

Book Review

Title:	Genghis Khan And The Mongol War Machine
Author:	Chris Peers
Illustrator:	Unknown
Pages:	256
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When I was told I was going to receive a review copy of this book I must confess I was really pleased. The Mongols have always fascinated me and I have spent many happy hours building Mongol armies. I was curious to see what, if anything, new would be revealed in this volume from Chris Peers.

When the book arrived I was immediately struck by how well organised it was. The inclusion of a full timeline, a genealogy for Genghis Khan's family, and a who's who's in thirteenth century Mongolia ensured I would be using the book for reference in the future.

All books on the Mongols suffer from a lack of contemporary sources and the author generally does a good job in explaining how this paucity limits what can be said with certainty.

In addition modern authors have to steer a careful course between weak, conflicting, or absent sources; previous generation's views and modern preconceptions. Overall, the author does this well too whilst offering a very readable mix of history, politics, and military strategy & technology ideal for the general reader.

I found the early chapters on the Mongol world, war on the steppes and the Khan's armies particularly absorbing and will be reading these chapters again and again. The following chapters on the Khan's conquests in the east and the west tackled their subject with gusto but suffered from the provision of only one map; somewhat surprising given the geographical breadth of Genghis's empire and the sweeping operations undertaken on his behalf. On more than one occasion I found myself wishing for a small map to help me with the various regions and key topological features mentioned in the text.

I read the book in three or four sessions over four or five days which is a compliment to the author's relaxed style and clear exposition of often complex situations. However in places the text warrants careful reading. Two or three times I struggled with author's logic; they were in effect "written speed bumps".

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For example, in discussing the veracity of Juvaini version of Genghis's "Punishment of God" lecture to the leading citizens of Bokhara in 1220, the author states "Some scholars have argued the incident never happened ... But the chronicler's detailed account rings true, and when he wrote it forty years later there may have been eyewitnesses still living, so it is unlikely that the story is entirely fictional."

This is opinion dressed as logic and is a disservice to the reader: casual reading may lead to the wrong conclusion. The author's opinion is clear as it is his ears that ring true but the suggestion that Juvaini's account is at least partly true because he may have used recollections from eyewitness, who would have to be in their late fifties and sixties at least, is absurd as there's no evidence either way.

Thankfully passages like this are few and far between. In fact they are made all the more striking because the vast majority of the text flows well with facts presented as such and opposing views fully discussed.

Overall, I found the book a good synthesis of current knowledge mixed with the military details so beloved of wargamers; plus it is just about the right length given the sources available. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the military aspects of Mongol warfare and if you are only going to read one book on the subject let this be the one; just watch out for the speed bumps!