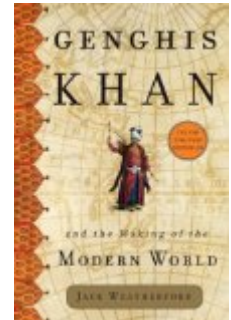


Jack Weatherford. *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2004. xxxv + 312 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-609-61062-6.



Reviewed by Timothy May

Published on H-World (March, 2005)

The name of Genghis Khan is often associated with destruction, although the image of Genghis Khan has been rehabilitated somewhat in the west. The western world, saturated in media distortion and a reluctance to accept changes in perceptions of history, has been rather averse in accepting Genghis Khan's activities as pivotal in world history and the shaping of the modern world. Thus, the publication of Jack Weatherford's book, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, is a welcome addition to the literature on the Mongols.

The author, Jack Weatherford, the Dewitt Wallace Professor of Anthropology at Macalester College, has written several books targeted for the non-academic world and writes in a very engaging style. As a result, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* spent several weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list. The strength of Weatherford's writing is that he mixes narrative with analysis and grabs the attention of any reader.

The book is organized into an introduction, and then three sections of the text itself, and con-

cluding with an epilogue, notes, glossary, and bibliography. Preceding all of these is a genealogical table showing Genghis Khan, his sons, and the successor khanates. In addition to showing the rulers of the empire, the terms of the regents are designated. The latter is something that is often remiss in these sorts of tables, but a welcome addition here. There is an odd segment of the table though. All of the Khanates or states resulting from the split of the Mongol Empire are shown except the Chaghatayid Khanate of Central Asia. In its place is the Moghul Empire of India. Indeed, the Moghul Empire has connections back to the Mongols (Moghul is Persian for Mongol), but the founder of the Moghul Empire, Babur, was himself a Timurid, the dynasty of the Emir Timur, who was not descended from Genghis Khan.[1] While Babur was descended from Genghis Khan on his mother's side, he cannot be viewed as a direct line from Genghis Khan's grandson, Chaghatai, as Weatherford's table indicates.

In his introduction, Weatherford reveals that he did not set out to write a book about Genghis Khan. Rather, he intended to write a book on the

history of world commerce. During his research on the Silk Road he traveled to Mongolia and read about the accomplishments of the Mongols. Like many who have done so, Weatherford was, one might say, "bitten by the Mongol bug" and could not resist the allure of Genghis Khan. Thus, Weatherford began working on the impact of the Mongols on the world. He did much of the research in tandem with a Mongolian team that included a scholar of shamanism, an archaeologist, a political scientist, and an officer in the Mongolian army, providing a wide viewpoint and a variety of expertise.

Weatherford's main point in the introduction is that the world changed or began to change from the medieval to the modern because of the Mongols. Weatherford wrote, "The new technology, knowledge, and commercial wealth created the Renaissance in which Europe rediscovered some of its prior culture, but more importantly, absorbed the technology for printing, firearms, the compass, and the abacus from the East" (p. xxiv). This passage is, without question, controversial. Many would scoff at the notion that a literal horde of illiterate nomads from Mongolia created the Renaissance. There is something to be said about Weatherford's view; however the impact of the Mongols on the Renaissance will be discussed more fully in the discussion on section three of the book. Nevertheless, Weatherford's pronouncement does seize one's attention and stir the imagination.

Weatherford also entices the reader by remarking on the accomplishments of the Mongols such as that they conquered an empire that stretched from the Pacific to the Mediterranean, an area roughly the size of Africa. Furthermore he notes that the Mongols accomplished this feat when their population was perhaps a million people, of which only around 100,000 comprised the military. Weatherford does well to illustrate the magnitude of this deed by pointing out that many modern corporations have more employees than

the Mongol army had soldiers. The author uses these analogies exceedingly well to clarify his points.

There are two general comments before discussing the actual content of the book. There is a curious lack of dates in many of the historical sections, for the non-specialist this can be problematic. In his writing style, Weatherford moves back and forth between events; while not hampering the flow of the narrative, this can be confusing to the reader. Secondly, the method of citation is frustrating. Granted, this is a work intended for the general public thus the lack of footnotes is to be expected. Yet, the manner in which sources are cited is awkward. Rather than a footnote or endnote with a number, the reader must turn to the notes section, and look for a page number. If he is lucky, there will be a brief snippet of a passage with the source. However, there are a number of quotes which are not attributed. This is not to say that it is plagiarism as it is clear that Weatherford does not claim to make the statements, but rather just plain sloppiness on the part of someone whether it is the author or editor.

The first section after the introduction concerns the rise of Genghis Khan and the unification of Mongolia. As with most of his writing, this section comprising three chapters is very engaging. The first chapter begins with an account Genghis Khan's attack on the Khwarazmian Empire, which covered much of Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and the former Soviet Central Asia. Throughout this section, Weatherford provides the reader with a very good sense of the rise of Genghis Khan to power and how the Mongols viewed warfare, which is to say, honor was not in the methods of war, but rather in gaining victory. Furthermore, Weatherford does a splendid job of illustrating that Genghis Khan was not a born military genius, a label that is often and understandably applied to the Mongol leader, but rather he learned from his mistakes and then applied the lessons.

Also in the first chapter, Weatherford provides an excellent description of the topography and ecology of Mongolia. It is clear he understands how vital these two factors are to the rise of Mongol dominance. Weatherford's anthropological insight is clear when discussing various aspects of nomadic culture.

Weatherford, however does engage in some historical speculation; some of it very interesting and convincing, particularly that based on anthropological premises. For instance, Temüjin killed his older step-brother. Many scholars have concluded that this was partially based off of a rivalry for power, even at a young age between the two branches of the family (Yesügei, Temüjin's father, had two wives). Weatherford raises the intriguing possibility that the half brother was murdered because of the possibility that Temüjin's mother would become the half-brother's wife due to Levirate law (p. 23-24).

The second section concerns the expansion of the Mongol Empire outside of Mongolia. This of course leads the Mongol armies into China, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. These chapters provide a discourse on the effectiveness of the Mongol military as well as a comparison with its enemies, including such ubiquitous yet interesting elements such as diet. Weatherford also attempts to put the massacres and destruction conducted by the Mongols into perspective and makes a good contrast between the Mongols and their "civilized" opponents who were often much more prone to torturing prisoners, often for entertainment purposes. Finally, Weatherford attempts to explain the rationale between each invasion as well as provide the political background behind each event from the Mongol perspective.

The third section is truly the focus of the book: the impact of the Mongols on the world. This section begins with the breakup of the empire and various changes that occurred in the khanates that would lead to the transformation of the world. Weatherford rightly places his empha-

sis on the Mongols' role in facilitating trade. With their empire secure, caravans and merchants traversed the Mongol realm with much greater security than in previous eras. In addition to trade, others took advantage of the secure roads leading to the migration of people (in some cases against their will), ideas, and technology. One particular item that made its way to Europe from the Mongol Empire was quite unintentional: the Black Plague. The effects of the plague on Europe are well known and need no further comment.

Weatherford also makes his connections between the Mongols and the Renaissance and emergence of modern Europe. Weatherford states that it was the importation of the printing press, blast furnace, compass, gunpowder, as well as Persian and Chinese painting styles from the Mongol Empire that spawned the Renaissance. Indeed, Weatherford writes during the Renaissance period, "The common principles of the Mongol Empire-such as paper money, primacy of the state over the church, freedom of religion, diplomatic immunity, and international law-were ideas ... gained new importance" (p. 236). Weatherford states his case very eloquently and with an abundance of evidence demonstrating not only the indirect influence of the Mongols in Europe but also the transformation of the Mongols from agents of innovation in the Renaissance into agents of destruction in the European mind during Enlightenment.

It is quite clear that Weatherford is a brilliant writer, blending anthropological insight and incredible enthusiasm with a captivating narrative. It is easy to see why many reviewers and readers have been enthusiastic about it. Despite all of *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World's* acclaim, it is very clear that Weatherford is not a historian. In the general narrative Weatherford is sufficiently accurate. However, in the details, Weatherford is wrestling with material that he clearly does not fully appreciate. It is important to remember that the book is intended for the

general public and thus certain allowances are often made, usually in the form of generalizations. While this can be a useful method in writing, often it is misleading or just simply wrong. Unfortunately this is the case with much of Weatherford's book.

Again, the general narrative is correct, but finer points are simply wrong. For instance, he foreshadows the Mongol defeat at 'Ayn Jalut in 1260 by mentioning the Mamluks, slave soldiers who were primarily Kipchak Turks, many of whom the Mongols sold or sent fleeing into slavery. Curiously, Weatherford mentions that the Mamluks were comprised of Kipchaks and Slavs. While it is quite possible that Slavs were sold in the Middle East as slaves, if any did serve as Mamluks, their numbers were negligible and more of a rare exception than the rule.

Also in discussing the Battle of the Kalka River, the first encounter between the princes of the Rus' and the Mongols, several problems surface. This discussion is a perfect example of the frustration caused by Weatherford's lack of footnotes. In one section (p. 141) Weatherford states that the Mongol arrows could not be used by the Rus' but the Mongols could use the arrows shot by the Rus'. Yet there is no indication of the source in the notes, nor any explanation in the text of why this was so. In his discussion of the army of the Rus' he includes peasants. While his arguments on their capabilities are intriguing, there is no evidence that a levy of peasants took part in this battle. Weatherford also confuses the horses of the Rus' with the large warhorses used by knights in Western Europe (pp. 141-142).

One of the most troublesome aspects is that Weatherford places an incredible amount of emphasis on the Mongols' use of gunpowder in warfare, going so far as to insinuate that they used cannons at the siege of Baghdad in 1258 (p. 182). There is no indication of this in the Arabic, Syriac, or Persian sources of this practice, nor of the Mongols using devices like a cannon at other

sieges. To be sure, the Mongols did use grenades thrown from catapults occasionally, but gunpowder weapons of any form were not a major component of their arsenal.

In relation to Baghdad, Weatherford also takes another historical misstep noting that Baghdad would not fall again to "infidel troops" as it did to the Mongols in 1258 until 2003 to the Americans. This ignores the capture of Baghdad by British troops in 1917 during World War I.

Furthermore, many of the errors are simply careless. In discussing Timur (Tamerlane, 1336-1405) as a successor to Genghis Khan, Weatherford states that Timur captured the sultan of the Seljuk kingdom in modern Turkey. This is incorrect as the Seljuks no longer existed. Rather, Timur captured Sultan Bayazid, the Ottoman Sultan. Then Weatherford links Din-i-Illah, the universalist religion of Mughal ruler, Akbar the Great (1543-1605), with the religious policies of Genghis Khan. While Akbar and the other Moghul rulers certainly did use many of the practices of the Mongol Empire, one should not confuse the religious policies of the Mongols with a higher goal of religious unity and toleration on philosophic ideals. Mongol religious toleration was based on preventing strife in the empire, not ensuring spiritual harmony.

While Weatherford's book is filled with inaccuracies it is also rife with unsubstantiated historical speculation. While some of his speculations do have merit and deserve further consideration, many aspects are passed off as truths which the casual reader or non-specialist may accept unknowingly. An example of this concerns the last ruler of the unified Mongol Empire, Mongke. Weatherford makes a curious statement that Mongke had a fondness for European contraptions and designs (p. 177). This perhaps stems from an account of a fountain that provided four different beverages at feasts through intricate means. It was designed by a European prisoner, Guillaume Boucher, but hardly accounts for a

fondness as there are no other accounts of these "contraptions" in the sources.

Weatherford undermines his own efforts by dabbling in linguistic matters. While this reviewer cannot be positive, it seems clear that Weatherford enters a field where he has no business. Indeed, the words he mistranslates in Persian demonstrate that, one should hope, he has no background in the language. Weatherford may have learned some Mongolian, but it is also clear that he is not a student of the language, and thus does not understand the transformation of the Mongolian language from the Middle Mongolian of the thirteenth century to the modern Khalkha dialect used in Mongolia today.

This is demonstrated on several occasions. In relation to Mongolian, Weatherford states that the title "Genghis Khan", means strong, firm, fearless. In this instance, he is correct as Genghis (or more properly, Chinggis) comes from the middle Mongolian "ching"; Weatherford uses the modern Mongolian equivalent, "chin." Weatherford then associates it with the Mongolian word for wolf, *chino*, which was also the male ancestor of the Mongols (the female ancestor was a deer). Weatherford's lack of familiarity with Mongolian is apparent as, while the words are somewhat similar, they bare no relation other than that a *chino* could be described as "ching."

While other examples exist, one final example of these linguistic errors must be brought forth, particularly as it pertains to a subject that has been in the news in the recent years: the Hazara people of Afghanistan. Weatherford is correct in that the Hazara trace their existence back to a Mongol regiment that was stationed in Afghanistan; however Hazara does not mean "ten thousand" in Persian as Weatherford states, but rather "a thousand", which was the essential unit for military and civil operations.

Thus with Weatherford's *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, the reader is left in a quandary. Many may have thought of using

this book in a class. Considering the numerous factual errors and misguided etymological speculations this reviewer cannot recommend using this as a standard text for a world history class with the exception of using it as a point of discussion on historiography. While the overall thrust of the book is on target and may promote new discourse on the influence of the Mongols in history, it is undermined by numerous mistakes. Weatherford overstates his case in his enthusiasm for the Mongols, making connections that are often tenuous. Did the Mongols contribute to the modern world? Definitely yes, the evidence (even considering the errors) assembled makes this very clear. It is too much to say that Renaissance would not have happened without the Mongols. Indeed, eventually artists would have had contact with new styles and Chinese technology would have crept into Europe at any rate via the Middle East, albeit perhaps at a slower rate. One could make the argument that the Renaissance would not have happened without the Crusades or the rise of the Jin Dynasty in Northern China. After all the Jin unwittingly allowed the Mongols to rise to power, whereas their predecessors, the Liao dynasty did a great deal more to control the steppe tribes. More importantly the great period of translation of Greek material conducted by the Arabs is of equal importance.

That being said, there is still something to be said for *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. The errors are almost forgivable considering how well it is written. This reviewer doubts that most historians found their love of history in a dusty monograph but rather a well-written popular book that they read in their youth. Thus in this respect, while this reviewer would be reluctant to use Weatherford's book in a class, I would suggest it to someone might otherwise not have an interest in history.

Note

[1]. Timur, himself conquered the remnants of the Chaghatayids. Timur, however suffered

from the fact that he was not descended from Genghis Khan, and thus was not always viewed as a legitimate ruler in the steppes. To overcome this handicap, he married Genghisid princesses, and even placed Genghisid princes on the throne of his empire, while he ruled "behind the scenes" (needless to say, nobody was fooled).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

Citation: Timothy May. Review of Weatherford, Jack. *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10378>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.