanted to see some form of divine judgement or punishment in Chinggiz Khan's death. He has Chinggiz "killed by a thunderbolt, having completed his decrees and statutes."<sup>11</sup> (John more than likely did not make this account. It might be a Russian adaptation of the work of the late fifth-century Byzantine Church historian Socrates and Theodoret and their story of the death of Rua, king of

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<sup>8</sup> John Andrew Boyle (trans.), *The History of the World-Conqueror*. London: Manchester University Press, 1958. v. 1:180-181, 183.

<sup>9</sup> John Andrew Boyle (trans.), *The Successors of Genghis Khan, Translated from the Persian of Rashid al-Din*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971:29.

<sup>10</sup> Manuel Komroff (rev. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. New York: Liveright, 1926:88. Of course, Chinggiz Khan's battles with Ong Khan were twenty-four years previous to 1227; on this, see Henri Yule and Henri Cordier (trans. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993 [reprint of original 1903 ed.]. v. 1:244-245 and n. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Dawson (ed.), *The Mongol Mission*. London: Sheed and Ward, Ltd., 1955:26.

the Huns. These accounts have Rua killed by a thunderbolt for daring to attack the Christian domains of Byzantium and as something of a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies about Gog and Magog.<sup>12</sup> These accounts were available in Carpini's time and likely constitute the analogous basis for Carpini's account, which he in turn almost certainly got from his informants among Russian clerics. Just as King Rua of the Huns was struck by lightning for daring to attack Christian Byzantium, so Chinggis Khan was struck by lightning for daring to launch a Gog-and-Magog-like attack on Christian Russia.<sup>13</sup>)

Armenian historians of the Mongols do not comment on the manner of Chinggis Khan's death.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most fanciful and bizarre account of all is, ironically enough, from a seventeenth-century Mongolian-language chronicle. According to the eminent German Mongolist Walther Heissig, one chronicle describes the death of Chinggis Khan in the following terms: In 1227 Chinggis Khan was campaigning against the Tanguts, a non-Chinese people whose kingdom was located in modern Ning-hsia (Ningxia) and Kansu (Gansu) provinces in northern China. After capturing and executing the Tangut king, Chinggis took the king's wife, the Tangut queen Gürbelč'in yuu-a (Mongolian for 'Lizard-like Beauty'), as a concubine. Not pleased with this novel form of courting, Gürbelč'in yuu-a made plans to kill her new captor and husband. She placed a small sharp piece of metal into her sexual organ, and after Chinggis Khan imposed himself on her, she mortally wounded him in his sexual organ.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On which see Ezekiel 38:39 and Revelation 20:7-9.

<sup>13</sup> Personal written communications from Felicitas Schmieder, 1 July 1996, and 12 February 1997. See also her *Johannes von Plano Carpini, Kunde von den Mongolen 1245-1247*, übersetzt, eingeleitet und erläutert von Felicitas Schmieder, Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1997, Kap. V, 19, note 98.

<sup>14</sup> On Grigor of Akanc, see Robert P. Blake and Richard N. Frye (trans. and eds.), "History of the Nation of the Archers (The Mongols)" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 12/3-4 (Dec. 1949):269-399. On Kirakos of Ganjak's brief history of the Mongols, see John Andrew Boyle (trans. and ed.), "Kirakos of Ganjak on the Mongols", *Central Asiatic Journal* 8 (1963):199-214.

<sup>15</sup> Heissig 112-114. The relevant passage from Heissig (113) is as follows: "... in the Mongolian chronicles of the seventeenth century, which are based on much older historical works and traditions, the view is constantly expressed that Korbelchin, his beautiful 'lizard-like' wife, had done him an injury of which the great warrior had died. Jenghiz

Subsequent Mongolian historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rejected this version as a fabricated libel perpetrated by Western Mongols, who had traditionally been ill-disposed towards Chinggis Khan. But some seventeenth-century Mongolian chronicles seem to have this version in mind, although they hint very cautiously and delicately at its specifics.

One example of such careful and indirect treatment of Chinggis Khan's death is found in the seventeenth-century *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, the 'Bejeweled Chronicle'. In several ways the account contained in this chronicle seems almost a bowdlerized or sanitized reworking of the more shocking and bizarre version given above. In the *Erdeni-yin Tobči* we find the Tangut king, just prior to his execution, making the following statement to Chinggis Khan:

*Gürbelč'in γuu-a-yi minu č'i beye-degen abqu bügesü бүкү beye-yi inu sayitur negjijü üjegdeküi* 'If thou takest unto thyself the body of my Gürbelč'in γuu-a, inspect her entire body thoroughly and it shall be seen'.<sup>16</sup>

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Khan, after his victory over the Tanghuts – a Buddhist people with a culture of their own derived from Tibet, who lived in the country stretching from the bend of the Hwang Ho westwards and south-westwards to the Himalayas – is said to have coveted the wife of the Tanghut king. He had the king executed and took the woman into his harem. One can well imagine that Korbelchin was not greatly impressed by this novel form of courting. In any case a whole series of Mongolian chronicles report that, after they had slept together, some «injury was done» to Jenghiz Khan's imperial body. Korbelchin, so the story goes, fled, pursued by the Mongolian guards and flung herself into the Yellow River, which flowed near the camp. Jenghiz Khan died. The injury that he suffered is usually hinted at very cautiously. An early seventeenth-century chronicle, however, is quite specific and records with complete clarity: «The prince's wife Korbelchin pressed a small piece of metal into her sexual organ and, after she had injured the ruler's sexual organ, she fled, threw herself into the Hwang Ho and died.»

<sup>16</sup> The three passages I have translated and quoted here come directly from the Mongolian text reproduced in I. J. Schmidt, *Erdeni-yin Tobchi: Geschichte der Ost-Mongolen und ihres Fürstenhauses, verfasst von Ssanang Ssetsen*. St. Petersburg, 1829:100, 102, along with a less than fully adequate German translation. Schmidt's text has a number of errors and cannot serve by itself as the base text of a new translation. (For some of its problems, see C. Z. Zamcarano (Rudolph Loewenthal, trans.), *The Mongolian Chronicles of the Seventeenth Century*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955:26-40). A carefully transcribed and edited text was published in 1990: M. Gô, J. de Rachewiltz, J. R. Krueger, and B. Ulan (eds.), *Sayang Secen Erdeni-yin Tobči Precious Summary: A Mongolian Chronicle of 1662*. v. 1. *The Urga Text Transcribed and Edited*. Canberra: Faculty of Asian Studies Monographs. New Series 15.)

In several important translations, the full sense of *üjegdeküi* ('it shall be seen') is not adequately conveyed. John Krueger's translation of the passage above is as follows: "If you take to yourself my GÖrbeljin Guua, scrutinize her entire body well."<sup>17</sup> Chinese translations are also inadequate. *Meng-ku Yuan-liu*, the eighteenth-century Chinese translation of the *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, renders this passage approximately as follows: "Again, if you take unto yourself GÜrbelčĭn yuu-a, you may take the side of her body and inspect it meticulously."<sup>18</sup> A modern translation published in Inner Mongolia in 1981 says more or less the same thing: "Furthermore, if you take unto yourself my GÜrbelčĭn yuu-a, you should meticulously inspect her entire body."<sup>19</sup> But according to Lessing, the meaning of *üjegde-* (YZEGDE-) is 'to be seen or visible; to give birth to [!] (rare)'.<sup>20</sup> The agglutinative suffix *-küi* is what Poppe labeled the "Nomen futuri"<sup>21</sup> which "expresses an action which will take place in the future".<sup>22</sup> The sense of 'it shall be seen' in *üjegdeküi* is, then, unmistakable.

We may well wonder what is being hinted at by the instructions to search GÜrbelčĭn yuu-a's body thoroughly. Knowing what we do about the "libelous" account of Chinggis Khan's death, it is somewhat tempting to conclude that this is a reference to some type of sharp instrument. Perhaps she and her husband had made prior plans for the assassination of Chinggis Khan?

She may have had ample opportunity to be alone to hide a weapon, as she was allowed a few moments of privacy. According to the *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, her beauty was admired by all after she had been taken into Chinggis's harem. Before her union with Chinggis, she announced that her physical

<sup>17</sup> John R. Krueger (trans.), *The Bejewelled Summary of the Origin of Khans (Qad-un ündüsün-ü Erdeni-yin Tobči): A History of the Eastern Mongols to 1662*. Bloomington, Indiana (The Mongolia Society Occasional Papers no. 2), 1964:68.

<sup>18</sup> *Ch'in-ting Meng-ku yuan-liu*. Taipei: T'ai-wan Shang-wu (Ssu-k'u ch'üan-shu chen-pen, Ser. 3), ca. 1972, *chüan* 4:4A. Original Chinese translation first published during the reign of the Ch'ien-lung emperor in the late eighteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> *Hsin-i chiao-chu Meng-ku yuan-liu*. Hohhot: Nei Meng-ku jen-min ch'u-pan she, 1981:176.

<sup>20</sup> Ferdinand D. Lessing (ed.), *Mongolian-English Dictionary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960:1015.

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Poppe, *Grammar of Written Mongolian*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1964:94, § 360.

<sup>22</sup> Poppe 94, § 359.

beauty would be even more radiant if she were allowed to bathe. Permission to bathe was granted, but she was ashamed to disrobe in front of Chinggis's retinue: *olan nököd tan-ača içimüi bi ta bükün-iyer ende bayıγun bi γaγcha-γar odču ukiyasuγai* 'I shame because of [the presence of] thine attendants. All of you stay here, and allow me to bathe alone'.

This request was also granted, and the bathing did indeed add to her already ravishing beauty. When night fell, she did harm to Chinggis Khan's body: *tendeče söni bolju umtaγsan-u qoyina ejen-ü altan beye-dur gem bol-γaγsan-iyar čiligerken büküi-e* 'And it came to pass that at nightfall, after he [Chinggis Khan] was asleep, she did the harm to his golden body, and he fell ill'.

Having done the deed, she threw herself into the Yellow River (*Qara Mören*) and drowned.<sup>23</sup> (After her death the Yellow River was sometimes called the *Khotun-gol*, or 'Lady's River', by some Mongols.) Chinggis's illness soon grew serious, and he died in August of 1227.

The elements of this version of Chinggis Khan's death are highly improbable; hiding blades in such a manner would surely have severely injured, if not quickly killed, Gürbelčün γuu-a. The details of this particular account of the great khan's death are likely not as reflective of historical truth as they are of lurid, exaggerated male anxieties and unsavory fascinations with sex and violent death.

The historiographical nature of the *Erdeni-yin Tobči* is a separate but important and related issue. The *Erdeni-yin Tobči* seems primarily a literary work, not a straightforward and strictly factual chronicle written on rationalistic Western models. It contains clearly fantastic passages that cannot be taken literally. For instance, in passages immediately preceding the Tangut king's cryptic warning to Chinggis Khan about Gürbelčün γuu-a's body, we have the Tangut king transforming himself into a serpent and Chinggis Khan transforming himself into a fabulous (snake-catching?) bird in response. The king then transforms himself into a tiger, and Chinggis responds by turning himself into a lion, the king of beasts. The Tangut king is left without powers after Chinggis Khan transforms himself into the lord of the skies, so he sur-

<sup>23</sup> John R. Kureger's translation of this important passage is as follows: "Then when night had fallen and they had gone to sleep, because she had performed an evil to the Ruler's exalted body, the Ruler grew ill, and Queen Görbeljin Guua rose, went to the Qara Mören, plunged in and died." (John R. Krueger (trans.) 69. The translation in the "Second Edition" (1967) is identical.)

renders. He bleeds not blood but milk when he is slashed with his own mysterious folding Egyptian knife hidden in his boot.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, then, the literary and hyperbolic need to be distinguished from the historical facts, and this is no mean task. But from the strictly historical point of view, common sense and human experience can perhaps afford some guidance in classifying or interpreting the events in the *Erdeni-yin Tobči* as impossible, improbable, possible, and likely. The magical transformations described above are impossible or extremely improbable because they do not conform with the empirical observations of human experience. For the same reasons it seems improbable that Gürbelčín yuu-a could have secreted a sharp instrument inside her sexual organ for any extended period of time, as this would have led to serious injury almost immediately.

It is, however, well within the realm of possibility that she could have assassinated Chinggis Khan in some way. The fact remains that a whole series of seventeenth-century Mongolian chronicles do hint strongly that Gürbelčín guu-a did some bodily injury to Chinggis Khan after they had slept together. Similar accounts among the Kazakhs have also been discovered by folklorists.<sup>25</sup> The seventeenth-century chronicles are perhaps not as accurate or reliable as the more contemporary sources on Mongolian history. If there is some ultimate element of truth in this particular version, it is perhaps that the death of Chinggis Khan was due to assassination rather than natural or accidental causes.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The knife is described as a folding knife of three parts. This is more than likely a simple "butterfly" knife, perhaps not entirely unlike those used by American gangsters today. Two covers pivot at the base of the blade and fold over against themselves to enclose the blade in a closed position. When opened, the blade and the two covers constitute three separate parts until the two covers are attached to each other to form the knife's handle. The "Egyptian" steel is likely *Damascus* steel, a very fine knife steel folded by a blacksmith nine times into 512 layers, a process which leaves a very distinctive grain in the steel. Damascus steel has been highly prized by knife fanciers for centuries. I owe these insights to Prof. David C. Montgomery of Brigham Young University.

<sup>25</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Birtalan Ágnes (of Budapest's University Elte, Dept. for Inner Asian Studies), Szeged, Hungary, June 1996.

<sup>26</sup> In April of 1993 I discussed this question at Brigham Young University with Dr. Renchingin Otgon, Director of the State Central Library in Ulan-bator, Mongolia and a scholar of Mongolian history. He stated to me his belief that Gürbelčín yuu-a probably did assassinate Chinggis Khan in some way.



It must also be remembered, however, that this is only *one* of several accounts or versions of Chinggis Khan's death. Historians must be content to conclude with Paul Ratchnevsky, the distinguished biographer of the great khan, that the circumstances of Chinggis Khan's death will, along with many aspects of his death, always remain a mystery; only in specifying the general time of his death (August 1227) do the historical sources agree.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Ratchnevsky (Thomas Haining, trans.), *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991:141-142. On the issue of the exact date of Chinggis Khan's death, see Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1959. v. 1:305-309. Pp. 309-330 of the same work contain much detail on the disagreements over the exact place of his death.