

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# NOMADS OF THE STEPPES



**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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# Introduction

## History's First Warriors on Horseback

Sometime after 2000 BCE, a new kind of pastoral nomadism emerged on the vast Eurasian steppes that stretch from Hungary to China. There, groups that probably had combined herding and hunting with some simple agriculture turned full-time to a nomadic life tending herds of oxen, sheep, cattle—and horses.

It was in fact the ability to master riding horses that made this nomadic life attractive. Farming was possible only in a few places on the vast, treeless grasslands of the steppes. The horse freed nomadic people to roam the plains with their herds. And it soon turned these nomadic societies into fierce warriors and conquerors. At certain times, many tribes would unite around a single leader and become a terrifying threat to settled societies, even those far advanced in terms of agricultural productivity, technology, literacy, and the other attributes of civilized life. At other times, the nomads were a transmission belt for goods and ideas from one end of the Eurasian landmass to the other. As a result, from around 1500 BCE through the Mongol conquests of the 13th century CE and beyond, the nomads of the steppes would play a far more important part in history than their numbers or general state of social advancement would seem to justify. With this set, we hope to convey something of the nature of these societies and the role they played in world history.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in this story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes**

These illustrations focus on the role of the horse and horse-riding warriors in these nomadic societies. The images also call attention to the fear and loathing that influenced and sometimes distorted the way that nomads were seen by others.

### **Steppelands**

The illustrations here highlight the stark and challenging natural setting in which these societies developed and thrived.

### **The Nomadic Life**

This lesson looks at some aspects of nomadic ways of life, as well as the complex interactions that evolved between these societies and cultures from outside the steppes.

### **The Mongol Empire**

The greatest of all the nomadic empires was the one constructed by Genghis Khan. This lesson examines this empire and the factors common to nomadic societies that explain both its rapid rise and its disintegration.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.



**OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand how the steppe nomads' ability to tame horses and mount them for combat made them such a feared and powerful force in history.

# Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

This small Scythian gold bottle of the fourth century BCE shows a warrior pulling the tooth of a comrade. It is a bit of evidence in a great mystery. The Scythians and other nomadic peoples roamed the grasslands of the Eurasian steppe for centuries. They were fierce warriors, the first to fully master the horse as a weapon of war. This made them terrifying to more technically advanced settled societies near them. Yet the mystery is that this bottle could easily have been made by a Greek goldsmith. Greek and Scythian potters, jewelers, sculptors, and smiths mutually encountered and influenced one another in Black Sea settlements and elsewhere near the Scythian homelands in today's Ukraine. Scythian interactions with the settled civilizations near them took many forms. Warfare between them was common enough, but trade and cultural sharing were also ongoing aspects of the relationship.

**Illustrations 2A & 2B**

Scores of nomadic societies roamed the Eurasian steppes from the Danube basin and Hungary in Europe, to Mongolia and Manchuria in the east. A nomadic society known as the Xiongnu, for example, threatened China throughout the Han Dynasty (221 BCE to 220 CE). In the fifth century CE, what was probably a breakaway group from the Xiongnu crossed the steppes to terrorize ancient Rome. They are known to history as the Huns. The illustrations here, both from a later time, depict the Huns' leader, Attila. They may not be reliable evidence of what Attila looked like, but they do suggest the terror he evoked.

**Illustration 3**

There was more to the nomads of the steppe than pillage. Yet the fact remains they were among the most ruthless warriors in history. This illustration again suggests the depth of fear they evoked. It shows Duke Henry II of Silesia being slain by the Mongols at Wahlstadt in Poland in 1241. The Mongol tactics involved swift attack, planned retreats, and coordinated deception. Both sides fought on horses, but the heavily armored European knights had to get in close to use lance and sword. Swiftly galloping Mongols could use bow and arrow with amazing accuracy at more than 300 yards. At Wahlstadt, Henry died in defeat along with 25,000 of his men.

## Lesson 1—Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

# Illustration 1



The Granger Collection, New York

### Discussing the Illustration

1. What you see here is small Scythian gold bottle from the third or fourth century BCE. In one of its scenes here, a warrior is helping a comrade. Can you guess how he is helping that other warrior?
2. The Scythians were one of many groups of pastoral nomads who have roamed the Eurasian steppes. What are pastoral nomads? What is a steppe?
3. The Scythians lived on steppelands north of the Black Sea. For centuries, the Eurasian steppe was home to dozens of sizable nomadic tribes or peoples, all at the same time. Can you explain how?
4. What sorts of things do you think this bottle can teach or suggest about the Scythians and their way of life?
5. These fierce Scythian warriors were probably the first to fully master the horse as a weapon of war. This made them terrifying even to the more technically advanced settled societies near them. Why do you suppose this made them so terrifying?

### Follow-up Activities

1. Objects like the gold bottle shown here can be found in a collection of Scythian artifacts at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Learn more about this collection by contacting the Hermitage Museum. One way to do this is by going to its Web site:  
<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/>  
From there, search their collections to find the one on the Scythians. Use what you learn there in a brief report to the class on what this collection contains and what can be learned from it about the Scythians.
2. **Small-group activity:** The nomadic warriors of the steppe were the first to tame the horse and learn to ride it. How did they do this? What other uses did they make of the horse? One source that can help you find out is *The First Horsemen*, by Frank Trippett (Time-Life Books, 1974). Use this book and other sources to help you create a colorful bulletin-board display on the role of the horse among the nomads of the Eurasian steppes.

## Lesson 1—Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

# Illustrations 2A & 2B

2A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

2B



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### Discussing the Illustrations

1. These illustrations are of another group of nomadic warriors from the Eurasian steppes, the Huns. The most famous Hun of all is depicted in both illustrations. Can you name him and explain why he and the Huns came to be so feared in Europe?
2. No one is sure of where the Huns came from. Some historians say they originally split off from another nomadic society known as the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu terrorized the Han Dynasty for centuries. About when and over what nation did the Han Dynasty rule?
3. Attila is in both illustrations. He is sitting on his throne in Illustration 2B. These illustrations from a later time are not reliable evidence of what Attila looked like. However, they do help to suggest the way he and other nomad warriors were viewed. What view of these warriors do the illustrations suggest? How realistic or fair do you think this view is? Why?

### Follow-up Activities

1. Speaking of Attila's campaigns against the Roman Empire in the mid-400s CE, one historian says:

*The victories of this period may have more to do with Roman demoralization than any inherent military superiority of the invaders.*

Learn more about Attila and his military campaigns during his time first as co-ruler of the Huns with his brother (434–445 CE) and then as king of the Huns by himself (445–453 CE). Write a brief essay on Attila's military campaigns. In your essay, explain why you do or do not agree with the historian quoted here.

2. **Small-group activity:** Learn more about both the Huns and Xiongnu. Create a map showing the original homelands of the Xiongnu, the first known location of the Huns (or various groups with the name Hun), their movements in Asia and Europe, and the impact of both Hun and Xiongnu nomads on other nearby societies. Use your map in a presentation to the class.



## Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustration**

1. This illustration shows how nomads of the Eurasian steppe could terrorize the more settled civilizations regularly over the centuries. It shows Duke Henry II of Silesia being slain by perhaps the fiercest nomadic army of all time in a battle at Wahlstadt in Poland in 1241. From this date and location, can you identify these nomadic conquerors?
2. Nomadic steppe warriors were among the most ruthless and effective in history. At Wahlstadt, both sides fought on horses. However, the heavily armored European knights had to get in close to use lance and sword. From what you know about the Mongols, and from what you can see here, can you explain why such tactics failed so miserably against these horse-riding warriors?
3. At Wahlstadt, Henry died in defeat, along with 25,000 of his men. This painting from the 1800s is again only an artist's idea of the battle. What view of Henry, his forces, and the Mongols does the painting offer? How accurate do you think this view is? Why?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. The battle of Wahlstadt was part of a larger campaign by the Mongols in Poland and Hungary in 1241. Learn more about these Mongol invaders and what their aim was. Find out which European countries and which groups of European knights and other forces were involved in the fighting. What were the key battles? How did Mongol tactics help them to triumph? Finally, find out why the Mongols' military victory turned out to be of no value to them. Create a map of this fighting and use it in a report to the class.
2. Historians have described the military tactics of nomadic warriors as involving these elements:

swift attack	silent signalling
planned retreats	coordinated deception

Learn more about nomadic horse-riding warriors of the Eurasian steppes from the time of the Huns to the time of the Mongols. Based on what you learn, write a brief essay explaining how each of the four elements listed helped make these warriors so effective.

**OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will appreciate the many ways in which the nomads of the steppes were shaped by the harsh and challenging environment in which they lived.

# Steppelands

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

Here a Buryat horseman tends to other horses near Lake Baikal in what is now Russia. His horse is typical of the smaller, lighter horses the nomads learned to handle with such deadly skill. Those horse-riders of the Eurasian steppelands were tough warriors. They had to be—they lived in one of the harshest environments on the planet. Where the region is not open grassland good for grazing sheep, cattle, oxen, and horses, it is often desert good for little at all. The Gobi Desert is harsh enough; to the southeast is the Taklamakan—a thousand miles of heat in summer and searing cold in winter, with winds and terrifying sand storms.

**Illustration 2**

The nomads lived mainly on open grasslands, which were good for herding animals but generally too dry and harsh for much farming. This tent, known as a ger or yurt, is made of felt produced from wool. It is typical of the dwellings nomads used throughout much of their history. In the bitter winters, the nomads moved to valleys or riverbeds less open to the winds. Over the course of a year, a tribe and its herds usually moved in a regular pattern perhaps a hundred miles or so from one pastureland to another. This life may seem primitive. But nomadic pastoralism was not the earliest form of social life on the steppes. First came hunters and gatherers. Then some did eke out a livelihood through farming along rivers and at oases scattered throughout the region. Only after about 2000 BCE did the herding of sheep, cattle, and oxen become the chosen lifestyle of the steppes, especially once the horse was tamed.

**Illustration 3**

The open grasslands and deserts of the Eurasian steppes are not all flat. Some of the highest mountains on earth divide up this region and help to cut it off from more settled societies, especially from India to the south and the societies of the Western Asia and the Mediterranean to the west. This artist's view is of the Tien Shan range that runs north of the Taklamakan desert. For centuries, caravan traders made their way along the foothills dividing the Tien Shan from the Taklamakan desert, finally crossing passes in the Pamir Mountains at its western edge. From there they would go south to India or west to Afghanistan, Persia, and the Mediterranean.



## Lesson 2—Steppelands

# Illustration 1



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### *Discussing the Illustration*

1. The Buryats, like the Mongols, were mainly nomadic herders. This photo shows a Buryat horseman and his herd close to Lake Baikal, near the lands where many of the most important nomadic societies developed. Where is Lake Baikal located?
2. The horse-riders of the vast Eurasian steppelands were tough warriors. They had to be strong. They lived in one of the harshest environments on the planet. Using this photo, explain what features appear to make it so harsh.
3. Along with steppelands, deserts have also played a huge role in the history of this region, including the Gobi in Mongolia and the Taklamakan. Where is the Taklamakan Desert located?
4. In the illustration, the man's horse is typical of the smaller, lighter horses the nomads learned to handle. Why might such horses have been ideal as the first to be tamed and the first to be ridden into battle by bow-and-arrow wielding warriors?

### *Follow-up Activities*

1. **Small-group activity:** The name "Taklamakan" roughly translates as, "Go in, and you won't come out." Find out why by reading an account of a trip through or around the edge of the Taklamakan. One book is *Crossing the Desert of Death: Through the Fearsome Taklamakan*, by Charles Blackmore (John Murray Pubs Ltd., 2002). Also, look for photos of this desert in magazines and other sources. Make copies of these images and use them to help illustrate at least five passages from the account you read. Post all the images and the passages on the bulletin board and title your display, "Go in and You Won't Come Out!"
2. **Small-group activity:** The Eurasian steppe runs in and near several deserts: the Gobi, the Taklamakan, the Kara Kum, and Kizil Kum (the latter two being near the Aral Sea). Learn about these and other deserts near and in the Eurasian steppelands. Create a bulletin-board display on these deserts in which you show carefully how they are alike and how they differ from one another.

## Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### ***Discussing the Illustration***

1. The Eurasian nomads lived on open grasslands, often in special tents covered with sturdy wool felt, such as the one shown here. What name is often used for these tents?
2. Over the course of a year, a tribe would normally move in a regular pattern perhaps a hundred miles or so, from open pasture land to more-sheltered winter quarters in a valley. Given this pattern, why would tents of the sort shown here be a sensible form of housing?
3. A life of nomadic pastoralism may seem primitive. But it was not the first form of society on the steppes. First came hunter-gatherers. Then some did eke out a living by farming along rivers and at oases. Only after about 2000 BCE did herding sheep, cattle, and oxen on the open grasslands become the chosen lifestyle of the steppes, especially once the horse was tamed. Why would this have made such a difference? What other factors might have led more settled tribes to turn to pastoral nomadism as a way of life?

### ***Follow-up Activities***

1. *Gers (or yurts)* are still popular. It should not be hard to find information on them in the library or on the Internet. Use what you learn to create a list of the benefits of this kind of shelter. Also, make your own diagram and a set of instructions setting out the basic steps in constructing one. Use all this to create a brief guide on building and using a *ger*. “Publish” your guide by making enough copies of it for the entire class.
2. Scientists know that climate has changed several times over the centuries since the last Ice Age ended more than 10,000 years ago. However, they do not know in very exact detail how it has changed. Learn more about what is and is not known about climate change in the Eurasian steppelands from the end of Ice Age to the present. Also learn what you can about how these changes may have affected humans. Could such changes be one cause for the rise of nomadic pastoralism after around 2000 BCE? Report what you learn to the rest of the class.



## Lesson 2—Steppelands

# Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### Discussing the Illustration

1. The Eurasian steppes are not all flat. Some of the highest mountains on earth can be found in this region. This is an artist's idea of one mountain range, the Tien Shan. It is just one of several ranges that break up or hem in the vast steppelands. Can you name other big mountain ranges inside or near the edges of the Eurasian steppes?
2. The Tien Shan range runs in an east-west direction just north of the huge Taklamakan desert. Caravans hugged the foothills of this range as they traveled from China to points west or back again. Using details in this illustration, explain why it would be sensible for caravans to hug the line between these mountains and the desert?
3. At the western end of the Tien Shan are the Pamir Mountains and others offering only rugged high passes to the settled societies to the south or west. What main societies to the south or west were these caravans trying to reach?

### Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Here are lists of mountain ranges and rivers in or near the Eurasian steppelands that stretch from Hungary and Ukraine in the west to Mongolia and Manchuria in the east:

#### Mountains

Tien Shan  
Himalaya  
Pamir  
Altai  
Hindu Kush

#### Rivers

Dnieper  
Volga  
Don  
Amu Darya (Oxus)  
Syr Darya (Jaxartes)

Have each group member learn more about one of these geographical features and how it influenced the ways of life of peoples living near it. Together, create a bulletin-board display organized around a map on which all of these features are shown. Add other illustrations you find and write your own descriptions explaining what you have learned about each feature and its role in the life of the Eurasian steppelands.

**OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand that pastoral nomadism on the Eurasian steppes was not a primitive or completely isolated way of life.

# The Nomadic Life

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustrations 1A & 1B**

The favorite dwelling of the steppe nomads was the ger, or yurt. For the most part, these structures could be easily taken down, transported on pack animals, and set up again in about an hour's time. Yet it is a mistake to view the pastoral nomads using them as primitive. The need to move whole communities regularly did limit them in some ways. But as Illustration 1B suggests, even large structures could be moved if need be. The inside of a nomad's home could be quite comfortable. Walls and floors might be covered with wall hangings and lavishly decorated carpets. In Illustration 1A, an Uzbek woman wearing traditional clothing and jewelry stands on a carpet outside her home.

**Illustrations 2A & 2B**

The nomads lived largely on the products of their herds: meat, cheese, wool, hides, and qumis, an alcoholic beverage made from horse's milk. But these were not isolated cultures. They depended on settled societies in complex ways, learning from them and trading with them for grain, textiles, and metals for tools and weapons. They often controlled various Silk Road routes and took payment from caravans on them. The famous Khyber Pass (Illustration 2B) was only one way for outside influences to enter and affect the lands of the steppe nomads.

**Illustrations 3A & 3B**

More than goods came to the lands of the nomads along the Silk Road and other trade routes. Conquerors and merchants alike also brought ideas, skills, and various religious traditions. Illustration 3A is a Buddhist monastery in Russia's Trans-Baikal region just north of Mongolia. Illustration 3B, with the Pamir Mountains in the background, is the Shakh-i Zindeh Mosque in Samarkand, a complex of graves and chapels for descendants of Timur, or Tamerlane (1336–1405), a powerful Muslim Turko-Mongol conqueror. Oases and cities like Samarkand were central points from which influences radiated. Buddhism and Islam were only two of the many religious traditions brought to and through this region over the centuries. Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, and Judaism were also carried east along these overland routes, in some cases all the way to China. All of these cultural forces shaped and reshaped the nomadic societies of the steppes.



## Lesson 3—The Nomadic Life

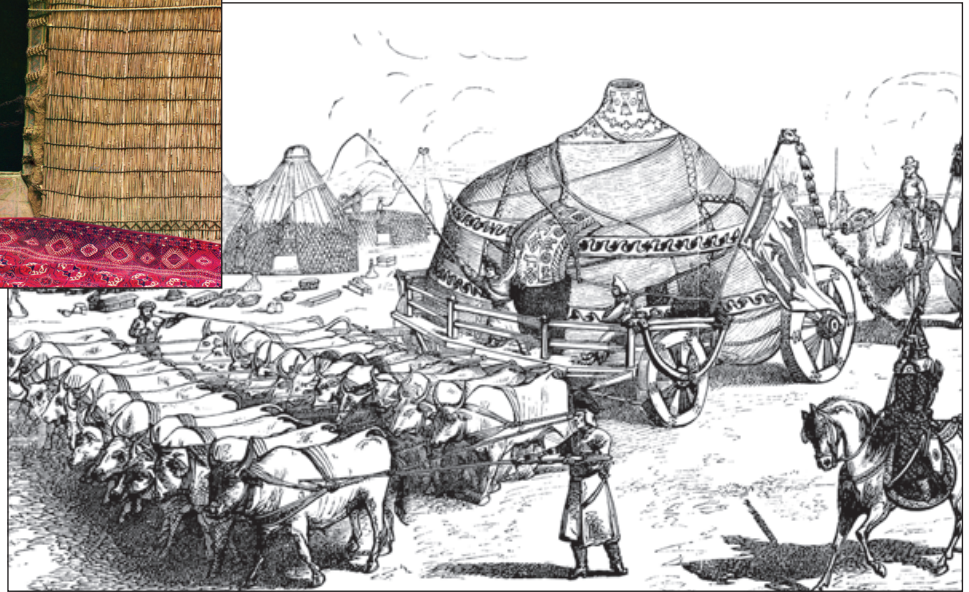
# Illustrations 1A & 1B

1A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

1B



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### Discussing the Illustrations

1. As we've seen, the favorite dwelling of the steppe nomads was the *ger*, or *yurt*. The nomadic life limited the kinds of structures these societies could build and the comforts they could include in them. How might a nomadic lifestyle impose limits of this sort?
2. Nevertheless, the nomads often found ways to overcome such limits. That is, they were often clever in finding ways to develop comfortable, rich, and satisfying ways of life. Explain how Illustration 1A and Illustration 1B both show this in varying ways.
3. The inside of a nomadic home could actually be quite comfortable. Walls and floors might be covered with wall hangings and lavishly decorated carpets. In Illustration 1A, an Uzbek woman wearing traditional clothing and jewelry stands on a carpet outside her home. What else do you know about the lifestyle of the many nomadic societies of the steppes?

### Follow-up Activities

1. What would it be like to live in a *ger*? Learn more about how nomadic peoples have lived in these forms of housing in the past and how they are still used today. Now pretend you are a member of a family living in the home shown in Illustration 1A. It is late in the evening. Write a diary entry on your day and on the activities during the day of others living in the *ger* with you. Describe the inside of the home and what each person in it has been doing both in and outside the *ger* for most of the day.
2. Learn more about the typical cycle of migration that a nomadic steppe tribe would have followed with their herds from one season to the next, throughout the year. Using a map of Mongolia and the rest of Inner Asia, mark out a possible route you think a nomadic tribe might well have followed with its herds from summer to winter and back again. Your route should be no more than 150 miles round-trip. Defend the route you create in a brief talk to the class.



## Lesson 3—The Nomadic Life

# Illustrations 2A & 2B

2B



Courtesy of the  
Library of Congress

2A



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### Discussing the Illustrations

1. For the most part, the steppe nomads were self-sufficient societies. What does this mean?
2. Much of the nomads' needs for shelter, food, clothing, and transportation could be obtained from their own herds of animals. Yet as Illustration 2A suggests, these nomads did come to depend on other, settled societies. How does the illustration show this?
3. What sorts of goods do you think the nomadic societies most needed to acquire through trade?
4. The so-called "Silk Road" was their key way of getting such goods. As many historians will tell you, however, both the word "silk" and the word "road" in this name are misleading. Can you explain why?
5. Illustration 2B shows the Khyber Pass. It is one of many passes a caravan would cross going from China to points west and south. Toward what huge part of Asia would a caravan from China probably be heading by taking the Khyber Pass? What challenges would this pass present such caravans?

### Follow-up Activity

1. **Small-group activity:** Create your own map of all the main Silk Road routes from the ancient Chinese city of Chang'an in the east, across Inner and Central Asia, to the Mediterranean Sea in the west. On the map, include at least ten key oases and cities where caravans might have stopped to trade, get supplies, and prepare either to head back or move on. Have each group member learn about one of these key cities or oases. Try to learn about the kind of trading that went on at that place, any key architectural or religious sites there, its ties to or dealings with the pastoral nomadic societies nearby, and any major events in its history. Use your map as the central item in a bulletin-board display entitled, "Stops Along the Silk Road." Include in the display written summaries of what you learn about each location, plus any relevant illustrations or other graphics you find.

## Lesson 3—The Nomadic Life

# Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

3B



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustrations**

1. Illustration 3A is a Buddhist monastery in Russia's Trans-Baikal region north of Mongolia. Illustration 3B is the Shakh-i Zindeh Mosque in Samarkand, which was a key trading center along the Silk Road. Where is Samarkand located, and why would its location have made it a good trading point on the Silk Road?
2. Both of these photos help to make clear that far more than goods came to the nomads along the Silk Road and other caravan trade routes. Can you explain how the photos show this? How can you tell these are products of two very different cultural traditions?
3. Buddhism was carried from its homeland to China, Korea, Japan, and elsewhere over the Silk Road. Where is Buddhism's homeland?
4. As the mosque in Samarkand shows, Islam spread to many nomadic societies along the Silk Road. Islam began to spread in this area about a century after it first appeared. In what century did Islam first appear and where?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. The Khazars were an ancient people who lived north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea in what is today the Ukraine. In the eighth century CE, the Khazar nobility accepted Judaism. Later, Eastern Orthodox missionaries from the Byzantine Empire made some Christian converts among them. The Khazar empire practiced religious tolerance and reached a high degree of civilization. Learn more about it. Write a brief essay describing the Khazar civilization and explaining why it accepted Judaism.
2. **Small-group activity:** Buddhism, Islam, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity were all major religious traditions that, over the centuries, were brought in to one or more regions of Eurasia along the Silk Road. Have each group member learn more about one of these religions and the role it played in the history of the Silk Road. As a group, summarize what you learn in a brief talk to the rest of the class.

**OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will understand more about the rise of the greatest empire of the nomads of the steppes.

# The Mongol Empire

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustrations 1A & 1B**

The nomads of the steppes were normally tribes made up of a few clans, or larger families. Chieftains would lead them in battle. Larger federations of tribes would arise at times and terrorize whole regions. But political unity never lasted long. This was true of Attila's Huns. And it was true of the most awesome steppe-nomad federation of all—the one established in 1206 by the Mongols under Temujin, who took the title "Genghis Khan" ("universal ruler"). Genghis Khan (Illustration 1A) began the Mongol drive to empire by conquering northern China. He later led his armies west to Russia and Persia. The conquest of China was completed by his grandson, Kublai Khan (Illustration 1B), who founded China's Yuan dynasty.

**Illustration 2**

Within Genghis Khan's lifetime, the Mongols conquered the largest land empire the world has ever known. Genghis Khan was a superb military leader, winning the loyalty of many tribes. He was also an effective ruler. His empire unified an enormous area from Hungary to China, from Persia to Siberia. That unity made possible a great deal of contact across cultures. This was the time of Marco Polo's visits to China, for example. After his death, Genghis Khan's empire was divided among his sons and grandsons. This map shows the four khanates that resulted. But like other conquering nomadic societies, the Mongols could not stay united for long. In China, the Yuan dynasty lasted only 74 years after the death of Kublai Khan in 1294. Some parts of the empire lasted a bit longer, but by the 1500s, all parts of the Mongol Empire were gone.

**Illustrations 3A & 3B**

The nomadic steppe societies celebrated slaughter on a grand scale. This is suggested by the grisly image on the left of Mongols carrying off the heads of their Turkish foes. But they and the other steppe nomads were often open to outside cultural influences and acted as transmitters of ideas and traditions of others. This is suggested by the photo on the right of a dome on the Muslim mosque Shir-Dor, another impressive structure in Samarkand. Both of these images together should be kept in mind, for it would be wrong to downplay either side of these remarkable societies of the vast Eurasian steppes.



## Lesson 4—The Mongol Empire

# Illustrations 1A & 1B

1A



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### Discussing the Illustrations

1. The nomads of the steppes were normally tribes made up of a few clans, or larger families. Chieftains led them in battle. Larger federations of tribes would arise at times and terrorize whole regions. Yet political unity never lasted long. Given what you know about these nomadic societies, can you think of reasons why political unity was hard to maintain?
2. Perhaps the most awesome of these federations was the one established in 1206 by the man in Illustration 1A. Can you name him and the people he led?
3. Genghis Khan set out to conquer what the nomads must have seen as the biggest prize in Asia. What was it? Why would they see it as such a prize?
4. The Mongols finally conquered China only in 1279 under Genghis Khan's grandson (Illustration 1B). Can you name him? From these two illustrations, what can you tell about how the Mongol leaders changed from the time of Genghis Khan to the reign of Kublai Khan?

1B



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### Follow-up Activities

1. Temujin, or Genghis Khan, was born in 1167. At the age of 13, he took over for his father as chief of his tribe. Learn more about the early life of this Mongol leader. Based on what you learn, create a fictional account of a turning point in Temujin's rise to power; that is, make up a story about that event. But be sure that the details in your story all fit with what is in fact known about the episode that you decide to use. Post your story where others can enjoy it.
2. Genghis Khan was able to conquer much of northern China before turning westward in 1219 and setting out to conquer other societies in that direction. Why did he make this decision? Learn what you can about Genghis Khan's decision to lead his armies westward against a large Turkish empire there. Suppose he had decided not to do this. How might history have turned out differently, both in China and in the lands to the west that the Mongols left to conquer? Write an imaginative "alternate history" giving your answer to this question.

## Lesson 4—The Mongol Empire

### Illustration 2



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#### Discussing the Illustration

1. In 1219, Genghis Khan suspended his effort to conquer China and turned his attention to the west. Using this map, can you explain what the result was of that decision?
2. Under Genghis Khan, the Mongols created the largest empire the world has ever known. Genghis Khan was a superb military leader, winning the loyalty of many tribes. What do you know about him and his leadership abilities?
3. Compared with China, the Mongol population was quite small. Yet that small group of tribes conquered this huge empire. What factors can you think of that might explain this amazing feat?
4. The Mongol empire made possible a great deal of contact across cultures. But like other conquering nomadic societies, the Mongols could not stay united for long. How does the map also illustrate that fact? What might explain the failure of nomadic societies like the Mongols to establish long-lived states?

#### Follow-up Activities

1. “The Empire of the Golden Horde” was the name used for the Kipchak Khanate, one of the four khanates into which Genghis Khan’s empire was divided upon his death. The Empire of the Golden Horde covered much of Russia, and it lasted from 1227 to 1499, longer than any of the other three khanates. Why? Learn more about it and write a brief history of the Golden Horde explaining why you think it lasted longer than the other three khanates.
2. **Small-group activity:** What role did women play in nomadic societies such as the Mongols? Have each member research this question with regard to one of the several societies of the Eurasian steppelands, including at least these: the Scythians, Sarmatians, Huns, Kipchaks, and Mongols. Summarize your findings in a brief report to the class.



## Lesson 4—The Mongol Empire

# Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



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3B



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### ***Discussing the Illustrations***

1. The nomadic steppe warriors were famous for their ability to carry out and even celebrate slaughter on a grand scale. How is this expressed in Illustration 3A, showing Mongols fighting Turkish foes?
2. The illustration shows the Mongol warriors gleefully carrying off the heads of their Turkish foes. Do you think the illustration is a fair depiction of what the Mongol fighters were probably like? Why or why not?
3. However bloodthirsty the steppe nomads could be, they were also often open to outside cultural influences, including various religious influences. This is suggested by Illustration 3B, a photo of a structure in Samarkand. Can you tell what kind of structure? Why do you suppose these nomads were often open to outside cultural and religious influences?
4. These images together call attention to the complex nature of these nomadic peoples. Do you think the images do this effectively? Why or why not?

### ***Follow-up Activities***

1. Collect illustrations from various eras depicting the Mongols in battle and in other situations. Learn as much as you can about each image, who created it, when it was created, and what point of view it may be expressing. Use the above-left image if you wish. Arrange all the images you find in chronological order, with your own descriptions. Title your display, "The Mongols: How Others Have Viewed Them."
2. **Small-group activity:** Create your own guidebook to important architectural sites in the city of Samarkand. Find as many photos of these sites as you can and learn enough about them to tell a clear story of Samarkand's cultural history. Have each student learn about sites from one phase of the city's history, from the era of Alexander the Great's conquests to the Arab conquests, to the Mongols, and finally to Tamerlane. Display your guidebook on the bulletin board or make copies of it for others in the class.



# **Image Close-ups**



## Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

# Illustration 1



The Granger Collection, New York



## Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

# Illustrations 2A & 2B

2A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

2B



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## Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

# Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



# Steppelands Illustration 1



© Instructional Resources Corporation



Steppelands  
**Illustration 2**



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Steppelands  
**Illustration 3**



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



## The Nomadic Life

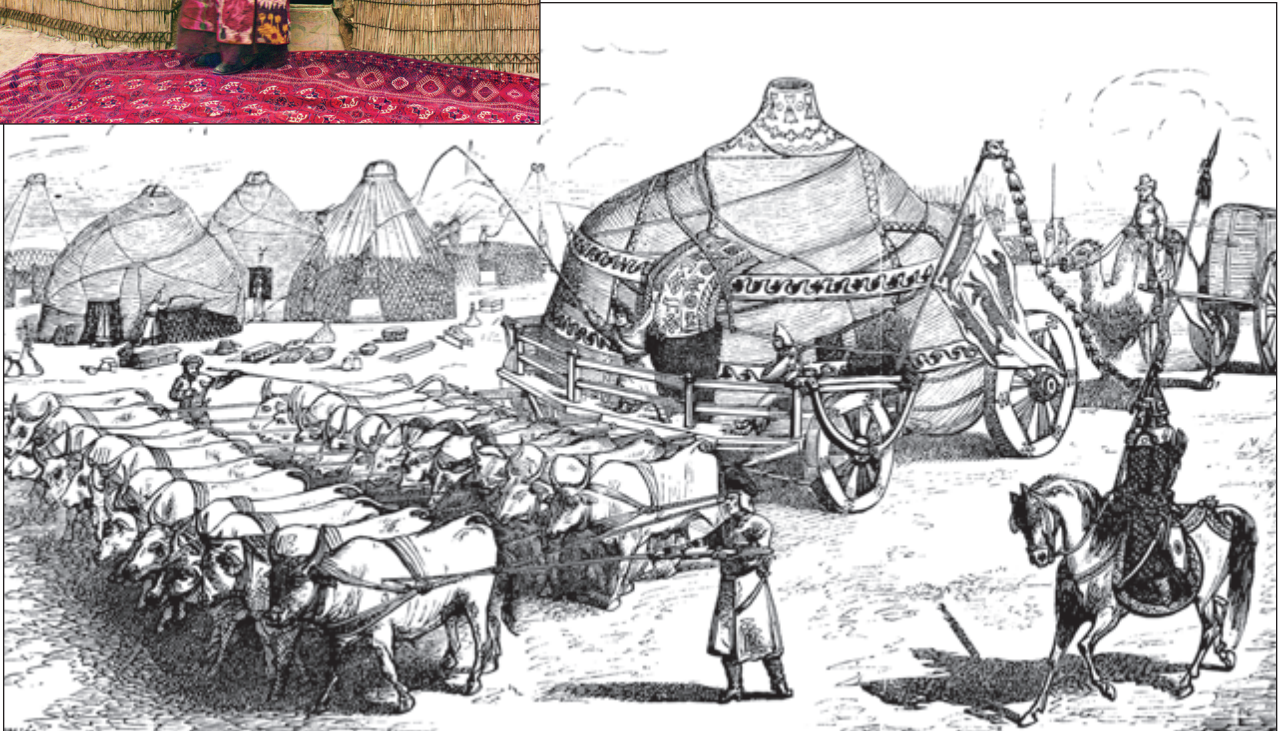
# Illustrations 1A & 1B

1A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

1B



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## The Nomadic Life

# Illustrations 2A & 2B

2B

Courtesy of the Library of Congress



2A



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The Nomadic Life

# Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

3B



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

## The Mongol Empire

# Illustrations 1A & 1B

1A



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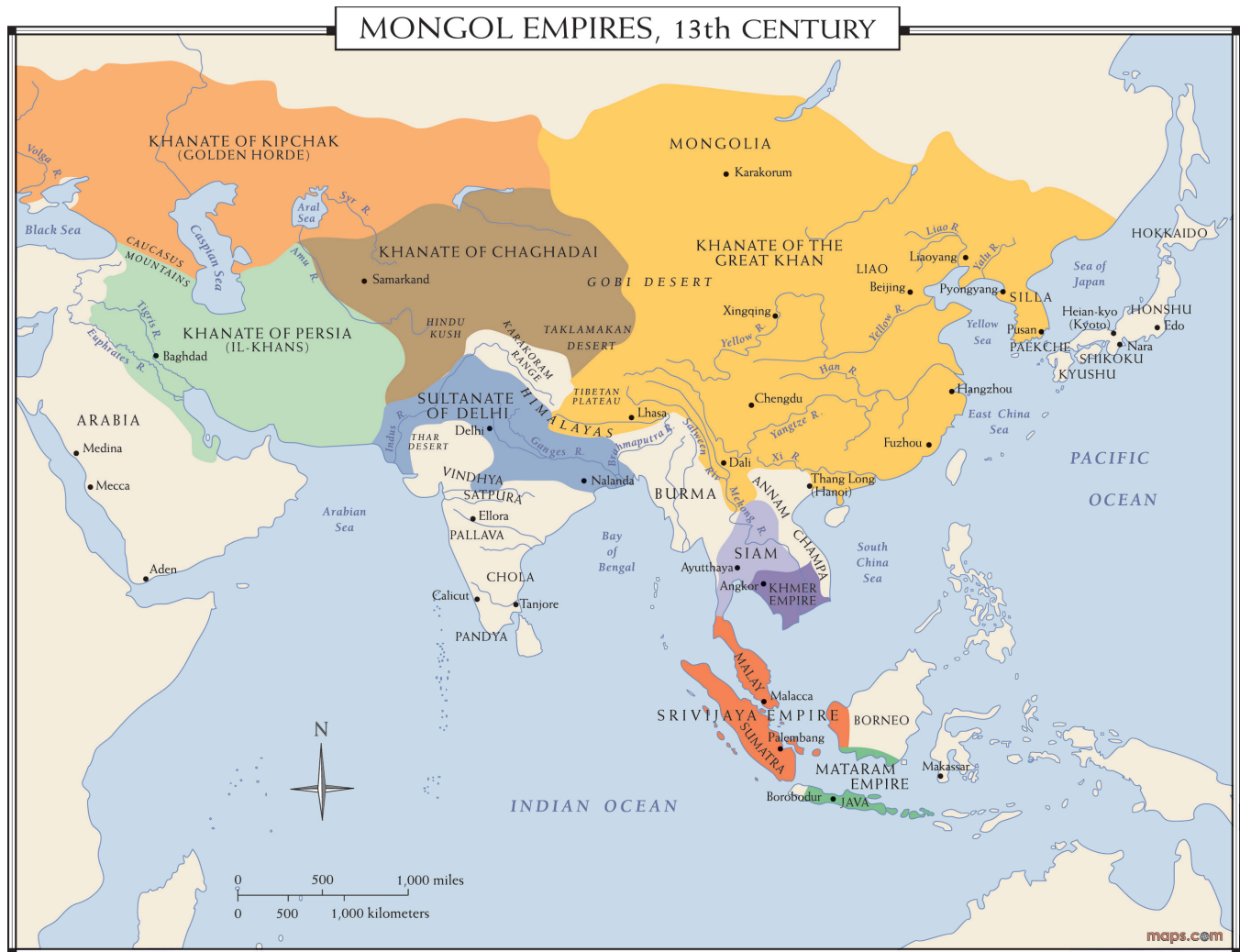
1B



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# The Mongol Empire

## Illustration 2



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## The Mongol Empire Illustrations 3A & 3B

3A



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3B



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



