

Mongol Invasion of Japan 1274 and 1281

Following the conquest of China in 1230 and Korea in 1231, Kublai Khan became the first emperor of Mongolia.

Between 1267 and 1274, Kublai Khan sent numerous messages to the emperor of Japan demanding that he submit to the Mongols or face invasion. However, the messengers were blocked by Japan's shogun, the real power behind the throne, and they never reached the Emperor.

Kublai Khan became furious that he never received a reply from the emperor, who he referred to as "ruler of a small country," and he vowed to invade Japan. The Mongols set to work on building an enormous fleet of warships and recruited thousands of warriors from China & Korea.

In the Autumn of 1274, the Mongols launched their first invasion on Japan, which has become known as the Battle of Bun'ei. An estimated 500 to 900 vessels and 40,000 warriors, mostly ethnic Chinese and Koreans reached the shores of Hakata Bay, where the two forces met.

The Mongols devastated the Japanese forces who began to retreat.

However, fearing the Japanese were getting ready to return with reinforcements, the Mongols retreated to their ships. That night, the typhoon struck as the ships lay at anchor in Hakata Bay. By daybreak, only a few ships remained. The rest were destroyed, taking the lives of thousands of Mongols.

The Japanese viewed this typhoon as a "kamikaze," or "divine wind" as it took place outside of the typical typhoon season. According to Japanese legend, the Kamikaze was created by Raijin, god of lightning, thunder, and storms, to protect Japan against the Mongols. One of the oldest Japanese deities, Raijin is an original Shinto god, also known as kaminari (from kami "spirit" or "deity" and nari "thunder"). He is typically depicted as a demon-looking spirit beating drums to create thunder.

More Mongolian ambassadors were sent to Japan in 1275 and 1279 – both groups were beheaded by the shogun. The Mongols were now more determined than ever to conquer Japan.

Meanwhile, Japan built 2-meter-high (6 feet) walls to protect themselves from future attacks.

Seven years later, the Mongols returned with an enormous fleet of 4,400 ships and an estimated 70,000 to 140,000 soldiers.

One set of forces set out from Korea, while another set sail from southern China, converging near Hakata Bay in August, 1281. Unable to find any suitable landing beaches because of the walls, the fleet stayed afloat for months and depleted their supplies. On August 15, the Mongols prepared to launch their assault on the much smaller Japanese forces defending the island.

However, once again, a typhoon hit, wrecking the Mongol fleet and once again foiling the invasion attempt.

The term used for the storms, kamikaze, was later used during World War II as nationalist propaganda for the suicide attacks Japanese pilots used on enemy forces. It was a metaphor intended to convey that the pilots were the "divine wind" that would sweep enemy forces from the seas, just as divine winds swept Mongol invaders from Japanese seas in centuries prior.