Hi I’m John Green; this is Crash Course World History and today we’re gonna discuss - wait for it - the Mongols!

So you probably have a picture of the Mongols in your head. Yes, that’s the picture: brutal, bloodthirsty, swarthy, humorously mustachioed warriors riding the plains, wearing fur, eating meat directly off the bone, saying, “Bar bar bar bar bar bar bar”. In short, we imagine the Mongol empire as stereotypically barbarian. And that’s not entirely wrong.

But if you’ve been reading recent world history textbooks like we here at Crash Course have, you might have a different view of the Mongols, one that emphasizes the amazing speed and success of their conquests — how they conquered more land in 25 years than the Romans did in 400. How they controlled more than 11 million contiguous square miles. And you may even have read that the Mongols basically created nations like Russia and even Korea. One historian has even claimed that the Mongols, “smashed the feudal system” and created international law. Renowned for their religious tolerance, the Mongols, in this view, created the first great free trade zone, like a crazy medieval Eurasian NAFTA. And that’s not entirely wrong either. Stupid truth, always resisting simplicity.

So remember herders? We talked about them back in episode one as an alternative to hunting and gathering or agriculture. Here are the key things to remember:
1. Nomads aren’t Jack Kerouac: They don’t just go on like random road trips. They migrate according to climate conditions so they can feed their flocks.
2. Nomads don’t generally produce manufactured goods which means they need to trade, so they almost always live near settled people.

Right, so one last thing: pastoral people also tend to be more egalitarian, especially where women are concerned. Paradoxically, when there’s less to go around, humans tend to share more, and when both men and women must work for the social order to survive, there tends to be less patriarchal domination of women. Although Mongol women rarely went to war. I can’t tell your gender. I mean you’ve got the pants, but then you also have the floopity flop, so... That’s the technical term, by the way. I’m a historian.

If you had to choose a pastoral nomadic group to come out of central Asia and dominate the world, you probably wouldn’t have chosen the Mongols. Because for most of the history we’ve been discussing, they just hung out in the foothills bordering the Siberian forest, mixing herding and hunting, quietly getting really good at archery and riding horses. Also, the Mongols were much smaller than other pastoral groups like the Tatars or the Uyghurs. And not to get like all Great Man History on you or anything, but the reason the Mongols came to dominate the world really started with one guy, Genghis Khan. Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

The story goes that Genghis or Chingus Khan was born around 1162 with the name Temüjin to a lowly clan. His father was poisoned to death, leaving Temüjin under the control of his older brothers, one of whom he soon killed during an argument. By 19 he was married to his first and most important wife, Börte, who was later kidnapped. This was pretty common among the Mongols, Temüjin’s mom had also been kidnapped. In rescuing his wife, Temüjin proved his military mettle
and he soon became a leader of his tribe, but uniting the Mongol confederations required a civil war, which he won, largely thanks to two innovations.

First, he promoted people based on merit rather than family position, and second, he brought lower classes of conquered people into his own tribe while dispossessing the leaders of the conquered clans. Thus he made the peasants love him. The rich hated him — but they didn’t matter anymore, because they were no longer rich.

With these two building block policies, Temüjin was able to win the loyalty of more and more people and in 1206 he was declared the Great Khan, the leader of all the Mongols. How? Well, the Mongols chose their rulers in a really cool way. A prospective ruler would call a general council called a kurultai, and anyone who supported his candidacy for leadership would show up on their horses, literally voting with their feet.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! But horses don’t have feet they have hooves.

I hate you, Me From the Past. Also, NO INTERRUPTING THE THOUGHT BUBBLE!

After uniting the Mongols, Genghis Khan went on to conquer a lot of territory. By the time he died in his sleep in 1227, his empire stretched from the Mongol homeland in Mongolia all the way to the Caspian Sea. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So that’s a pretty good looking empire, and sure a lot of it was pasture or mountains or desert, but the Mongols did conquer a lot of people, too. And in some ways with Genghis’ death, the empire was just getting started. His son Ögedei Khan expanded the empire even more. And Genghis’ grandson Möngke was the Great Khan in 1258 when Baghdad, the capitol of the Abbasid Empire, fell to the Mongols. And another of Genghis’ grandsons, Kublai Khan, conquered the Song Dynasty in China in 1279. And if the Mamluks hadn’t stopped another of Genghis’ grandsons at the battle of Ain Jalut, they probably would have taken all of North Africa. Genghis Khan sure had a lot of grandkids... It must be time for the open letter.

An Open Letter To Genghis Khan’s Descendants. But first, let’s check what’s in the secret compartment today. Oh. A noisemaker and champagne poppers? Stan, you know I suck at these. What’s all this for? Ohhh, it’s because it’s a BIRTHDAY PARTY!! YAY. Happy birthday to Genghis Khan’s descendants.

How do I know it’s your birthday, Genghis Khan’s descendants? Because every day is your birthday. Because right now on the planet Earth, there are 16 million direct descendants of Genghis Khan, meaning that every day is the birthday of 43,000 of them. So, good news, Genghis Khan: Your empire might be gone, but your progeny lives on. And on, and on, and on. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!

Best wishes, John Green

Unfortunately for the Mongols, those guys weren’t always working together, because Genghis Khan failed to create a single political unit out of his conquests. Instead, after Genghis’ death, the Mongols were left with four really important Empires called Khanates: The Yuan Dynasty in China, the Il-Khanate in Persia, the Chagatai Khanate in Central Asia, and the Khanate of the Golden Horde in Russia.

If you remember all the way back to the Hellenistic period, this is similar to what happened to another good general who wasn’t much for administration, Alexander the Great. Also, neither of them ever conquered India.
The Mongols succeeded primarily because of their military skill. Genghis Khan’s army, which never numbered more than 130,000 was built on speed and archery. Just like this guy. Mongol mounted archers were like super fast tanks, compared to the foot soldiers and knights they were up against.

But wait, all the military history nerds are saying, once people knew that the Mongols were coming, why didn’t they just hole up in castles and forts? It’s not like the Mongols had flying horses. EXCEPT THEY DID. They didn’t? Stan, why are you always making history boring?

So the Mongols apparently didn’t have flying horses, but they were uncommonly adaptable. So even though they’d never seen a castle before they started raiding, they became experts at siege warfare by interrogating prisoners. And they also adopted gunpowder, probably introducing it to Europeans, and they even built ships so they could attack Japan. That might have worked, too except there happened to be a typhoon.

Also, people were terrified of the Mongols. Often cities would surrender the moment the Mongols arrived, just to escape slaughter. But of course, that only happened because there were occasions when the Mongols, did, you know, slaughter entire towns.

So with all that background, let us return to the question of Mongol awesomeness. First, five arguments for awesome.
1. The Mongols really did reinvigorate cross-Eurasian trade. The Silk Road trading routes that had existed for about 1000 years by the time the Mongols made the scene had fallen into disuse, but the Mongols valued trade because they could tax it, and they did a great job of keeping their empire safe. It was said that a man could walk from one end of the Mongol empire to the other with a gold plate on his head without ever fearing being robbed.
2. The Mongols increased communication throughout Eurasia by developing this pony express-like system of way stations with horses and riders that could quickly relay information. It was called the yam system and also included these amazing bronze passports, which facilitated travel.
3. Another thing that traveled along the Mongol trade routes was cuisine. For example, it was because of the Mongols that rice became a staple of the Persian diet. Which I mention entirely because I happen to like Persian food.
4. The Mongols forcibly relocated people who were useful to them, like artists and musicians and, especially administrators. As you can imagine, the Mongols weren't much for administrative tasks like keeping records, so they found people were good at that stuff and just moved them around the empire. This created the kind of cross-cultural pollination that world historians these days get really excited about.
5. The Mongols were almost unprecedentedly tolerant of different religions. They themselves were shamanists, believing in nature spirits, but since their religion was tied to the land from which they came, they didn’t expect new people to adopt it and they didn’t ask them to. So you could find Muslims and Buddhists and Christians and people of any other religion you can think of prospering throughout the Mongol empire. And it's that kind of openness that has led some historians to go back and re-evaluate the Mongols, seeing them as kind of a precursor to modernity.

But there’s another side to the story that we should not forget, so, here are five reasons why the Mongols might not be so great.
1. Here is Genghis Khan’s definition of happiness: “The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters.” Off-topic, but if that quote rings a bell, it might be because Oliver Stone blatantly plagiarized Genghis Khan in the movie Conan the Barbarian.
2. Is an extension of one. The Mongols were seriously brutal conquerors. I mean, not uniquely brutal, but still: the Mongols destroyed entire cities, and most historians estimate the numbers they killed to be in the millions.
3. Their empire didn’t last. Within 80 years they’d left China and been replaced by a new dynasty, the Ming. And in Persia they blended in so completely that by the 15th century they were totally unrecognizable. I mean, they’d even taken up agriculture! Agriculture, the last refuge for scoundrels who want to devote their lives to working instead of skoodilypooping.

4. They also weren’t particularly interested in artistic patronage or architecture. I mean, your palace may last forever, but my yurt can go anywhere.

5. The Mongols were probably responsible for the Black Death. By opening up trade they also opened up vectors for disease to travel, in the case of the Plague via fleas infected with Yersinia pestis. And at least according to one story, the Mongols intentionally spread the plague by catapulting their plague-ridden cadavers over the walls of Caffa in the Crimea. While this primitive act of biological warfare might have happened, it’s unlikely to be what actually spread the plague. More likely it was the fleas on the rats in the holds of Black Sea ships that were trading with Europe. But that trade only existed because of the Mongols.

All right Stan, one last time- cue the Mongol-tage.

So the Mongols promoted trade, diversity, and tolerance, and they also promoted slaughter and senseless destruction. And what you think about the Mongols ends up saying a lot about you: Do you value artistic output over religious diversity? Is imperialism that doesn’t last better or worse than imperialism that does? And are certain kinds of warfare inherently wrong? If you think those are easy questions to answer, than I haven’t been doing my job. Regardless, I look forward to reading your answers in comments. Thanks for watching and I’ll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our Graphics Team is Thought Bubble. Last week's Phrase Of The Week was "Hawaiian Pizza". If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that can be answered by our team of historians. By the way, if you want to wear your love for Crash Course there's a Mongols shirt, link in the video info.

Thanks for watching Crash Course. Nobody can beat Crash Course viewers. Well, except for the Mongols.

(Outro music)
Hi there my name's John Green; this is Crash Course World History, and today we’re gonna talk about Alexander the Great, but to do that we’re going to begin by talking about ideals of masculinity and heroism and Kim Kardashian and the Situation.

Past John: Mr Green, Mr Green, Mr. Green! Which Situation?

Present John: Oh, Me from the Past, I forgot you wanted to go to Columbia. Me from the Present regrets to inform you that you do not get in.

But since you live in the past, you have no way of knowing who I’m talking about, and it occurs to me that this video may be watched in some glorious future when Kim Kardashian and the Situation have mercifully disappeared from public life, and the supermarket tabloids, instead of talking about celebrities, talk about Foucault and the Higgs-Boson particle, so Kim Kardashian is a professional famous person who rose to notoriety by skoodilypooping with someone named Ray Jay, and Mike “The Situation” I forgot his last name is a professional stupid person with big muscles. They're both known by millions, lives in luxury, and people literally pay to own their odors.

Why do these people crave fame? Why do any of us? Well, I'd argue it's not about money. If it were, our tabloids would be devoted to the lives and times of bankers. I think we all want to leave a legacy. We want to be remembered. We want to be Great.

( Intro )

For a long time, history was all about the Study of Great Men, and it was common to call people as “the Great,” but these days historians are less likely to do that, because they recognize that one man's Great is generally another man's Terrible.

And also “the Great” has some misogynistic implications, like, it’s almost always men who are called "the Great". You never hear about Cleopatra the Great or Elizabeth the Great. There was, of course, Catherine the Great of Russia, but for her masculine Greatness she was saddled with the completely untrue rumor that she died trying to skoodily poop with a horse. Saddled? Get it? Anybody? Saddled with the rumor?

Anyway, they could’ve soiled Catherine the Great’s name just by telling the truth: which is that like so many other Great men and women, she died on the toilet. Get it? soiled? Toilet? Yes? Yes!

So, quick biography of Alexander of Macedon, born in 356 BCE, died in 323 BCE at the ripe old age of 32. Alexander was the son of King Philip the 2nd, and when just 13 years old he tamed a horse no one else could ride named Bucephalus, which impressed his father so much he said: “Oh thy son, look thee at a kingdom equal to and worthy of thyself, for Macedonia is too little for thee.”

By that time, he was already an accomplished general, but over the next decade he expanded his empire with unprecedented speed and he is famous for having never lost a battle. Today we’re going to look at Alexander of Macedon’s story by examining three possible definitions of greatness.

Greatness Number One (2:37)
First, maybe Alexander was great because of his accomplishments. This is an extension of the idea that history is the record of the deeds of great men. Now, of course, that’s ridiculous. For one thing, half of people are women; for another, and this is important, there are lots of historic events that no one can take responsibility for, like for instance the Black Plague.

But still, Alexander was accomplished. I mean, he conquered a lot of territory. Like, a lot. His father, Philip, had conquered all of Greece, but Alexander did what the Spartans and Athenians had failed to do: He destroyed the Persian Empire. He conquered all the land the Persians had held including Egypt, and then marched toward India, stopping at the Indus River only because his army was like, “Hey, Alexander, you know what would be awesome? Not marching.”

Also, Alexander was a really good general, although historians disagree over whether his tactics were truly brilliant or if his army just happened to have better technology, specifically these extra long spears called sarissas. Much of his reputation as a general, and his reputation in general, anybody? Puns? Maybe I should stop? OK. Is because of Napoleon. Napoleon, like many other generals through the Millennia, was obsessed with Alexander the Great, but more on that in a moment.

That said, Alexander wasn’t very good at what we might now call empire-building. Alexander’s empire was definitely visually impressive, but it wasn’t actually much of an empire.

Like, Alexander specialized in the tearing down of things, but he wasn’t so great at the building up of institutions to replace the things he’d torn down. And that’s why, pretty soon after his death, his Empire broke into three empires, called the Hellenistic Kingdoms. Each was ruled by one of Alexander’s generals, and they became important dynasties. The Antigones in Greece and Macedonia, the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Persia, all of which lasted longer than Alexander’s empire itself.

**Thought Bubble, The Second Greatness (4:17)**

A Second Greatness: Maybe Alexander was Great because he had an enormous impact on the world after his death. Like King Tut, Alexander the Great was amazingly good at being a dead person. Let’s go to the Thought Bubble.

So, After Alexander of Macedon died, everyone from the Romans to Napoleon to Oliver Stone loved him, and he was an important military model for many generals throughout history. But his main post-death legacy may be that he introduced the Persian idea of Absolute Monarchy to the Greco-Roman world, which would become a pretty big deal.

Alexander also built a number of cities on his route that became big deals after his death, and it’s easy to spot them because he named most of them after himself and one after his horse. The Alexandria in Egypt became a major center of learning in the classical world, and was home to the most amazing library ever, which Julius Caesar probably “accidentally” burned down while trying to conquer a bunch of land to emulate his hero, Alexander the Great.

Plus, the dead Alexander had a huge impact on culture. He gave the region its common language, Greek, which facilitated conversations and commerce. Greek was so widespread that archaeologists have found coins in what is now Afghanistan with pictures of their kings and the word “king” written beneath the pictures — in Greek. This is also why, incidentally, the New Testament was eventually written in Greek.
Although Alexander was mostly just conquering territory for the glory and heroism and greatness of it all, in his wake emerged a more closely connected world that could trade and communicate with more people more efficiently than ever before. Alexander didn’t make those things happen, but they probably wouldn’t have happened without him.

But here’s a question: If you’re watching Jersey Shore and get so involved in The Situations romantic conquest that you leave the bath water running, thereby flooding your apartment, and you have to call a plumber, and the plumber comes over and you fall in love with him and get married and live happily ever after, does that make The Situation responsible for your marriage? Thanks, Thought Bubble.

The Third Greatness (6:11)

Okay, a third definition of greatness: Maybe Alexander is great because of his legend: Since no accounts of his life were written while he lived, embellishment was easy, and maybe that’s where true greatness lies. I mean the guy died at 32, before he ever had a chance to get old and lose battles. He was tutored by Aristotle, for God’s sakes.

Then there’s Alexander’s single-minded Ahab-esque pursuit of the Persian King Darius, who he chased across modern-day Iraq and Iran for no real reason except he desperately wanted to kill him, and when Bessus, one of Darius’s generals, assassinated him before Alexander had the chance, Alexander chased Bessus around until he could at least kill him.

These almost-comical pursuits of glory and heroism are accompanied in classical histories by stories of Alexander walking through the desert, and then suddenly raining, and these ravens coming to lead him to the army he’s supposed to fight, and stories of his hot Persian wife Roxana, who supposedly while still a teenager engineered the assassinations of many of Alexander’s fellow wives.

And even at his death, people tried to make Alexander live up to this heroic ideal. Like, Plutarch tells us that he died of a fever, but that’s no way for a masculine, empire-building, awesome person to die! So rumors persist that he died either of alcohol poisoning or else of assassination-y poisoning. I mean, no great man can die of a fever. Speaking of Great Men, it’s time to strip down for the Open Letter.

Open Letter (7:34)

So elegant. But first let’s see what’s in the Secret Compartment today. Oh. It’s Kim Kardashian’s perfume. Thanks Stan. I’ll wear this. I’ll check it out, I’ll give it a try. C’ah. Wow. That is... mmm... it’s like all the worst parts of baby powder and all the worst parts of cat pee. An Open Letter to the Ladies.

Hello, Ladies,

You’ve really been unfairly neglected in Crash Course World History and also in World History textbooks everywhere. Like, there will be a whole chapter exploring the exploits of great men and then at the end there will be one sentence that’s like “also women were doing stuff at the time and it was important, but we don’t really know what it was, so back to Alexander the Great…”

History has been very good at marginalizing and demeaning women and we’re going to fight against
that as we move forward in the story of human civilization. Ladies, I have to go now because my eyes are stinging from the biological weapon known as Kim Kardashian’s Gold. Seriously, don’t wear it.

Best wishes, John Green

The Fourth Greatness (8:34)

So in Alexander the Great we have a story about a man who united the world while riding a magical horse only he could tame across deserts where it magically rained for him so that he could chase down his mortal enemy and then leave in his wake a more enlightened world and a gorgeous, murderous wife.

But of course it’s not just Assassin’s Creed and Call of Duty that celebrate the idea that ennobled violence can lead to a better world. And that takes us to my opinion of how Alexander really came to be Great. Millennia after his death in 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt, not because he particularly needed to invade Egypt but because he wanted to do what Alexander had done.

And long before Napoleon, the Romans really worshipped Alexander, particularly the Roman General Pompey, AKA Pompeius Magnus, AKA Pompey the Great. Pompey was so obsessed with Alexander that he literally tried to emulate Alexander’s boyishly disheveled hair style.

In short, Alexander was Great because others decided he was Great. Because they chose to admire and emulate him. Yes, Alexander was a great general. Yes, he conquered a lot of land. The Situation is also really good at picking up girls... of a certain type. And Kim Kardashian is good at-

Stan, what is Kim Kardashian good at?

We made Alexander Great, just as today we make people great when we admire them and try to emulate them. History has traditionally been in the business of finding and celebrating great men, and only occasionally great women, but this obsession with Greatness is troubling to me. It wrongly implies, first, history is made primarily by men and secondly, that history is made primarily by celebrated people, which of course makes us all want to be celebrities.

Thankfully, we’ve left behind the idea that the best way to become an icon is to butcher people and conquer a lot of land, but the ideals that we’ve embraced instead aren’t necessarily worth celebrating either. All of which is to say we decide what to worship and what to care about and what to pay attention to. We decide whether to care about The Situation. Alexander couldn’t make history in a vacuum, and neither can anyone else. Thanks for watching, and I’ll see you next week.

Credits (10:28)

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller; the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Last week’s phrase of the week was "Thinly Sliced Trees". If you want to take a guess at this week’s phrase or suggest new ones you can do so in comments. If you have questions about today’s video you can also ask those in comments and our team of historians will attempt to answer them.

Thanks for watching Crash Course and as they say in my hometown, Don’t Forget To Be Awesome.