

Reading guide for the Secret History

Primary sources in history are, by definition, challenging. I have always felt that if there isn't something a student doesn't understand in a primary source, it hasn't taught anything. It is our role in class to make sources a bit more meaningful.

The Secret History of the Mongols is the only source we have for much of Genghiz Khan's life and accomplishments, but it is not a terribly accessible text; written by and for Mongols, it assumes a certain understanding of Mongol life and culture, and without this, you may find reading unsatisfying. In my lecture, I hope to provide some of the background needed for the text to render its meaning. For the present, I would like you to read the text provided – almost as you would read a novel, or view a soap opera. We'll consider meanings and implications in class.

The passages I have selected deal with several critical episodes in the life of Genghiz Khan:

1. (pp. 13-21): This section deals with the birth of Temujin, the future Genghiz, who was named after a warrior his father had just killed. It narrates Temujin's early life, "marriage", the death of his father, the difficulties his mother, "Mother Hodelin", had raising her four boys on the steppe. The passage suggests Temujin's family's poverty, in steppe terms, and the fact that he was not born into one of the nomad aristocratic clans.
2. (pp. 44-51) Temujin's relationship with his boyhood friend Jamuka, and the bond, *anda* that joined them. They eventually became sworn enemies, with Jamugha representing the Mongol establishment, and Temujin its challenger. Note that Temujin is declared to be "Khan" shortly after he leaves Jamugha.
3. (pp. 166-181). This passage deals with a number of important elements, as follows
 - a. Genghiz' division of the empire among his sons. (Note the tensions between them and the operation of nomad inheritance practices. There is a genealogy in Mote, p. 415.)
 - b. Arrangements for rule of conquered territories.
 - c. War against Muslim kingdoms of central Asia. It is claimed that during this war, Genghiz first set foot in a city.
 - d. War against the Tanghuts.
 - e. Death of Genghiz