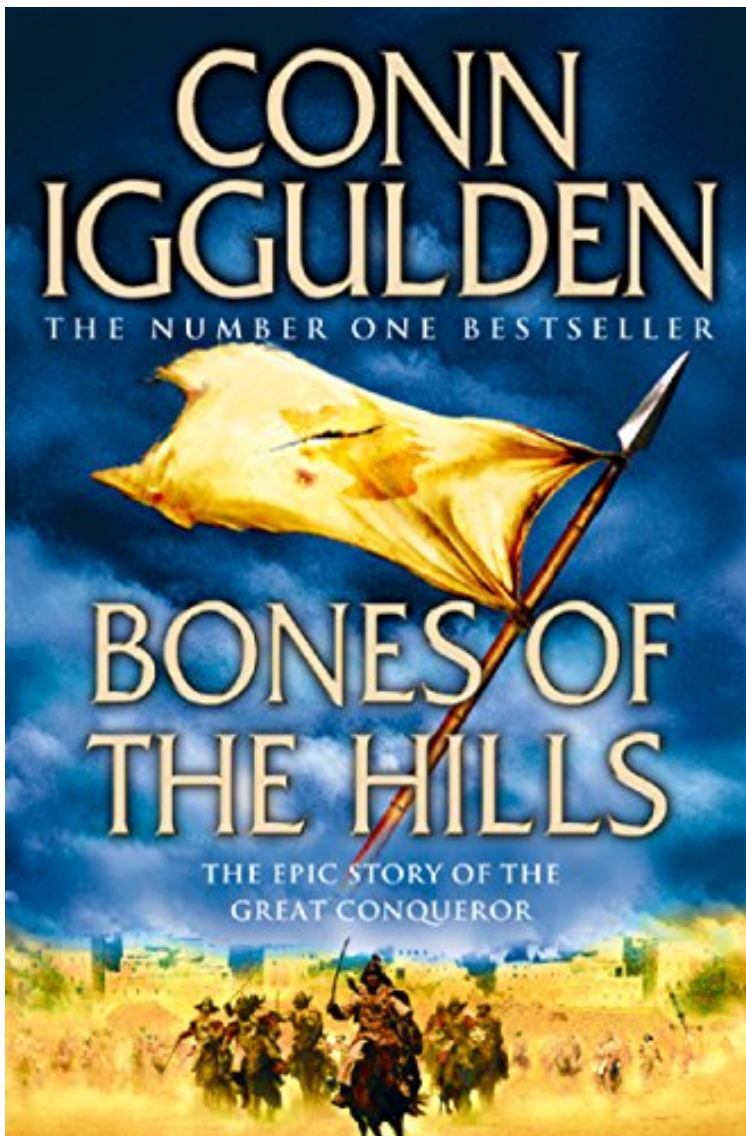


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Bones of the Hills (Conqueror, Book 3)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe powerful and exhilarating third novel in Conn Igguldens No. 1 bestselling Conqueror series, following the life and adventures of the mighty Genghis KhanThe fatherless boy, exiled from his tribe, whom readers have been following in 'Wolf of the Plains' and 'Lords of the Bow', has grown into the great king, Genghis Khan. He has united the warring tribes and even taken his armies against the great cities of their oldest enemies. Now he finds trouble rising west of the Mongolian plains. His emissaries are mutilated or killed; his trading gestures rebuffed. So, dividing his armies, using his sons as generals of the various divisions, he sends them out simultaneously in many directions, ranging as far as modern Iran and Iraq.As well as discovering new territories, exacting tribute from conquered peoples, laying waste the cities which resist, this policy is also a way of diffusing the rivalries between his sons and heirs and working

out who should succeed the khan. This, the third book in the Conqueror series, is once more an epic story.

Genghis Khan is an exhilarating and heroic figure. The sense of his ambition and his power, the relationships with his wives, sons and trusted aides, the sweep of his conquests, is all brought together by a masterful storytelling. It is a compelling read. With each book, you are left, even more, longing for the next. One can only hope that the phenomenal success of his co-authored *The Dangerous Book for Boys* does not take attention away from the prodigious storytelling skills of Conn Iggulden. As *Bones of the Hills* forcefully reminds us, Iggulden is the real deal when it comes to historical fiction on the grandest scale. And here, all of his characteristic skills are well to the fore. A boy was abandoned in the wilderness by his tribe -- but he did not die. As those Iggulden admirers who have read *Wolf of the Plains* and *Lords of the Bow* will know, this luckless boy has grown into one of the most feared and powerful figures in history, Genghis Khan. He has persuaded the tribes that had been tearing each other to pieces to ignore their differences and unite under his leadership to battle their oldest enemies. Under his ruthless (and ferociously inspired) leadership, a mighty nation has been forged. But this is only the beginning of his struggles: Khan sends out emissaries, but they are tortured and killed. He attempts to open trade routes; his efforts are met with violent rebuff. Soon, the Mongolian army is stretched to the furthest corners of Khan's realm, and destruction looms. This is epic storytelling on a high-operatic scale. Iggulden has long been the master of the broad brush stroke and conjures up the ancient world with great panache. Of course, the success of a book such as *Bones of the Hills* depends on the vivid characterisation of its larger-than-life central character, and of the many novels which have attempted to capture Genghis Khan, none have mastered the task as successfully as Conn Iggulden.

--Barry Forshaw

Chapter One THE WIND HAD FALLEN on the high ridge. Dark clouds drifted above, making bands of shadow march across the earth. The morning was quiet and the land seemed empty as the two men rode at the head of a narrow column, a jagun of a hundred young warriors. The Mongols could have been alone for a thousand miles, with just creaking leather and snorting ponies to break the stillness. When they halted to listen, it was as if silence rolled back in over the dusty ground. Tsubodai was a general to the Great Khan, and it showed in the way he held himself. His armor of iron scales over leather was well worn, with holes and rust in many places. His helmet was marked where it had saved his life more than once. All his equipment was battered, but the man himself remained as hard and unforgiving as the winter earth. In three years of raiding the north, he had lost only one minor skirmish and returned the following day to destroy the tribe before word could spread. He had mastered his trade in a land that seemed to grow colder with each mile into the wastes. He had no maps for his journey, just rumors of distant cities built on rivers frozen so solid that oxen could be roasted on the ice. At his right shoulder rode Jochi, the eldest son of the khan himself. Barely seventeen, he was yet a warrior who might inherit the nation and perhaps command even Tsubodai in war. Jochi wore a similar set of greased leather and iron, as well as the saddle packs and weapons all the warriors carried. Tsubodai knew without asking that Jochi would have his ration of dried blood and milk, needing only water to make a nourishing broth. The land did not forgive those who took survival lightly, and both men had learned the lessons of winter. Jochi sensed the scrutiny and his dark eyes flickered up, always guarded. He had spent more time with the young general than he ever had with his father, but old habits were hard to break. It was difficult for him to trust, though his respect for Tsubodai knew no limit. The general of the Young Wolves had a feel for war, though he denied it. Tsubodai believed in scouts, training, tactics, and archery above all else, but the men who followed him saw only that he won, no matter what the odds. As others could fashion a sword or a saddle, Tsubodai fashioned armies, and Jochi knew he was privileged to learn at his side. He wondered if his brother Chagatai had fared as well in the east. It was easy to daydream as he rode the hills, imagining his brothers and father struck dumb at the sight of how Jochi had grown and become strong. "What is the most important item in your packs?" Tsubodai said suddenly. Jochi raised his eyes to the brooding sky for an instant. Tsubodai delighted in testing him. "Meat, General. Without meat, I cannot fight." "Not your bow?" Tsubodai said. "Without a bow, what are you?" "Nothing, General, but without meat, I am too weak to use the bow." Tsubodai grunted at hearing his own words repeated. "When the meat is all gone, how long can you live off blood and milk?" "Sixteen days at most, with three remounts to share the wounds." Jochi did not have to think. He had been drilled in the answers ever since he and Tsubodai had ridden with ten thousand men from the shadow of the Chin emperor's city. "How far could you travel in such a time?" Tsubodai said. Jochi shrugged. "Sixteen hundred miles with fresh remounts. Half again as far if I slept and ate in the saddle." Tsubodai saw that the young man was hardly concentrating, and his eyes glinted as he changed tack. "What is wrong with the ridge ahead?" he snapped. Jochi raised his head, startled. "I . . ." "Quickly! Men are looking to you for a decision.

Lives wait on your word." Jochi swallowed, but in Tsubodai he had learned from a master. "The sun is behind us, so we will be visible for miles as we reach the crest." Tsubodai began to nod, but Jochi went on. "The ground is dusty. If we cross the high point of the ridge at any speed, we will raise a cloud into the air." "That is good, Jochi," Tsubodai said. As he spoke, he dug in his heels and rode hard at the crest ahead. As Jochi had predicted, the hundred riders released a mist of reddish grit that billowed above their heads. Someone would surely see and report their position. Tsubodai did not pause as he reached the ridge. Digging in his heels, he sent his mare over, the rear legs skittering on loose stones. Jochi matched him and then took a sharp breath of dust that made him cough into his hand. Tsubodai had come to a halt fifty paces beyond the ridge, where the broken ground began to dip to the valley. Without orders, his men formed a wide double rank around him, like a bow drawn on the ground. They were long familiar with the firebrand of a general who had been placed over them. Tsubodai stared into the distance, frowning. The surrounding hills enclosed a flat plain through which a river ran, swollen with spring rain. Along its banks, a slow-moving column trotted, bright with flags and banners. In other circumstances, it would have been a sight to take the breath, and even as his stomach clenched, Jochi felt a touch of admiration. Ten, perhaps eleven thousand Russian knights rode together, house colors in gold and red streaming back over their heads. Almost as many followed them in a baggage train of carts and remounts, women, boys, and servants. The sun chose that moment to break through the dark clouds in a great beam that lit the valley. The knights shone. Their horses were massive, shaggy animals, almost twice the weight of the Mongol ponies. Even the men who rode them were a strange breed to Jochi's eyes. They sat like they were made of stone, solid and heavy in metal cloth from their cheeks to their knees. Only their blue eyes and hands were unprotected. The armored knights had come prepared for battle, carrying long spears like lances, but tipped in steel. They rode with the weapons upright, the butts held in leather cups close behind the stirrups. Jochi could see axes and swords hanging down from waist belts, and every man rode with a leaf-shaped shield hooked to his saddle. The pennants streamed back over their heads and they looked very fine in the bands of gold and shadow. "They must see us," Jochi murmured, glancing at the plume of dust above his head. The general heard him speak and turned in the saddle. "They are not men of the plains, Jochi. They are half blind over such a distance. Are you afraid? They are so large, these knights. I would be afraid." For an instant, Jochi glowered. From his father, it would have been mockery. Yet Tsubodai spoke with a light in his eyes. The general was still in his twenties, young to command so many. Tsubodai was not afraid, though. Jochi knew the general cared nothing for the massive warhorses or the men who rode them. Instead, he placed his faith in the speed and arrows of his Young Wolves. The jagun was made up of ten arbans, each commanded by an officer. By Tsubodai's order, only those ten men wore heavy armor. The rest had only leather tunics under padded deels. Jochi knew Genghis preferred the heavy charge to the light, but Tsubodai's men seemed to survive. They could hit and gallop faster than the ponderous Russian warriors, and there was no fear in their ranks. Like Tsubodai, they looked hungrily down the slope at the column and waited to be seen. "You know your father sent a rider to bring me home?" Tsubodai said. Jochi nodded. "All the men know." "I had hoped to go further north than this, but I am your father's man. He speaks and I obey, do you understand?" Jochi stared at the young general, forgetting for a moment the knights who rode in the valley below. "Of course," he said, his face showing nothing. Tsubodai glanced back at him, amused. "I hope you do, Jochi. He is a man to follow, your father. I wonder how he will respond when he sees how well you have grown." For a moment, anger twisted Jochi's face before he smoothed his features and took a deep breath. Tsubodai had been more like a father than his own in many ways, but he did not forget the man's true loyalty. At an order from Genghis, Tsubodai would kill him. As he looked at the young general, he thought there would be some regret, but not enough to hold the blow. "He will need loyal men, Tsubodai," Jochi said. "My father would not call us back to build or rest. He will have found some new land to tear to pieces. Like the wolf, he is always hungry, even to the point of bursting his own stomach." Tsubodai frowned to hear the khan described in such a way. In three years, he had seen no affection when Jochi spoke of his father, though sometimes there was a wistfulness that showed less and less as the seasons passed. Genghis had sent away a boy, but a man would return to him, Tsubodai had made certain of that. For all his bitterness, Jochi was a cool head in battle and the men looked on him with pride. He would do. "I have another question for you, Jochi," Tsubodai said. Jochi smiled for an instant. "You always have, General," he replied. "We have drawn these iron knights after us for hundreds of miles, exhausting their horses. We have captured their scouts and put them to the question, though I do not know of this 'Jerusalem' they seek, or who this 'white Christ' is." Tsubodai shrugged. "Perhaps I will meet him one day over the length of my sword, but the world is large and I am but one man." As he spoke, he watched the

armored knights and the trailing baggage lines behind them, waiting to be seen. "My question, Jochi, is this. These knights are nothing to me. Your father has called me back and I could ride now, while the ponies are fat with summer grass. Why then are we here, waiting for the challenge?" Jochi's eyes were cold as he replied. "My father would say it is what we do, that there is no better way for a man to spend his years than at war with enemies. He might also say you enjoy it, General, and that is all the reason you need." Tsubodai's gaze did not waver. "Perhaps he would say that, but you hide behind his words. Why are we here, Jochi? We do not want their big horses, even for meat. Why will I risk the lives of warriors to smash the column you see?" Jochi shrugged irritably. "If it is not that, I do not know." "For you, Jochi," Tsubodai said seriously.

"When you return to your father, you will have seen all forms of battle, in all seasons. You and I have captured towns and raided cities, ridden desert and forests so thick we could hardly cut our way through. Genghis will find no weakness in you." Tsubodai smiled briefly at Jochi's stony expression. "I will be proud when men say you learned your skill under Tsubodai the Valiant." Jochi had to grin at hearing the nickname from Tsubodai himself. There were no secrets in the camps. "There it is," Tsubodai muttered, pointing to a distant messenger racing to the head of the Russian column. "We have an enemy who leads from the front, a very brave man." Jochi could imagine the sudden dismay among the knights as they looked into the bowl of hills and saw the Mongol warriors. Tsubodai grunted softly as an entire rank peeled off the column and began trotting up the slopes, the long spears ready. He showed his teeth as the gap began to narrow. They were charging uphill, in their arrogance. He longed to teach them their error. "Do you have your paitze, Jochi? Show it to me." Jochi reached behind him to where his bow holder was strapped to the saddle. He lifted a flap in the stiff leather and pulled out a plaque of solid gold, stamped with a wolf's head in profile. At twenty ounces, it was heavy, but small enough for him to grip in his hand. Tsubodai ignored the men rising doggedly up the hill to face the eldest son of Genghis. "You have that and the right to command a thousand by my hand, Jochi. Those who command a jagun have one of mere silver, like this." Tsubodai held up a larger block of the whitish metal. "The difference is that the silver paitze is given to a man elected by the officers of each arban below him." "I know this," Jochi said. Tsubodai glanced back at the knights laboring closer. "The officers of this jagun have asked to have you lead them, Jochi. I had no part in it." He held out the silver paitze and Jochi took it joyfully, passing back the plaque of gold. Tsubodai was solemn and deliberately formal, but his eyes were bright. "When you return to your father, Jochi, you will have known all ranks and positions." The general gestured, cutting the air with his hand. "On the right, the left, and the center." He looked over the heads of the straining knights cantering up the hill, seeing a flicker of movement on a crag in the distance. Tsubodai nodded sharply. "It is time. You know what you have to do, Jochi.

Command is yours." Without another word, Tsubodai clapped the younger man on the shoulder and rode back over the ridge, leaving the jagun of riders in the care of one suddenly nervous leader. Jochi could feel the combined stares of the hundred men on his back as he struggled to hide his pleasure. Each arban of ten elected one man to lead them, then those men elected one of their number to lead the hundred in war. To be so chosen was an honor. A voice in his mind whispered that they only honored his father, but he crushed it, refusing to doubt. He had earned the right and confidence swelled in him. "Bow lines!" Jochi called. He gripped his reins tightly to hide his tension as the men formed a wider line so that every bow could bear. Jochi glanced over his shoulder, but Tsubodai had truly gone, leaving him alone. The men still watched and he forced the cold face, knowing they would remember his calm. As they raised their bows, he held up a clenched fist, waiting while his heart thumped painfully in his chest. At four hundred paces, Jochi dropped his arm and the first flight of arrows whipped into the air. It was too far and those that reached the knights splintered on their shields, now held high and forward, so that almost the entire man was protected. The long shields showed their purpose as a second flight struck the ranks without a single rider going down. The powerful horses were not fast, but still the gap closed and Jochi only watched. At two hundred paces, he raised his fist once more and another hundred arrows waited on creaking strings. At such a distance, he did not know if the knights' armor would save them. Nothing ever had. "Shoot like you have never owned a bow," he shouted. The men around him grinned and the arrows snapped out. Jochi winced instinctively at shafts that went clear over the enemy heads, as if loosed by panicking fools. Only a few struck, and of those, still fewer brought a horse or man down. They could hear the thunder of the charge now and saw the front ranks begin to lower their spears in anticipation. Facing them, Jochi smothered his fear in a sudden bloom of rage. He wanted nothing more than to draw his sword and kick his mount down the slope at the enemy. Shaking with frustration, he gave a different order. "Retreat over the ridge," Jochi shouted. He wrenched at his reins and his horse jerked into a run. His jagun shouted incoherently, turning in chaos after their general.

Behind him, he heard guttural voices yelling in triumph and acid rose in his throat, though whether it was from fear or anger, he did not know. From the Hardcover edition.