

ATL Skills: Research

Early Life of Timujin

In *The Historical Dictionary of the Mongol World Empire*, ed. by Buell, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2003, pp.7-8, it states about Genghis Khan's early life:

His early life is the subject of myth, but much of the myth probably has some basis in fact. It accords well with known facts about life on the Mongolian steppe during the second half of the 12th century. According to the *Secret History of the Mongols*, Temujin, like other Mongolian children, learned to ride and shoot at an early age. He also began to form the relationships that were to be important for the rest of his life at a young age. For example, he became the blood brother or *anda* of Jamuqa later as much rival as friend, while still a child. Temujin was also a child, and afraid of dogs, the *Secret History of the Mongols* records, when betrothed to Borte, his later primary wife, and daughter of the powerful chieftain Dei-secen. It was on the return journey from this betrothal that Temujin's father, Yisugei, encountered some Tatar and was poisoned by them. Left without effective leadership, Yisugei's herdsmen abandoned Ho'elun and her children, sans Temujin, who had been left behind to serve his future father-in-law, on the steppe to die.

Soon summoned home to help his mother, Temujin, perhaps nine years old, began one of the most difficult periods of his life. Although the degree to which Ho'elun was isolated is probably overstated in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, clearly she had a great deal of responsibility on her shoulders. In the *Secret History of the Mongols* she, among other things done solely to survive, is described as doing the unthinkable, from the perspective of a Mongolian society based upon shepherding and its products: gathering plant foods to feed her brood. Her sons themselves had to catch small, "misshapen" fish and shoot small birds, under their mother's close supervision. That such things were far more common among the early Mongols than the *Secret History of the Mongols* allows is immaterial. The image is very much the traditional one of hero and his family down on their luck but surviving because of divine favour.

It was during such hunting that Temujin shot and killed his half brother Bekter, an event perhaps signaling a power struggle among lines sired by Yisugei from at least two wives... Soon afterwards, perhaps in connection with the murder of Bekter, Temujin was taken captive by his father's former people, the Tayici'ut, whose leader may have considered Temujin as a potential rival. Ultimately, he escaped, and after a series of harrowing experiences rejoined his family, who continued to live in straitened circumstances. By this time Temujin was perhaps in his middle teens.

As Temujin grew older, he not only was increasingly able to look after himself, but also began to draw upon old connections once made by his father with others, and new alliances forged by himself.

