



The Mongol Conquests: The Military Operations of Genghis Khan and Sübe'etei by Carl Fredrik Sverdrup.

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Review by Timothy May, The University of North Georgia (timothy.may@ung.edu).

Although there is no end to the fascination with the Mongol conquests, comparatively few biographies of Genghis (*sic*)¹ Khan's generals have seen the light. Most histories of the Mongol conquests quickly unite the Mongol tribes and then unleash them into North China (the Jin Empire), Central Asia (the Khwarazmian Empire), and finally Central Europe. Carl Sverdrup also follows this pattern, but takes a methodical, chronological approach to the lives of Chinggis Khan and Sübe'etei, rather than producing a "greatest hits" compilation. Though he has published a couple scholarly articles on his subject, the author is not a professional historian and his lack of formal training in the field is reflected in his book. His career in international business management likely fostered his curiosity about areas outside his native Scandinavia.

The Mongol Conquests consists of fifty-four short chapters accompanied by twenty-five excellent maps, and two appendices. The main text examines specific military engagements, the lives of Chinggis Khan and Sübe'etei, principal Mongol officers, and the Mongol army. The first appendix charts the composition, organization, and battle formations of the Mongol Army, making good use of *The Secret History of the Mongols* and Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jamī'at al-Tawārikh*. The second appendix lists battles, indicating dates (often approximate due to inconsistent sources), Mongol and enemy commanders, and outcomes. A bibliography comprises relevant secondary sources, most in (English, German, and French) translation; Sverdrup made use of a translator for the included Chinese-language materials. A section of the bibliography titled "Mongols as military supermen" is most welcome.

Many studies of the Mongols, especially by nonspecialists, gloss over the unification of Mongolia. Thankfully, Sverdrup discusses the subject in detail, with attention to each battle. (Many of the book's invaluable maps concern the wars in Mongolia.) In a valuable corrective shift of emphasis, Sverdrup gives more space to Sübe'etei's campaigns in East Asia (60 pages) than to the Western Campaign (35 pages) which brought the Russian principalities under Mongol control.

Though well written overall, the book has some defects. For example, Sverdrup argues that the Mongol military system was based on that of the Liao dynasty (960-1125). But there is little

1. Sverdrup eschews the more accurate transliteration *Chinggis* Khan in favor of the traditional western form, *Genghis* Khan, which entered the English language via François Pétis de la Croix's *Genghis Khan* (1710, Eng. trans. 1722). (N.b., in French, *Genghis* is pronounced more like *Chinggis*, that is, with a soft rather than hard "G.") This jars with his use of *Sübe'etei*, a precise transliteration from the Middle Mongolian, as opposed to Sübedei, Sübetei, Subotai, Subedai: if one is willing to use the truest but least familiar (to western readers) rendering of a Mongolian name, then why retain "Genghis Khan?" This problem extends to toponymy: curiously, Sverdrup uses *Beijing* instead of *Zhongdu* to designate the Jin capital. While Beijing now occupies much of the former *Zhongdu*, it did not exist in the thirteenth century, nor was *Zhongdu* the northern capital of the Jin Empire. Sverdrup also incorrectly refers to the *Erdis* (read *Irtys*) River (150).

evidence that this was true when Chinggis Khan rose to power almost a century later. Rather, traditional steppe forms of warfare predominated alongside Jin influences (which might have contained Liao forms).

More disappointing are Sverdrup's facile comparisons of Mongol tactics with those of such Western military figures as Hannibal, Napoleon, and Robert E. Lee. Military buffs may appreciate these excurses, but they reveal Sverdrup's lack of familiarity with nonwestern military history and consequent missed opportunities to stress unique aspects of the Mongol military. To cite another example, the author twice (32, 48) mentions the presence of *a woman*—Hö'elun—at the battle of Dalan Baljut.² Both times, he simply lists her among other commanders without remarking on the extreme rarity of female battlefield commanders in any historical era or on the fact that she was Chinggis Khan's own mother. Although somewhat off topic, a paragraph concerning other examples of contemporary female commanders would have been most enlightening.

General readers may find in *The Mongol Conquests* a convenient introduction to the Mongol Empire. Specialists will value the clarity of its charts and maps, but dislike its inconstancies and errors of fact. While Carl Sverdrup's measured and discerning analyses of the campaigns of Chinggis Khan and Sübe'etei break no new ground, they offer a salutary antidote to the "Mongols as military supermen" style of narrative.

2. Sometimes erratically spelled "Baljud" by Sverdrup.