

# CONN IGGULDEN

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

# WOLF OF THE PLAINS

THE EPIC STORY OF THE GREAT CONQUEROR





# GENGHIS

BIRTH OF AN EMPIRE

Conn Iggulden

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To my brothers John, David, and Hal

A multitude of rulers is not a good thing. Let there be one ruler, one king.

Homer, *The Iliad*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This book could not have been written without the people of Mongolia, who allowed me to live among them for a time and who taught me their history over salted tea and vodka while the winter eased into spring.

## PROLOGUE

THE SNOW WAS BLINDING as the Mongol archers encircled the Tartar raiding party. Each man guided his pony with his knees, standing on the stirrups to fire shaft after shaft with withering accuracy. They were grimly silent, the hooves of their galloping ponies the only sound to challenge the cries of the wounded and the howling wind. The Tartars could not escape the whirring death that came out of the darkening wings of the battle. Their horses fell groaning to their knees, blood spattering bright from their nostrils.

On an outcrop of yellow-gray rock, Yesugei watched the battle, hunched deep into his furs. The wind was a roaring devil on the plain, tearing at wherever his skin had lost its covering of mutton grease. He did not show the discomfort. He had borne it for so many years he could not have been sure he even felt it anymore. It was just a fact of his life, like having warriors to ride at his word, or enemies to kill.

The Tartars did not lack courage, for all he despised them. Yesugei saw them rally around a young warrior and heard his shouts carry over the wind. The Tartar wore a chain-mail vest that Yesugei envied, lusted after. With curt words of command, the man was preventing the raiders from scattering, and Yesugei saw the moment had come to ride. His *arban* of nine companions felt it, the best of his tribe, blood brothers and bondsmen. They had earned the precious armor they wore, boiled leather inscribed with the leaping figure of a young wolf.

“Are you ready, my brothers?” he said, feeling them turn to him.

One of the mares whinnied excitedly and his first warrior, Eeluk, chuckled.

“We will kill them for you, little one,” Eeluk said, rubbing her ears.

Yesugei kicked in his heels and they broke effortlessly into a trot toward the screaming, roiling battlefield in the snow. From their height above the fighting,

they could all see the full stretch of the wind. Yesugei murmured in awe as he saw the arms of the sky father reach around and around the frail warriors in great white scarves, heavy with ice.

They moved into a gallop without the formation changing and without thought, as each man judged the distances around him as he had for decades. They thought only of how best to cut the enemy from their saddles and leave them cold on the plains.

Yesugei's arban crashed into the center of the fighting men, making for the leader, who had risen in the last few moments. If he was allowed to live, perhaps he would become a torch for all his tribe to follow. Yesugei smiled as his pony hammered into the first of the enemy. Not today.

The impact broke the back of a Tartar warrior even as he turned to meet the new threat. Yesugei held his mount's mane in one hand, using his sword in single strikes that left dead men falling like leaves. He refused two blows where the blade of his father might have been lost, instead using the pony to trample the men down and the hilt as a hammer for one unknown soldier. Then he was past and had reached the knotted core of the Tartar resistance. Yesugei's nine followers were still with him, protecting their khan as they had been sworn to from birth. He knew they were there without looking, guarding his back. He saw their presence in the way the Tartar captain's eyes flickered to each side of him. He would be seeing his death in their flat, grinning faces. Perhaps he had also become aware of all the bodies around him, stiff with arrows. The raid had been crushed.

Yesugei was pleased when the Tartar rose in his stirrups and pointed a long red blade at him. There was no fear in the eyes, only anger and disappointment that the day had come to nothing. The lesson would be wasted on the frozen dead, but Yesugei knew the Tartar tribes would not miss the significance. They would find the blackened bones when the spring came and they would know not to raid his herds again.

Yesugei chuckled, making the Tartar warrior frown as they stared at each other. No, they would not learn. Tartars could starve to death deciding on a mother's tit. They would be back and he would ride out to them again, killing even more of their dishonest blood. The prospect pleased him.

He saw that the Tartar who had challenged him was young. Yesugei thought of the son being born to him over the hills to the east and wondered if he too would face a grizzled older warrior across the length of a sword one day.

“What is your name?” Yesugei said.

The battle had finished around them and already his Mongols walked among the corpses, taking anything of use. The wind still roared, but the question was heard and Yesugei saw a frown pass across the face of his young enemy.

“What is yours, yak penis?”

Yesugei chuckled, but his exposed skin was beginning to ache and he was tired. They had tracked the raiding party for almost two days across his land, going without sleep and surviving on nothing more than a handful of wet milk curd each day. His sword was ready to take another life and he raised the blade.

“It does not matter, boy. Come to me.”

The Tartar warrior must have seen something in his eyes that was more certain than an arrow. He nodded, resigned.

“My name is Temujin-Uge,” he said. “My death will be avenged. I am the son of a great house.”

He dug in his heels and his mount surged at Yesugei. The khan’s sword whipped through the air in a single stroke of perfect economy. The body fell at his feet and the pony bolted across the battleground.

“You are carrion, boy,” Yesugei said, “as are all men who steal from my herds.”

He looked around him at his gathered warriors. Forty-seven had left their *ger* tents to answer his call. They had lost four of their brothers against the ferocity of the Tartar raid, but not one of twenty Tartars would return home. The price had been high, but the winter drove men to the edge in all things.

“Strip the bodies quickly,” Yesugei ordered. “It is too late to return to the tribe. We will camp in the shelter of the rocks.”