

KHARAKORUM

Jean Tee (2006)

From: I am the soul in limbo

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I was a city once. Many years have passed since then. My founder was Ghengis Khan, the Universal Ruler. He named me Karakorum and I was the capital of his Great Mongol Empire.

They build me in a short time: a palace, regal with its green-tiled floor and green- and red-tiled roof, rich with relief and ornaments, houses, shops, temples, schools, barns, storehouses and kilns and foundries next to the Ohron River.

More and more people came to live within my walls. First only Mongols of all tribes, later also people that came from far away lands. Their appearance was different and their languages were not the same. When they first arrived, they brought silk, silver and gold and they left with ceramics, cauldrons, glass beads and yarn. Soon they settled here, build their own houses, shops and places of worship: churches and mosques.

I remember those first years so well. I was growing so fast, my streets were bustling and the Khan and his people were happy here; nothing seemed to stand in the way of the empire and it's capital: me. My days were filled with watching my inhabitants. Their ceaseless motion struck me most. We cities do not move much, but these people never stopped moving. They walked and rode their horses, they ate and drank, they worked and made love and when they'd lay down to rest, they kept turning and shifting positions.

I was inexperienced then, still a child really. So when the first big winter storms came, I wasn't prepared. It was my main duty to protect the people and the animals and I tried so hard. But the winds were so fierce, pushing and tearing at my walls. The roofs were so heavy with snow and ice. I couldn't hold on any longer and some of the roofs and walls collapsed. People died, they are so vulnerable, humans, that's why they need so much protection, but I had failed. Their families mourned. They went to the temples, churches and mosques and they buried or burned the dead. When they came to me, some were quiet, some were scared and some were angry. "It was not our time," they said. I tried to comfort them, told them they were a part of me now and together we would watch over their children. It took them a while to accept that life as they knew had ended. But with the passing of time, they became less and less restless, growing accustomed to the stillness of my walls.

This is how I became stronger, by absorbing the dead. Their voices were etched in my walls, leaving a record of their lives. When winds blew from a certain angle, a few of the people and some of the horses could hear it: the voices of the old.

The Khan was not one of those people. He was a practical man. A very busy man as well. He had many meetings with advisors and generals. They spoke of politics and trade. Together they planned strategies for conquering first the lands nearby and later other empires further and further away. They say he was a fierce warrior, cruel even, and when he and his thousands of military got up on their horses, dressed in armour and taking their siege weapons with them, I could see the fear they would install in the cities and peoples about to be conquered.

When he didn't come back from one of his military campaigns, I mourned him together with my inhabitants. He was my founder and now I felt lost.

His son Ogodei succeeded him as Khan. He was not as impressive a man as his father had been, but he was good to me. He had my walls made stronger, build a new palace and decorated me with great stone sculptures of tortoises. The Mongol Empire was greater than ever and I was still its capital. 70 thousand people now walked my streets and I was not even 40 years of age.

With the death of Ogodei Khan my downfall began. His widow Torogene reigned shortly, while the family disagreed on who should be Khan. Eventually Kuyuk was elected, son of Ogodei and Torogene. He died only two years after his election and I worried about my future. The ones in power changed rapidly. Unrest took hold of my inhabitants. A man named Kublai won the struggle for power in the end and became the next Khan. He was to be the last of the Great Khans, but we didn't know that then. Like his grandfather before him, he was a legendary warrior. He led his army south and conquered the vast lands of China.

Kublai Khan was the one who set it all in motion. He left me for a city called Dadu. This city still exists now under the name of Beijing. I hear that millions of people live there. It is still capital of China. Kublai had never cared for me much, nor for the people that lived here. Their anger resonated between my walls. They called him a traitor, a collaborator of the Chinese and there was an uprising against him. The Great Mongol Empire fell apart and I slowly fell into decay. The Silk Road, that had once made me flourish, no longer reached me. It ended in China now.

And China it was that finally destroyed me completely. An emperor named Hung-wu came with his army and launched an attack on my

walls. I tried to be strong and resist the waves of attacks, but the great forces of Genghis Khan were no longer there to protect me. My walls crumbled and I could not shelter my people from the destructive powers of Hung-wu's army. And so it was that my inhabitants were slaughtered and driven away and I, the once great city of Karakorum, was no more.

For years and years I just laid here, my remnants falling to an ever further decay. I mourned. There were no people here any longer and I alone remembered the days of Genghis and Ogodei Khan.

Then one day Buddhist monks came and out of what was left of me they build the monastery of Erdeni Dzu. I listened to their chanting and sheltered them from the fierce winters of the Mongolian steppes. But in my heart I was still Karakorum, a city, not a monastery.

Today, the monastery is a museum. People from all over the world come to visit me again. I can see that some of them can still hear the voices of the people of the past. But they are only traces now, soft and incomprehensible.