The particular circumstances of the death of the great Mongolian hero Chinggis Khan will probably always be mysterious.¹ Several versions of his death exist. The official Chinese-language history of the Mongol or Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in China records simply that the khan died in a tent in the summer of 1227.² A Mongolian chronicle entitled Altan Tobči gives a similarly brief account of his death.³ According to the Secret History of the Mongols, the thirteenth-century Mongolian-language record of the Mongols’ exploits and conquests, Chinggis Khan died in 1227 of a fever that set in when he was thrown from his horse during his final campaign against the Tanguts⁴:

“Wintering that winter, saying, «I shall set forth against the Tang’ud people», newly numbering the number, in the autumn of the year of the dog [1226], Činggis Qahan set forth against the Tang’ud people. From the qadund, [taking with him] Yesüi qadun, he departed. As, on the way, in the winter, he hunted the many wild horses of [1v] Arbuqa, Činggis Qahan was riding Josotu Boro.⁵ When the wild horses came, passing by, Josotu Boro being terrified, when Činggis Qahan fell from the horse, his flesh paining exceedingly, he pitched [at] Čo’orqad. As he

¹ An important study of the death of Chinggis Khan is Eric Haenisch, “Die letzten Feldzüge Chinggis Han’s und sein Tod” Asia Major (ser. 1) 9 (1933):503-551. Paul Pelliot’s review of this article can be found in T’oung Pao 31 (1934-35):157-167.
⁵ This is the name of a horse, signifying ‘Red-Earth Grey’.
passed that night, when, on the morrow, [2r] Yesui Qadun spake, she said, «Princes and chiefs, talk [ye] unto one another. The Qahan, at night, hath passed the night, [his] flesh [being] hot.»

Despite his fever, Chinggis Khan ordered an attack on the Tangut kingdom. He died soon after the Tangut king was captured and executed. This version of his death is sometimes regarded as the “official” or standard one.

The Persian historian Juvaini has Chinggis Khan falling ill due to a “disease arising from the insalubrity of the climate”:

“When Chinggiz-Khan returned from the lands of the West to his old encampment in the East, he carried out his intention to proceed against the Tangut. And after the whole region had been purged of the evilness of his enemies and they had all been conquered and subjugated, he was overcome by an incurable disease arising from the insalubrity of the climate. He called to him his sons Chaghatai, Ogetei, Ulugh-Noyan, Kölgen, Jürchetei and Orchan, and addressed them as follows: «The severity of my illness is greater than can be cured by treatment, and, of a truth, one of you must defend the throne and the power of the State and raise up that pedestal which has received so strong a foundation.»”

6 Cleaves 205. Kahn's reworking of the Secret History's account of Chinggis Khan's death is found on 176-181. His account of the fatal injury is much more readable than the scholarly Cleaves translation:

“Chinggis Khan was hunting wild horses in the Arbukha region, riding his horse known as Red-Earth Grey. As some soldiers drove the wild horses from the bush, Red-Earth Grey bolted and threw Chinggis Khan to the ground. The fall caused him a great deal of pain, and he pitched his camp there at Chogorkhād. That night his condition grew worse, and the next morning Yesui Khatun called the princes and commanders together. «Talk among yourselves and decide what to do», she said. «The Khan has spent a bad night and his flesh has grown hot.»” (176)

7 Walther Heissig calls this version the “official” one; see his A Lost Civilization: The Mongols Rediscovered (J. S. Thomson, trans.). London: Thames and Hudson, 1964:112-114.
Chinggis then designated Ogodei as his successor, and the other brothers made a promise in writing to be obedient and loyal to Ogodei. Soon after this Chinggis died of his illness:

Chingiz-Khan's illness grew worse, and it being impossible to remove him from where he was he passed away on the 4th of Ramazan, 624 [18th of August, 1227].

Rashid al-Din, another Persian historian, related Chinggis Khan's death in a straightforward manner, with no apparent illness or circumstance other than human mortality as the cause of his death:

“In the qaqa yil, that is, the Year of the Pig, falling within the months of the year 624/1126-1127, Chinggiz-Khan, by reason of that condition which no mortal can escape, passed away in the region of Tangqut, having set out for the country of the Nangiyan [China] and having reached the frontier [of that country].”

European sources also do not agree on the cause of his death. The well-known Venetian traveller Marco Polo wrote that Chinggis was hit in the knee by an arrow during a siege on a castle of “Prestor John” (Ong Khan) and eventually died of the wound. John of Plano Carpini, a Franciscan friar sent by Pope Innocent IV to Mongolia in 1245, perhaps wanted to see some form of divine judgement or punishment in Chinggis Khan's death. He has Chinggis “killed by a thunderbolt, having completed his decrees and statutes.” (John more than likely did not make this account. It might be a Russian adaptation of the work of the late fifth-century Byzantine Church historian Socrates and Theodoret and their story of the death of Rua, king of

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10 Manuel Komroff (rev. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. New York: Liveright, 1926:88. Of course, Chinggis Khan's battles with Ong Khan were twenty-four years previous to 1227; on this, see Henri Yule and Henri Cordier (trans. and ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*. New York: Dover Publications, 1993 [reprint of original 1903 ed.]. v. 1:244-245 and n. 1.
the Huns. These accounts have Rua killed by a thunderbolt for daring to attack the Christian domains of Byzantium and as something of a fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies about Gog and Magog. These accounts were available in Carpini's time and likely constitute the analogous basis for Carpini's account, which he in turn almost certainly got from his informants among Russian clerics. Just as King Rua of the Huns was struck by lightning for daring to attack Christian Byzantium, so Chinggis Khan was struck by lightning for daring to launch a Gog-and-Magog-like attack on Christian Russia.

Armenian historians of the Mongols do not comment on the manner of Chinggis Khan's death.

Perhaps the most fanciful and bizarre account of all is, ironically enough, from a seventeenth-century Mongolian-language chronicle. According to the eminent German Mongolist Walther Heissig, one chronicle describes the death of Chinggis Khan in the following terms: In 1227 Chinggis Khan was campaigning against the Tanguts, a non-Chinese people whose kingdom was located in modern Ning-hsia (Ningxia) and Kansu (Gansu) provinces in northern China. After capturing and executing the Tangut king, Chinggis took the king's wife, the Tangut queen Gürbelčin γαυ-a (Mongolian for 'Lizard-like Beauty'), as a concubine. Not pleased with this novel form of courting, Gürbelčin γαυ-a made plans to kill her new captor and husband. She placed a small sharp piece of metal into her sexual organ, and after Chinggis Khan imposed himself on her, she mortally wounded him in his sexual organ.

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12 On which see Ezekiel 38:39 and Revelation 20:7-9.
15 Heissig 112-114. The relevant passage from Heissig (113) is as follows: "... in the Mongolian chronicles of the seventeenth century, which are based on much older historical works and traditions, the view is constantly expressed that Korbelčin, his beautiful 'lizard-like' wife, had done him an injury of which the great warrior had died. Jenghiz
The Death of Chinggis Khan

Subsequent Mongolian historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rejected this version as a fabricated libel perpetrated by Western Mongols, who had traditionally been ill-disposed towards Chinggis Khan. But some seventeenth-century Mongolian chronicles seem to have this version in mind, although they hint very cautiously and delicately at its specifics.

One example of such careful and indirect treatment of Chinggis Khan's death is found in the seventeenth-century Erdeni-yin Tobči, the 'Bejeweled Chronicle'. In several ways the account contained in this chronicle seems almost a bowdlerized or sanitized reworking of the more shocking and bizarre version given above. In the Erdeni-yin Tobči we find the Tangut king, just prior to his execution, making the following statement to Chinggis Khan:

Gürbelčin γuu-a-yi minu či beye-degen abqu bügesü bükü beye-yi inu sayitur negijijü üjegdeküi 'If thou takest unto thyself the body of my Gürbelčin γuu-a, inspect her entire body thoroughly and it shall be seen'.

Khan, after his victory over the Tanghuts – a Buddhist people with a culture of their own derived from Tibet, who lived in the country stretching from the bend of the Hwang Ho westwards and south-westwards to the Himalayas – is said to have coveted the wife of the Tanghut king. He had the king executed and took the woman into his harem. One can well imagine that Korbelchin was not greatly impressed by this novel form of courting. In any case a whole series of Mongolian chronicles report that, after they had slept together, some «injury was done» to Jenghiz Khan's imperial body. Korbelchin, so the story goes, fled, pursued by the Mongolian guards and flung herself into the Yellow River, which flowed near the camp. Jenghiz Khan died. The injury that he suffered is usually hinted at very cautiously. An early seventeenth-century chronicle, however, is quite specific and records with complete clarity: «The prince's wife Korbelchin pressed a small piece of metal into her sexual organ and, after she had injured the ruler's sexual organ, she fled, threw herself into the Hwang Ho and died.»

In several important translations, the full sense of *üjegdekii* (‘it shall be seen’) is not adequately conveyed. John Krueger’s translation of the passage above is as follows: “If you take to yourself my Görbeljin Guua, scrutinize her entire body well.” Chinese translations are also inadequate. Meng-ku Yuan-liu, the eighteenth-century Chinese translation of the *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, renders this passage approximately as follows: “Again, if you take unto yourself Gürbelčin γuu-a, you may take the side of her body and inspect it meticulously.” A modern translation published in Inner Mongolia in 1981 says more or less the same thing: “Furthermore, if you take unto yourself my Gürbelčin γuu-a, you should meticulously inspect her entire body.” But according to Lessing, the meaning of *üjegde-* (YZEGDE-) is ‘to be seen or visible; to give birth to [!] (rare)’. The agglutinative suffix -kii is what Poppe labeled the “Nomen futuri” which “expresses an action which will take place in the future”. The sense of ‘it shall be seen’ in *üjegdekii* is, then, unmistakable.

We may well wonder what is being hinted at by the instructions to search Gürbelčin γuu-a’s body thoroughly. Knowing what we do about the “libelous” account of Chinggis Khan’s death, it is somewhat tempting to conclude that this is a reference to some type of sharp instrument. Perhaps she and her husband had made prior plans for the assassination of Chinggis Khan?

She may have had ample opportunity to be alone to hide a weapon, as she was allowed a few moments of privacy. According to the *Erdeni-yin Tobči*, her beauty was admired by all after she had been taken into Chinggis’s harem. Before her union with Chinggis, she announced that her physical

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22 Poppe 94, § 359.
beauty would be even more radiant if she were allowed to bathe. Permission to bathe was granted, but she was ashamed to disrobe in front of Chinggis's retinue: *olan nökød tan-aça ičimüi bi ta bükün-iyer ende bayiɣun bi ɣychaɣar odču ukiyasuɣaɣai ‘I shame because of [the presence of] thine attendants. All of you stay here, and allow me to bathe alone’.

This request was also granted, and the bathing did indeed add to her already ravishing beauty. When night fell, she did harm to Chinggis Khan's body: *tendeče sönü bolju umtaɣsan-u qoyina ejen-ü altan beye-dur gem bol-ɣaɣsan-iyar čiɣigerken bükiɣ-e ‘And it came to pass that at nightfall, after he [Chinggis Khan] was asleep, she did the harm to his golden body, and he fell ill’.

Having done the deed, she threw herself into the Yellow River (*Qara Mören) and drowned.23 (After her death the Yellow River was sometimes called the *Khotun-gol, or ‘Lady’s River’, by some Mongols.) Chinggis's illness soon grew serious, and he died in August of 1227.

The elements of this version of Chinggis Khan's death are highly improbable; hiding blades in such a manner would surely have severely injured, if not quickly killed, Gürbelčin γuu-a. The details of this particular account of the great khan's death are likely not as reflective of historical truth as they are of lurid, exaggerated male anxieties and unsavory fascinations with sex and violent death.

The historiographical nature of the *Erdeni-yin Tobči is a separate but important and related issue. The *Erdeni-yin Tobči seems primarily a literary work, not a straightforward and strictly factual chronicle written on rationalistic Western models. It contains clearly fantastic passages that cannot be taken literally. For instance, in passages immediately preceding the Tangut king's cryptic warning to Chinggis Khan about Gürbelčin γuu-a's body, we have the Tangut king transforming himself into a serpent and Chinggis Khan transforming himself into a fabulous (snake-catching?) bird in response. The king then transforms himself into a tiger, and Chinggis responds by turning himself into a lion, the king of beasts. The Tangut king is left without powers after Chinggis Khan transforms himself into the lord of the skies, so he sur-

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23 John R. Kureger's translation of this important passage is as follows: “Then when night had fallen and they had gone to sleep, because she had performed an evil to the Ruler's exalted body, the Ruler grew ill, and Queen Görbeljin Guua rose, went to the Qara Mören, plunged in and died.” (John R. Krueger (trans.) 69. The translation in the “Second Edition” (1967) is identical.)
renders. He bleeds not blood but milk when he is slashed with his own mys-
terious folding Egyptian knife hidden in his boot.24

Clearly, then, the literary and hyperbolic need to be distinguished from
the historical facts, and this is no mean task. But from the strictly historical
point of view, common sense and human experience can perhaps afford some
guidance in classifying or interpreting the events in the Erdeni-yin Tobči as
impossible, improbable, possible, and likely. The magical transformations
described above are impossible or extremely improbable because they do not
conform with the empirical observations of human experience. For the same
reasons it seems improbable that Gürbelčin γuu-a could have secreted a sharp
instrument inside her sexual organ for any extended period of time, as this
would have led to serious injury almost immediately.

It is, however, well within the realm of possibility that she could have
assassinated Chinggis Khan in some way. The fact remains that a whole
series of seventeenth-century Mongolian chronicles do hint strongly that
Gürbelčin guu-a did some bodily injury to Chinggis Khan after they had slept
together. Similar accounts among the Kazakhs have also been discovered by
folklorists.25 The seventeenth-century chronicles are perhaps not as accurate
or reliable as the more contemporary sources on Mongolian history. If there
is some ultimate element of truth in this particular version, it is perhaps that
the death of Chinggis Khan was due to assassination rather than natural or
accidental causes.26

24 The knife is described as a folding knife of three parts. This is more than likely a simple
"butterfly" knife, perhaps not entirely unlike those used by American gangsters today.
Two covers pivot at the base of the blade and fold over against themselves to enclose the
blade in a closed position. When opened, the blade and the two covers constitute three
separate parts until the two covers are attached to each other to form the knife's handle.
The "Egyptian" steel is likely Damascus steel, a very fine knife steel folded by a black-
smith nine times into 512 layers, a process which leaves a very distinctive grain in the
steel. Damascus steel has been highly prized by knife fanciers for centuries. I owe these
insights to Prof. David C. Montgomery of Brigham Young University.

25 Personal conversation with Dr. Birtalan Ágnes (of Budapest's University Elte, Dept. for
Inner Asian Studies), Szeged, Hungary, June 1996.

26 In April of 1993 I discussed this question at Brigham Young University with Dr. Ren-
chingin Otgon, Director of the State Central Library in Ulan-bator, Mongolia and a
scholar of Mongolian history. He stated to me his belief that Gürbelčin γuu-a probably
did assassinate Chinggis Khan in some way.
It must also be remembered, however, that this is only one of several accounts or versions of Chinggis Khan's death. Historians must be content to conclude with Paul Ratchnevsky, the distinguished biographer of the great khan, that the circumstances of Chinggis Khan's death will, along with many aspects of his death, always remain a mystery; only in specifying the general time of his death (August 1227) do the historical sources agree.27