Teacher's notes and answer key

Tengri – the Sky God Without a Temple

Subjects: English · Religious Studies · History · Geography | recommended from age 12 (B1) | Video: 8:28 min

Answers B

1. Tengri is the word for sky and at the same time the god who lives in it. Worshipped by the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe, from the early Turkic peoples to the Mongols (possibly already by the Xiongnu more than 2,000 years ago). Today in Turkish: 'Tanrı' = God.

2. The creator Kaira Khan sends the first human down to the bottom of the water to bring up earth; he scatters it over the water and land grows from it. The human secretly hides earth in his mouth to create a world of his own; it swells, and he has to spit it out (it becomes swamps). He is cast out and becomes Erlik, lord of the underworld.

3. “When the blue sky above and the brown earth below were created, between the two, human beings were created.” The sky places a ruler over the people and grants him fortune and power – and can take both away at any moment (the right to rule is a gift from above, not just inherited).

4. He hung his belt around his neck, took his hat in his hand (signs of submission), turned towards the sun, knelt nine times, offered a libation to the sky, gave thanks for being alive and swore never to forget the mountain.

5. A shaman called 'Teb Tengri' who announced that the title Genghis Khan came from heaven. Danger: if heaven spoke through him, it was unclear who had the final word; he meddled in the ruling family and turned the khan's brothers against one another. After his death in a wrestling match, it was said heaven had stopped favouring him – message: from now on the will of heaven speaks through the khan.

Answer C

Correct numbers from top to bottom: 4 – 7 – 1 – 6 – 2 – 8 – 3 – 5

Notes on D and E

D1: The sky brought rain (grass for the herds) and drought (herds die), winter blizzards and the vast horizon for finding the way; a god of this sky is worshipped in the open, on mountains and passes, at ovoo. D2 (e.g.): the inscriptions – heaven can take fortune and power away at any time; Kököchü loses heaven's favour; Temüjin kneels humbly despite his later power; the Mongol Empire falls apart.

E: Above – Tengri, the sky / gives rain, rule, fortune, power. Middle – the earth of humans, Mother Etügen as a female force / carries and feeds (a pair with the sky). Below – Erlik, lord of the underworld / place of banishment, dark depths.

C (order) follows the sequence in the video. Extra: Güyük's letter with the seal “By the power of Eternal Heaven” is still kept in the Vatican today – a good starting point for talking about sources (the Secret History of the Mongols, inscriptions, letters).

Content note and age

Recommended from age 12. No graphic scenes; the video mentions the poisoning of Temüjin's father, a raid on his camp, the death of the shaman Kököchü in a wrestling match and the Mongol conquests. Tengri worship and today's 'Tengrism' are living traditions in Central Asia – please treat them with respect.

Background: Altai creation myth (recorded by Wilhelm Radloff, 19th century), Old Turkic Orkhon inscriptions (8th century), the Secret History of the Mongols, John of Plano Carpini's journey (1245) and Güyük Khan's letter to Pope Innocent IV.

The narrator's voice and the illustrations in the video are AI-generated; the script follows the established tradition. You are welcome to copy and share this worksheet for classroom use.

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