

Burkhan Khaldun

Zevgee and Bagi are lounging on the sleeping platforms when I return to the guest house. Zevgee has already soaked himself in Ikh Tsenkher and Baga Tsenkher. Now Tuya is bathing. She soon appears, her cheeks flushed from the hot water and her black hair glistening. Mutton and noodles, along with wild onions—presumably the same kind Mother Ögelün fed to her chicks—are served up for breakfast. Bagi is amazed to find the onions still edible this late in the year. After breakfast and some rest—to let the mutton settle—I take long soaks in four of the springs. When I return to the guesthouse the horses are saddled and ready to go.

Shortly after eleven we cross the Onon and head back up the valley. We will stay on the trail the entire way back to the Elüür River, instead of detouring via Botokhan Boorjid as we had done on the way here. The track through the low bush tundra is wet and boggy, and there are treacherous mud holes where the numerous creeks flowing out of the mountains to the left cross our path. As we veer to the left out of the valley of the Onon and cross some forested spurs, thunder cracks and booms in the mountains and several times we have to duck into thick copses of larch to take cover from sudden rain showers. We drop down into the valley of Tsonj Chuluu Creek and by five have reached the clearing where we overnighted on the way in. I am all for heading on but Bagi and Zevgee insist on a pot of hot tea and a late lunch of boiled sheep ribs. Eventually we climb toward Ikh Davaa, lingering for over an hour to gorge again on the huckleberries in the thickets just below the pass, then hurry down the other side. We reach the grassy bench above the Elüür River just as the sun is setting over the hills to the left of the valley. To the east its last rays illuminate the crowned dome of Burkhan Khaldun. Here we make camp.

It's dark by the time our mutton stew is ready. Over dinner we discuss the ascent of Burkhan Khaldun. Zevgee says that from here to the summit there is no real path, and it's necessary to climb through thick woods and boulder fields that are difficult and dangerous for the horses. Instead of going to the mountain and returning here via the same arduous route he now suggests that we take our gear with us to the summit, then drop down the east side of the mountain to the valley of a small stream which flows into the Kherlen. Once on the summit this is the easiest way back down, he claims. From the upper Kherlen we can then ride downstream and eventually pick up the jeep trail back to his ger. I am all for returning a different way and seeing some different country—I don't like backtracking—but there appears to be a problem. What about Tuya, who is supposedly not allowed on the mountain? If we don't return here we will have to take her with us to the summit. Sagacious Zevgee has a solution. Tuya already has short hair cropped like a man's and is wearing a man's baseball cap. Tomorrow she will wear Bagi's deel and also carry Bagi's gun strapped over her shoulder. Surely, then, no beasts, men, or gods will realize that she is actually a woman, opines Zevgee. Tuya will come with us and from the summit we will go down the other side of the mountain. Tuya appears pleased by this solution. Saying she must rest up for the morrow she soon retires to her tent. The two men and I sit silently by the fire. Jupiter glows in the sky to the right of March Mountain, and as we sit red Mars rises just above the horizon to the south-southwest and then sets again. In the north glitters the Big Nail (the polar star) and directly overhead wheel the Seven Wise Men (Big Dipper). Several meteor streak across the horizon on the far side of the Elëer. Zevgee and Bagi turn in but I sit up a while longer, until scudding clouds start to obscure the stars. Even in my tent I can't fall asleep. In the morning we will climb the mountain worshipped by Chingis Khan.

High cirrus clouds are still streaking the sky when I rise the next morning and there's a chill, moaning wind. Zevgee is anxious to get moving. After tea and cold mutton the pack horse is quickly loaded. We ride across a broad swampy meadow and begin our climb up the flanks of March Mountain. It's soon obvious what Zevgee meant when he said this was a difficult route. For two hours we fight our

way upwards through thick woods and fallen timber bristling with nasty snags, around huge boulders, and over fields of treacherously loose rock. Amazingly, not once do any of our horses flounder or fall, and not once does Zevgee suggest that we get off and walk. Finally we emerge on the broad open saddle connecting March Mountain and Baatar Yan Mountain. Directly in front of us, across a deep, narrow valley, looms Burkhan Khaldun, topped with its distinctive black crown.

With the Merkits in pursuit Temüjin had hidden in the dense forests around Burkhan Khaldun. Three times the Merkits rode around the mountain looking for Temüjin, but he continued to elude them. Finally the Merkits tired of the chase through the trees and thickets, the down timber, and the mud holes. They had captured Temüjin's wife, Börte, and they decided this was sufficient revenge for the kidnapping of Mother Ögelün. With their prisoner they headed back toward their camps. Temüjin cautiously descended from the heights of Burkhan Khaldun. Afraid that the Merkits had only feigned leaving and were instead waiting in ambush for him he sent Boorchu and Zelme on their trail. They followed them for three days; finally convinced that the Merkits had indeed left they returned. The protective spirits of Burkhan Khaldun had saved Temüjin and once again he had escaped with his life. According to the *Secret History*, he proclaimed:

On Burkhan Khaldun,
My life like a louse's,
I was hunted.
My life, the only one, was spared.
With only a horse
I followed the elk trails.
I made a yurt of willow twigs.
I climbed up on Khaldun,
On Burkhan Khaldun,
My life like a swallow's,
I was protected.

In thanks he added, "I will honor Burkhan Khaldun with sacrifices every morning and pray to it every day. My children and my children's children shall be mindful of this."¹¹ The *Secret History* con-

tinues: "With these words he turned toward the sun, his belt around his neck and his hat hanging over his hand, beat his breast and knelt nine times to offer a libation and prayer to the sun."¹² Because he had miraculously escaped on Burkhan Khaldun Temüjin began to believe in his own special destiny. He was on his way to becoming Chingis Khan, the World Conqueror. But first, of course, he had to get his Börte back.

From the ridge line we ride up the eastern flanks of Baatar Yan Mountain. The larch and dwarf cedar thin out completely and we pass through dry low bush and alpine tundra. Finally we cross a short, knife-edged ridge which connects the massifs of Baatar Yan and Burkhan Khaldun. On both sides cliffs and steep slopes drop off precipitously for a thousand feet or more. At the end of the ridge is a sharp bluff up which we have to walk our horses. From the lip of the bluff a flat expanse of alpine tundra stretches off to the crown of Burkhan Khaldun less than half a mile ahead. From our campsite the crown had not looked that imposing, but now it appears as a black mass of loose black rock three hundred feet or more in diameter and over sixty feet high. Riding closer I can see that the rim of the crown is lined with dozens of small ovoos. We walk our horses up the last sixty feet of crumbling black rock and at last are standing on the summit of Burkhan Khaldun. "You know," says Zevgee somewhat anticlimactically, "I don't think anyone was ever brought a pack horse up here before."

The level top of the crown is dotted with hundreds of small three-foot-high ovoos built by Mongolians who have come here to follow Chingis's injunction that this mountain should be worshipped forever. On the northern edge of the crown is the main oboo, a ten-foot-high pile of rocks topped by a carved wooden post draped with hundreds of blue and white prayer scarves. Resting on the sides of the oboo are wooden statues of horses and a black stone bas relief of Chingis himself. At its base are scattered offerings—whole bricks of tea, packets of cigarettes, coins and bills, rifle cartridges, and various other bric-a-brac. Zevgee digs out some cold mutton, cheese, and the last of the fried bread and the three Mongolians sit down for a snack in front of the oboo. I wander off by myself to the southern



Zevgee at the summit of Burkhan Khaldun

edge of the crown. The weather has been threatening all day, and while there is still blue sky directly overhead dark clouds hang over the mountains on all horizons and long, low grumbles of thunder can be heard from the distant peaks.

Temüjin had to rescue Börte and for that he needed help. Shortly after marrying Börte he had approached Tooril, chieftain of the Keraits, who ruled over a confederation of tribes stretching from the upper valleys of the Onon and the Kherlen in the east to the valley of the Orkhon in the west. Temüjin's father, Yesükhei, had earlier helped Tooril rise to power, and the two had sworn a pact of friendship. Now Temüjin reminded Tooril of this pact and added that since his own father was dead he looked upon Tooril as a fa-

ther. To prove his devotion he gave Tooril the magnificent sable coat Börte had given his family as a wedding gift. Having no father Temüjin needed a patron, and Tooril, who had seized the leadership of the Keraits by murdering his own brothers and thus could not count on the support of his own family, needed loyal followers. The two entered an alliance of convenience. In exchange for Temüjin's support Tooril promised he would help the young man reunite his scattered clan.

Now with Börte in the hands of the Merkits, he and his brother, Khasar, and half-brother, Belgütei, traveled to Tooril's camp on the Tuul River. The Kerait chieftain hated the Merkits, who had kidnapped him as child—he later escaped—and he now had an excuse to attack them and reward his vassal, Temüjin, at the same time. According to the *Secret History* he announced: "In gratitude for the sable cloak I will find your Börte for you, even if I have to destroy all the Merkits. In gratitude for the black sable cloak we will rescue your wife Börte, even if we have to massacre every Merkit!"¹³

The brothers also called on the chieftain, Jamukha, who had been one of Temüjin's few friends during his early boyhood on the Onon. The two had skated on the ice of the Onon together and had sworn a pact of friendship. By now Jamukha was a powerful man with a considerable following of his own, although like Temüjin he recognized Tooril as an overlord. As a young man he had been robbed of all his possessions by the Merkits and he too wanted revenge. Such was his standing among the tribes that Tooril gave him overall command of the campaign against the Merkits. Jamukha, Tooril, and Temüjin, along with their men, agreed to rendezvous at Botokhan Boorjid, where Tsonj Chuluu and Öngöljin creeks come together to form the Onon. The assembled army was not inconsiderable. Tooril and Jamukha each brought twenty thousand men. Together they rode northward against the Merkits.

Togtoga and one of the three Merkit chiefs who had chased Temüjin around Burkhan Khaldun were camped with their followers on the Khilok River, a tributary of the Selenga. Warned in the middle of the night that the Mongol force was approaching, they with some of their men fled in the dark down the Selenge, eventually reaching the Barguzin lowland just east of Lake Baikal. The Merkits

who were left behind were cut down or captured and their camps looted. Temüjin ran among the panicked Merkits crying, “Börte! Börte!” From her hiding spot Börte recognized his voice and she ran to him. Under the light of the moon they hugged each other. Temüjin had his Börte back. There was only one problem: Börte was pregnant.

Gray clouds scud over Burkhan Khaldun and big raindrops spatter on the black rock. Massive bolts of lightning rattle off the summit of Baatar Yan Mountain just to the northwest. I hurry back to the main ovoo where Zevgee has all the horses assembled. He suggests we leave immediately rather than get caught in a thunderstorm here on the summit. I agree. I had once been caught in a thunderstorm like this on the summit of a mountain in the Baikal region and it was a truly nerve-shattering experience. We walk our horses down the black crown, and ride down a rounded ridge leading away from the mountain to the southeast. Dropping through alpine tundra we’re soon back at the timberline. From here we have to walk our horses down a well-marked but very steep trail that switchbacks along the side of the ridge to the valley of the Bogdyn River.

On a flat bench just above the valley bottom we emerge into a small clearing in the larch forest. Right by the trail is a large brush ovoo and an immense iron kettle. At the base of the ovoo are more than a dozen whole bricks of tea, Mongolian and Russian bills and coins, and other offerings. The pot, which could hold at least fifty gallons, was the teakettle of a monastery which once existed here. This monastery, says Zevgee, was built by Zanabazar, and he used it as a retreat when he came to pay homage to Burkhan Khaldun. Most people who go to the summit of Burkhan Khaldun, he explained, come this way, and not via the route we had used. We had ascended from the west because, of course, we were coming from the Onon Valley. In the past people always stopped at this monastery to make offerings before starting up the mountain. Kicking around in the thick moss he soon uncovers a ceramic roof tile, some bricks, and other building remnants. He does not know the name of this monastery, nor have I found any reference to it in my researches. It was probably destroyed by the communists in the 1930s, but he’s not sure

of the exact date. Mongolian scientists he has accompanied here say that in the time of Zanabazar, three hundred years ago, there were no trees on this bench, and that it was covered with steppe.

Zevgee goes out ahead on the trail and we follow slowly behind with the pack horse. He soon hurries back and he and Bagi have a whispered conference. Then he tells Tuya and me that we must go and hide in the woods. He has heard someone approaching and he doesn't want them to see us. He rides off and returns fifteen minutes later. Before leaving on this trip he had heard that some Mongolian scholars from Ulaan Baatar were planning a pilgrimage to Burkhan Khaldun and now he is afraid that we might encounter this group. He doesn't want them to know that he has taken both a foreigner and a woman up on Chingis's sacred mountain. It's a false alarm; there is no one.

While we were coming down the mountain the rain clouds had blown over completely and now the skies are burnished a cobalt blue. Although it's only a little past seven we decide to camp in a large grassy clearing along the Bogdyn and enjoy the evening. A fire is soon blazing and we relax with hot tea. When Bagi goes to cut up mutton for our dinner he discovers that his knife is missing. His knife was handmade and one-of-a-kind, with a ten-inch blade of finely tempered steel and an elaborately engraved bone handle. Now he remembers that he used it while eating lunch at the oboo on the top of Burkhan Khaldun. He apparently left it there. He stares ruefully back at the massif of the mountain—the summit is not visible from here—as if considering riding back up to get it. But of course there isn't time for that. I am tempted to remind him of what he said when I lost my knife, but I don't.