

Wolf Totem

By Tim Cope

An Extract from *On The Trail of Genghis Khan: An Epic Journey*

Through the Land of the Nomads.

Tim Cope spent more than three years riding horses 10,000km from Mongolia to Hungary on a quest to discover the heritage and spirit of the nomadic peoples of Eurasia. With his three horses, and later his dog, Tigon, he encountered a myriad of challenges, highs and lows, including an early brush with Wolves that forced him to confront the fine line of survival on the steppe.

Just below the ovoo(a type of shamanistic cairn) we dropped down a crumbly slope of clay and rock and emerged from a curtain of mist into daylight. It was another world.

Boggy permafrost gave way to sturdy ground, and the sun's rays gently filtered down, bathing us with warmth that had been unimaginable in recent days. The only sign of storms here were wispy trickles of mist that boiled over the lip of the east-west-running ridge we had crossed, evaporating in the face of the sun. While the southern side had been treeless and windswept, the slopes here were thickly carpeted with larch forests that extended as far north as we could see. Following the tracks of the horseman, we descended at a good pace until the wind came to a standstill and we

began to hear the bubbling of a stream, the cackle of birds, and the whine of cicadas. The cold and storms had become a memory, packed away like the rainproof coats and warm layers of clothing we had been living in for days.

For the next few hours we followed the twists and turns of the stream as it led us ever deeper into a forested valley. The horses pushed through the same waist-high grass where the phantom rider clearly had been, and I fell into rhythm with my horse, imagining that the mountain pass had delivered us into another time.



It was precisely this kind of high, forested backcountry that had so shaped the outlook and beliefs of Genghis Khan. Unlike nomads of the open steppe grasslands, he had grown up on the southern fringes of the Siberian forests, where reliance on grazing sheep and cattle wasn't possible. Hunting was a mainstay of his small tribe's survival, and whenever there was trouble in his life, he learned to retreat to the forest, where

nature afforded him sustenance and protection. In one legendary episode, at the age of sixteen he managed to narrowly escape a deadly raid on his family by fleeing to the forested Khentii Mountains, not far from the place of his birth in present-day northeast Mongolia. There, surviving on marmots, rats, and whatever else he could find, he managed to evade capture. According to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, the future leader later voiced his gratitude to the highest mountain in the Khentii range, BurkhanKaldun, by removing his belt and throwing it over his shoulder, then dropping to the ground nine times toward the south. “The mountain has saved my life. I shall not forget it,” he said.¹

Right up until the end of his days, Genghis would return to BurkhanKaldun Mountain to worship and pray before going off to war or making any important decisions. Victory was always a sign that he had been given divine power and permission from Tengri, the eternal blue sky.

Just as the yellow disc of the sun began to touch the jagged skyline of the forest, our mood swung. We had lost the horseman’s tracks, and the slopes of the valley side had become so steep we were forced to lead the horses along narrow ledges and crisscross from one riverbank to the other. The forest had been gutted by a wildfire, and where trees might have once bloomed with color and crawled with birds and squirrels, bare, sooty trunks fingered their way toward the sky. A sea of willow-herb had been the first to seed on the ground below us, and its millions of bobbing purple flower heads were the only living thing to catch the lingering light. No nomads had been here for a long time, and perhaps they had never grazed their animals in the upper reaches of this valley.

By the time dusk came on we were feeling marginally more positive. After negotiating the steepest section of the valley, we had reached a broad, open meadow on the riverbank, and set about making camp. Just as we were tying down the guy ropes, there came a howl from down the valley.



“There must be a nomad family down there after all!” I said to Kathrin, fixing my eyes downstream, expecting to locate a nomad encampment. As I strained to focus in the fading light, the only white tinge to the landscape came from a ghostly rock that glowed from a slope of blackened, dead trees.

The howl came again, long and hound-like. From up the valley a similar cry echoed, then another from high in the forest on the far bank. Kathrin tripped over our canvas duffle bag, then sat where she had fallen with her panicked eyes skirting the forest. Nothing moved, and again things fell silent.

“You—you secure the horses! I’m going for firewood!” I stammered.

Nomads had long cautioned me about wolves and thought us mad to be traveling without a gun, but I had always dismissed their warnings as scaremongering. During my studies in Finland, I had learned that despite all the rumors and fear about wolves, there had only been a handful of recorded stories in history about attacks on humans, and even then the victims had been babies or young children.

It was only now that the real threat dawned on me. The wolves were interested not in us but in our horses. If the horses were frightened enough to break free of their tethers and escape, what would we do?

Night flooded in fast as I chopped away at standing trees, the axe first smashing its way through charcoal before hitting a core of dead dry wood that was hard as steel. After an hour’s work I barely had enough wood to fill my outstretched arms, but nevertheless hurried back to camp.

Without a gun, there were only two courses of action available. I urinated near each of the three horses—a trick long suggested to me by veterinarian Sheila Greenwell. Second, I lit a fire and rationed out the meager wood supplies that would need to see us out until dawn. According to Mongolians, a fire would keep the wolves at bay.

Once the fire was going we relaxed somewhat and sat gazing into the flames, eating a mash of rice and rehydrated meat. As my tummy filled, I watched a deep blackness spill into the eastern sky and stars flicker on.

After an hour or two had passed with no sign of wolves, I collapsed in the tent while Kathrin took the first shift by the fire.

I woke after what felt like just minutes. Kathrin was shaking me.

“Relax, Tim! Apart from the fact that I’m freezing, everything is okay. No wolves so far. It’s one in the morning, so it’s your turn, you lazy Australian!” she said, her German accent, as always, more pronounced when she was tired.

We swapped my sleeping bag for the down jacket she had been wearing, and I settled in beside the gentle crackle and spitting of the fire. The flames licked the night air and cast a circle of flickering light that just reached the horses. All three of them had eaten themselves silly in the afternoon and now stood like statues, their heads hanging. The sky was giant above, yet as we nestled in this tall grass in the bosom of the hills, there was an intimacy that cradled us. I couldn’t help wonder what it would be like after Kathrin went home and 5,600 miles (9,000 km) to Hungary yawned. The longest journey in the wilderness I’d ever done alone until now was a mere ten days.

By three o’clock an invisible heaviness tugged at my arms and legs. I rested my head on a rolled-up coat and drifted off.

When I felt the thudding of hooves vibrate through the soil beneath me, I thought sleepily that I was in the tent. I assumed Bor was attempting to move in the hobbles that bound his two front legs to his back left leg. While the others had mastered the art of walking at a reasonable speed with the hobbles on, Bor stumbled awkwardly.

Then, however, I heard furious pounding coming in toward me from all directions.

No sooner had I pried open my eyes than a howl shot through the darkness. This time it was from somewhere right behind us, perhaps no more than 350 feet (100 m) away, on the edge of the forest. I lay low, not daring to breathe. It was black all around—I had let the fire burn down to a few glowing coals.

When the fire was again ablaze I picked up the axe and checked on the ropes and tethering stakes. The horses' necks and withers were tense and their heads were raised high, ears twitching this way and that. Over thousands of years they had evolved as a supreme animal of flight, able to reach top speed within seconds and escape at the first hint of predators. By hobbling them, however, I had turned them into easy prey.



Scores of Hungarians and officials from the Australian, Mongolian and Kazakh embassies greet Tim at journey's end on 22 September 2007. He finishes at Ópusztaszer, where Hungary was founded by the nomadic Magyars in the 9th century.

UKRAINE
 May 2006–August 2007
 Tim, Tigon and the horses board a ferry and cross the Kerch Strait to the Crimean Peninsula, Ukraine. He rides north into mainland Ukraine, where he breaks the journey for five months to return to Australia after his father, Andrew, dies. He returns to Tigon and the horses on April 2007 and makes his way through the Carpathian Mountains to the border of Hungary.

HUNGARY
 August–September 2007
 On 2 August Tim crosses from Ukraine into Hungary. Hungarians trace their ancestry to mounted nomads who came from the east Siberian steppe, and Tim is honoured to ride with Hungarian csikos, who preserve the masterful arts of their horsemen forebears. He rides to the Danube River, western edge of the steppe nomads' domain, then to the finish at Ópusztaszer.

SOUTHERN RUSSIA
 December 2005–May 2006
 Tim rides into Russia with his dog Tigon and his three Kazakh horses. He traverses the republic of Kalmykiya – inhabited by ethnic Mongols and the only Buddhist republic in Europe and the Kuban region, homeland of the fearless Cossacks.

A five-week delay occurs when Russian authorities at first refuse entry to Tim's horses. Two of them, Taskonir and Ogonyok, had been with him from eastern Kazakhstan and he refuses to abandon them.

KAZAKHSTAN
 October 2004–December 2005
 Tim enters Kazakhstan and buys three new horses, and is given a dog, Tigon. Winter descends, and his journey nearly ends as temperatures fall below –50°C on the Betpaqdala ("starving steppe"). In the summer that follows he adds a camel to his caravan and travels at night to avoid daytime temperatures above 50°C. He learns of the various Kazakh tribes and clans and discovers a rich nomadic culture.

Traditional nomad hospitality saved Tim at Christmas 2004, when –35°C temperatures, a limping horse and ripped tent forced him into the Kazakh village of Aqbaqay. A family took him in and cared for him for almost three months.

Mongolians constantly warned Tim to beware of wolves, and one night near a high wild pass his camp was surrounded by a howling pack. He kept them at bay by stoking his camp fire all night.

MONGOLIA
 June–October 2004
 Tim buys his first three horses near the former Mongol empire capital of Karakorum and sets course for Kazakhstan. He meets remote nomads who speak of relatives still living in Europe; a clan elder gives him the ankle bone of a wolf, for protection and for good luck. At Mongolia's western border, Tim is forced to sell his horses due to veterinary rules banning their export.

Eurasian horseback dyssey

— Tim's journey
 — Genghis Khan's empire, 1227
 Map shows present-day names and boundaries.

AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC CARTOGRAPHIC DIVISION
 LAMBERT CONFORMAL CONIC PROJECTION
 SCALE 1:16,000,000



For the next few hours I sat, axe at hand, convinced our lives hung in the balance. When the fire sputtered and it seemed my meager pile of wood wasn't going to make it to dawn, I was sure I could make out the furry outline of wolves prowling the perimeter of camp. I even began to think there might be hundreds of them, half crazed by starvation in the cremated remains of the forest. Feeding my remaining branches into the fire piece by piece, I prayed for dawn and rued my formerly dismissive attitude. No matter what I might have previously thought about wolves, there was something deeply petrifying about these howls in the dark. Perhaps through thousands of years of coexisting and competing with the wolf, humans, like horses, had evolved an innate reaction to them—one that was surely not without reason.

I recalled what my friend Gansukh had once told me: “It’s not for nothing you call a dog in your country ‘man’s best friend’—we Mongolians know they were the first animal to be domesticated! We believe the wolf is the wisest and most spiritual of animals. Look how cunning they are, how they survive in such tough conditions. To see a wolf, in our belief, is a good omen. It means you will inherit some of its wisdom. To kill a wolf is to be wiser than a wolf. We eat wolf meat for strength and use it for medicinal purposes,” he told.

The significance of the wolf for Mongolians went beyond Gansukh’s words. There was a legend that the ancient Mongolian people had been born from a union between the blue-gray wolf and a deer. Wolves carried the spirit of the Mongolian ancestors, the link proven by what was called a “Mongolian spot”—a bluish patch found on the lower back of most Mongolians in their infancy. It was also understood that when a wolf howled, it was praying to the sky, making it the only other living being that paid homage to sacred tengri.

Perhaps most important for nomads was the belief in the symbiosis that existed between wolf and humans on the steppe. Wolves were an integral part of keeping the balance of nature, ensuring that plagues of rabbits and rodents didn't break out, which in turn protected the all-important pasture for the nomads' herds.



Although they caused havoc when they attacked sheep, when it came to horses wolves were known to mostly attack the injured and the weak, therefore aiding natural selection and ensuring that only the strongest horses lived on to breed. Reflective of the deep sense of gratitude and respect Mongolians reserved for wolves, there was a belief that only through wolves could the spirit of a deceased human be set free to go to heaven. When a person passed away, his or her body would be taken to a mountain and left for the wolves to eat. A good person would be eaten by wolves quickly, while a bad person would be left to rot for days. According to legend, wolves would fly up to the sky with the ingested human flesh and release the person's spirit.

As Kathrin and I would later discover, this "sky burial" was a practice still carried out among modern nomads. In Uvs province, only a day's ride from

Ulaangom, we came across the skeleton of a young man on the steppe with only a few remaining pieces of sun-dried flesh and a torn khadag lying nearby.

In the safety and comfort of a nomad ger this philosophy might have made for engaging storytelling. But as the fire wavered it was difficult to feel gratitude toward the wolf. How could I reconcile the benevolent creature that Mongolians so worshipped with the ruthless animals that were surely about to attack my horses, and perhaps even Kathrin and me? And how was it that Gansukh could speak about worshipping the wolf and then in the same breath about killing and eating it?

I didn't know it yet, but these were questions that would linger for me well beyond the end of my journey. Over time I would come to believe that to dismiss the wolf as a bloodthirsty enemy would be akin to labeling nomads in the same ignorant way that Europeans had done for centuries.

The reality was that survival on the steppe was a fine balance, and wolves, like the humans, were no more cruel than was required to survive. Perhaps the relationship between wolves and nomads was best described in the fictional tale "Wolf Totem." In it an old Mongolian herder recounts to a Chinese student that the "wolf is a spiritual totem but a physical enemy." Of course, this understanding was still light-years from my mind where I sat now, barely a stone's throw from the beginning of my journey on the way to the distant Danube.

In the end, the test between night and my fire went down to the wire, and there were times when I was sure the fire would not hold out. When finally the night began to wilt away, however, there had been no howls for hours. I placed the last morsel of

wood on the flames and lay until the sun's glow had eclipsed that of the coals. Soon the fire I had so clung to was nothing more than a gray bed of ashes.

By the time we were ready to go, the sun had painted out the shadows, and, just as the mountains around us appeared to shrink in the daylight, the threat of the wolves began to seem exaggerated. I started to think that had I been a more experienced horseman, I might have taken the night's experience in my stride. As if to leave us with a reminder of the danger, however, only a stone's throw from camp we passed the fresh tracks of a wolf on the muddy banks of the river.

In the future, particularly on the open steppe of western Mongolia and Kazakhstan, I would not have the advantage of firewood, nor the company of Kathrin. While carrying a gun seemed out of the question, it was clear I might have to come up with some kind of plan. For the time being, though, I was just grateful to be riding away.



<n1>Chapter 3: Wolf Totem

<ntx>*The Secret History of the Mongols*—a mix of factual history and folklore documenting the rise of the Mongol Empire—was written for the Mongol royal family some time after Genghis Khan's death in 1227. It is the oldest surviving Mongolian literary work.