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## Barbarians At The Gate

By Nigel Feetham, Partner, Hassans International Law Firm

Business consultants have long sought to explain and analyse, for the benefit of their clients, the reasons why some businesses are far more successful than others. Aside from a passion for history, I also often examine historical data to see if it provides a perspective for business strategy. I am especially interested in the why, rather than the when and how. My greatest fascination has always been of historical figures and races that explode on the world scene, often from relative obscurity, unleashing a sequence of events with profound historical impact. There are numerous such examples in history but the one which to my mind stands out most (even more than Macedonian hegemony over the ancient world) is the emergence of Mongol supremacy in the 13th century.

I mention Macedonian hegemony because much has been written about Alexander King of Macedonia, known throughout the ages as 'Alexander the Great', and his conquest of the known world. The allure of the young heroic king leading his cavalry into battle, won him the adulation of his men, mesmerised his contemporaries, some of who worshipped him as a God, and earned him the enduring admiration of Roman emperors and future military leaders and kings alike. Whilst not intended to belittle his great accomplishments, Alexander had inherited a strong military from his father King Philip II, against a backdrop of the 'golden age' of ancient Greece, inspired by Aristotle (his tutor) and his own insatiable dream of conquest of the Persian Empire. As a historical figure Alexander probably has no equal but he died young (aged 32) without an adult male heir, whereupon his generals fought each other for the spoils of empire and the Hellenistic age eventually gave way to the rise of Roman imperial power.

### The Mongols

The Mongols, on the other hand, were unlikely world conquerors. A nomadic, even backwards people, occupying some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth - the Asian steppes, they had none of the magnificent cities or cultural achievements of any of the 'world' powers that preceded them (the Egyptian, Greek and Roman empires). The Mongols had spent much of their nomadic history fighting each other, but by the time Genghis Khan united the various tribes they could count on an organised army one hundred thousand strong. Still, this does not explain how they became masters of most of Eurasia, with an empire bigger than Alexander's, defeating well-disciplined and often numerically superior armies standing in their path to conquest.

The key to this military success was that the Mongols were unlike any military of their time. Surprisingly, the Mongols had no infantry. They were a cavalry force who rode small hardy horses native to the steppes. With several horses to each soldier they could cover greater distances than any of their rivals. However, what truly underpinned the Mongol's military superiority was a piece of technology that was as remarkably simple as it was devastating to their enemies - a composite bow made of wood and bone that had a longer reach than anything in existence at that time. The Mongol military strategy was equally simple and unconventional: they used their superior bow to rain arrows on enemy formations from a distance and out of harms way, engaging or picking off their enemy when it was most advantageous for them to do so. In contrast to Alexander, Mongol leaders had no difficulty in stealing a victory from their enemies. They were fast and agile in the field of battle, able to respond to changing circumstances when necessary. The Mongols also did not rush into enemy territory. Instead they had a good system of intelligence that provided them with valuable advance information about enemy strength, terrain, food supplies and even local weather.

First under Genghis Khan, and then under his successors, the Mongols established the largest contiguous empire the world has ever seen, stretching from China and parts of India into Persia, the Middle East and Turkey and all the way into Russia, and finally, Eastern Europe. In doing so, these nomadic people came up against the great civilisations of their day, the Chinese, Ottoman and

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Islamic empires; as well as knights from Hungary, Poland and Germany. To put it into some sort of historical perspective, this was at the height of Islamic power and after the Muslim armies had already defeated and pushed the Crusaders out of the Holy Land. In fact, the Mongol invasion of Russian territory was the only successful winter invasion in history; succeeding where both Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler failed.

However, the Mongols also left devastation and destruction in their wake and at a scale never seen before. Eventually as the empire was divided into separate regions, their Mongol rulers assimilated into the local cultures of the people they had conquered and started their own distinct dynasties in China, Persia and India. They left behind their nomadic traditions and some might even say became 'civilised'.

Despite their brutality, the Mongols were a pragmatic people. Historians have noted that the Mongolian empire established trading and communication routes stretching east to west, including the so-called Silk Road famously travelled by Marco Polo in his journey to the magnificent court of Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis, under the Pax Mongolica. As goods and people crossed in both directions it became the first world economy and system of communication. Also noted is the Mongol's religious tolerance, which in no small measure allowed them to keep the peace over much of their vast conquest, as well as their willingness to incorporate 'foreign' knowledge, expertise and technology in the furtherance of their ambitions for empire. Less well known is that Mongol law (the Great Yasaj) is thought to have exempted priests, teachers, doctors and even lawyers from taxation. Unlike Alexander, however, they were ruthless in their treatment of nobles of the conquered people. The Mongols proved they were not just marauding tribesmen. They were intent on keeping the lands they had conquered and did so for over a century.

Interestingly, the Mongols were not always victorious. They were less than successful in Vietnam where their opponents used the local terrain to fight an unconventional war against the larger Mongol army. In Japan the Mongols came up against forces beyond their control when much of their invasion fleet was destroyed by bad weather. Against the Mamluks in Egypt they suffered their first major defeat when a well organised army employed not dissimilar tactics to the Mongols. Fortunately for them, when they considered they could not usefully or successfully expand their empire any further, the Mongols simply turned back and consolidated what they had previously conquered. On the other hand, whilst Alexander never suffered defeat one gets the sense that, like his classical hero Achilles, he acted on impulse where stakes were high and 'winner takes all'.

## Barbarians knocking at the gates of business

I started this article by saying that I often examine historical data to see if it provides a perspective for business strategy. Therefore we must ask the question, is there any useful perspective that can be derived from this historical record? It is certainly not that the Mongols exempted lawyers from taxation. Instead, and at the risk of over-simplification, the following can serve as an explanation for this success translated into a business context:

- **Organisation:** No business can ever be successful without organisation.
- **Agility:** The ability to respond quickly to market changes.
- **Technology:** All businesses must keep abreast of technological developments. Sometimes simple technology (e.g. an increase in speed and accuracy) can provide a significant competitive advantage.
- **Intelligence:** Understanding what the competition is doing is vital.
- **Talent:** A willingness to learn from others and recruit externally where the required skill is not available within the organisation.

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- **Ambition:** All market-leading businesses must have that burning ambition to grow market share, expand into new products or areas and be better than their competitors.
- **Adaptability:** The business must be able to adapt and ready for unforeseen scenarios.
- **Strategy:** Subject to adaptability, devise a winning strategy and stay within the area of competence. If the firm suffers failure from particular markets, shed the loss-making operations and confine the business to what is successful.

To the above we might also add the less endearing aspect, a certain corporate ruthlessness; that is, by the standards of modern society of course. Likewise, the adverse circumstances mentioned above (alone or invariably as a chain of events) can cause an otherwise successful business to fail.

Even with all this, we would still be missing the most significant ingredient of all – quality of leadership, something which, unfortunately, cannot easily be emulated. Without this, no enterprise will ever become a market leader. Indeed, without Alexander or Genghis Khan there simply would have been no Greek or Mongol empires as we know them.

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