

Hulegu and the Fall of Baghdad

In the year 1255 of the Christian Era, 653 in the Muslim calendar, Prince Hulegu, the grandson of Temuchin, was sent by his elder brother, the Great Khan Mangke, to subdue Persia.

Much of that country was already part of the Mongols' empire, had Mongol-appointed governors and paid Mongol taxes. However, there were pockets of resistance to foreign rule. The hot and, in Mongol eyes, inhospitable south was almost untouched by the earlier invasion, as was Baghdad. The Abbasid Caliph, whose father had refused help to the resistance in 1227, though he had later chalked up some minor successes against the Mongol generals, was still lording it there in all his glory.

Hulegu's first major campaign, in the winter of 1256, was against the Islamic sect known as the *Nizaris*, or *Assassins*, under their leader Rukn ad-Din, who were entrenched in fortresses high in the Alburz Mountains, not far from present day Teheran. The Nizaris were not exactly popular with orthodox Muslims, who did not greatly mourn their humiliation.

After defeating Rukn ad-Din and destroying his fortresses, Hulegu marched on Baghdad, ousted the Caliph, and later took the title *Il-khan*. Within a few years, the whole country was occupied. Persian men were conscripted into the Mongol army and their women forced into marriage with the conquerors. Much of the Persian infrastructure was destroyed, or such as had survived the first onslaught, and a period of economic stagnation followed. Christianity, Judaism and especially Buddhism flourished at the expense of Islam.

The scene was set for events that were ultimately to change Persia forever.

The defeat of the Assassins in the winter of 1256 and the subsequent destruction of Baghdad were the climax of a military adventure that had begun forty years earlier.

In 1218, the armies of Temuchin arrived at the eastern borders of the Muslim empire. In front of them lay Transoxiana, Kwarazm, the Iranian

province of Khorasan and ultimately the Persian heartland that included the realm of the Caliph. The World Conqueror had come a long way, both politically and geographically, since his days as an ambitious Mongol clansman.

By 1209, at the age of forty-three, he had succeeded in uniting the Steppes clans into a new Mongol nation, with lands the size of Mongolia today. His people had proclaimed him its leader, with the title Genghis Khan. He was in command of an army of more than 50,000 unique fighting horsemen.

That same year, he attacked the Tanguts, a non-nomadic and literate people who lived south of the Gobi Desert in a country bordering the Yellow River. The Tangut emperor surrendered. Genghis turned next across the Gobi to the east and invaded the much stronger kingdom of the Jin, traditional enemies of the Mongols. Thus began a long campaign that ended with the siege and burning of Beijing in 1214.

The Jin were defeated but not subjugated, and it would be another decade before northern China was fully absorbed into the Mongol Empire. However, confident in his victory, Genghis turned his attention to another neighbour, this time to the west - Khara Khitai, a region that in modern times would be the country of Kyrgyzstan and part of Kazakhstan. Khara Khitai was ruled by an old enemy, a Naiman prince called Kuchlug, whom Genghis had defeated and forced to flee westwards from the Steppes.

Kuchlug was not such a tough nut to crack, and a second triumph over his foe brought Genghis Khan to the frontiers of Islam with its rich economy, its flourishing culture of art and science, and its ancient and fabled cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Baghdad.

The Empire of Kwarazm was the easternmost bastion of the Islamic Empire. It was ruled by a rather unpleasant man known as Shah Muhammad, with an equally unpleasant mother called Terken. She seems to have ruled Muhammad. The historian Ata-Malik Juvaini says of her that ... *whatever thou dost, the cruel world will write 'oppression' upon thee with sharp pens.*

The Shah was unpopular. He had annexed Transoxiana and a large part of Khorasan by force. He was no friend to the Caliph of Baghdad. Moreover, he was notorious for his amoral behaviour. His relations with his neighbour Kuchlug alternated between outright war and uneasy peace. And it was Muhammad who, through his arrogance and stupidity, was to bring the Islamic world to the brink of destruction.

The question must be asked: was the invasion of Persia part of Temuchin's strategy? Having subdued the Tanguts, the Jin and the Khitans, had he already worked out the next move in his plan for world domination? Several historians have expressed doubts that seem well-founded. Even Juvaini, the Persian Muslim, implies that Genghis's objectives with respect to the West were peaceful. He writes that the Khan ordered his sons ... *to equip two or three persons from their dependants and give them capital ... that they might proceed with this party to the Sultan's territory, engage in commerce and so acquire strange and precious wares.* It seems that Genghis also sent a message to Muhammad to the effect that ... *henceforth the abscess of evil thoughts may be lanced by the improvement of relations and agreement between us.*

Genghis had no quarrel with the people of Kwarazm. His earlier conquests had been either in pursuit of old grudges with traditional enemies or, as with the Tanguts, part of his strategy to deal with those enemies. He had brought some measure of stability to the regions he had conquered. Perhaps he needed friends on his western borders, and to build his new nation's prosperity by means of peaceful trade. He had enough to do in China and probably did not wish to become embroiled in disputes between Kwarazm and the newly conquered Khara Khitai. Whatever his thoughts and motives at that moment, the events that followed would launch one of the bloodiest conflicts in history.

Temuchin's trade delegation, composed almost entirely of Muslims, reached the frontier town of Otrar on the Jaxartes River, and was arrested *en masse* by the local governor on charges of spying. This governor, a kinsman of

Terken, then seized their goods and executed the merchants in cold blood, all but one, who escaped.

Such things were not done, even in those violent times, and Genghis reacted with fury. He sent envoys to the Sultan to demand retribution, otherwise there would be outright war. Muhammad promptly executed the envoys.

The Mongol army, reinforced from recent conquests and led by Genghis Khan himself, rode into Transoxiana and flattened Otrar to the ground. It then systematically set about the destruction of every centre that resisted, including the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. Next, Genghis's son Tolui took the Khorasan cities of Nishapur, Merv and Herat. According to some accounts, whole populations were massacred. Certainly, the carnage was terrible. However, some of the quoted figures are surely too incredible for words. If millions had died, as some writers have claimed, there would have been no one to pick up the pieces!

The only effective resistance to the Mongol onslaught came from Shah Mohammed's son, Jalal ad-Din who, unlike his unpopular and libertine father, seems to have been a man of courage and principle. His valiant effort was not enough. After enjoying brief success against the Mongol armies at Parwan on the River Indus, he was defeated and the juggernaut of history rolled on.

The Mongol Empire forged by Temuchin was one of the largest the world has ever seen. At its height, it stretched from China in the east, across Asia, the Middle East, parts of Russia, the Baltic and into Europe as far as the gates of Vienna. Writers and historians paint very different pictures of the Mongols and their rule. The very word Mongol is for many synonymous with terror and bloodshed. On the other, descriptions of the court of Kublai Khan, brother of Hulegu and Mangke, give the impression of splendour and culture.

For Ata-Malik Juvaini, they were certainly conquerors, but they were also his employers. Constrained, perhaps, against vilifying their worst excesses, he seems however to have admired many of their qualities, such

as their military skills, their discipline and, despite his strong Muslim faith, their tolerance in matters of religion. He writes authoritatively of the period and it is unfortunate that his *History* ends with the siege and burning of the Ismaili castles by Hulegu. It has nothing to say about the taking of Baghdad or the stagnant years that followed.

Perhaps Juvaini's conscience pricked him and he could not write objectively about the fate of the Caliph. He certainly benefited from the Conquest. Having served as Hulegu's secretary, he was appointed civilian governor of Baghdad and a large part of what is modern Iraq. It was a post he retained for more than twenty years under two of Hulegu's successors. He died in 1283, probably of natural causes, in the last year of Il-Khan Teguder's reign. To have survived Arghun's succession in 1284 would have been no comfort! Though he had served three monarchs faithfully, Juvaini had made enemies, foremost among them being Il-khan Arghun himself. Arghun rounded up several members of the historian's family and put them to death.

It was left to others to take up the story.

Baghdad rejoiced at the defeat of the Assassins but its celebrations were short-lived. In 1257, Hulegu's war engines turned south and rolled towards the Tigris. Hulegu offered the Caliph an opportunity to surrender but was refused. The Caliph, al-Musta'sim, confident that God was on his side and that all of Islam would unite with him to repel the aggressor, decided to resist. He was sadly misguided in both respects. The Sunni Abbasids were unpopular with people of Shiite persuasion; as Muslims, they were even more unpopular with Christians. In Baghdad there were significant numbers of both. Not only that, but Hulegu's army had a large contingent of Christian cavalry and had recruited many Shiite Muslims to its cause.

Early in 1258 the assault on Baghdad began. First, Hulegu divided his forces and surrounded the city. The Caliph's army was lured into marshes on the west and cut down. Then Hulegu launched his attack from the east and bombarded the walls with heavy weaponry. The siege lasted five days before the city was taken. The Caliph was executed.

It was inevitable that myths would arise. Baghdad was the city of legend and romance. It was the city of Shahrazad and the Arabian Nights, (though Shahryar, the king of the tales, was the ruler of Samarkand!) So, if not as thrilling as that of the three thousand virgins condemned to die, the story of Musta'sim's death is nevertheless colourful:

The Caliph was a weak, vain man given to earthly pleasures who had betrayed at least one of the five pillars of his faith. He amassed gold at the expense of his people and would use it neither to improve their welfare nor to relieve their suffering. When the Mongols threatened, he might have used his great wealth to provide his capital with more effective defences. He did not.

According to one version of the story, Prince Hulegu locked him in a tower without any food. When the Caliph complained he was hungry, his gaolers brought him a tray piled high with gold ornaments and coins. He appealed to the prince. *Gold has been meat and drink to you*, Hulegu is supposed to have told him. *What is stored in your treasury might have been used to good purpose among your subjects. Now you can eat it!*

In reality, al-Musta'sim was probably stitched up inside a carpet and trampled to death by horses. This was the Mongols' favourite means of executing aristocratic enemies.

Myth aside, mystery and controversy surround these defining campaigns in the history of Mongol Persia.

With so many castles and, presumably, an army at their disposal, why did the Nizaris from Alamut and elsewhere not go to the aid of Maymun-Diz?

Has history misjudged Caliph al-Musta'sim, or did he, having allowed his capital city to lose its glitter, deserve his fate? Why did Hulegu draw so much support from Muslims and Christians alike - even if later many of his one-time allies were to regret it?

Buried somewhere in the mass of literature from Nizari, Sunni and Christian sources must be answers these questions, but they are hard to find. It may be that the truth lies in the personalities of the two Muslim leaders rather than the nature of Islam itself.

Imam Rukn ad-Din was a young man. He had a young family. The murder of his father Muhammad had thrust him into leadership, perhaps prematurely, only twelve months before the Mongol attack. He had previously quarrelled with Muhammad over the latter's erratic policies. Muhammad's predecessor had maintained pragmatic ties of friendship with both the Caliph al-Mustansir and with the Mongols. Whether he betrayed his people by so doing or was merely indulging in what Muslims call *Taqiyya* - hiding one's true beliefs while under threat, is unclear.

Throughout history, alliances have been made and remade regardless of peoples' religious persuasions. The Syrian Nizaris had come to a peaceful understanding with both the Mamluks and Crusaders. However, under Muhammad, the Persian Nizaris expanded their territory by military action into lands previously occupied by the Kwarazmian Empire. This was clearly against Mongol interests. Guyuk Khan rebuffed Muhammad's peace overtures - itself no surprise since Guyuk rebuffed everyone! - and Mangke, more rational, decided to put an end to the threat.

Was Rukn ad-Din so overburdened by his responsibilities, and so overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of the Mongol host, that he truly saw surrender as the only way out? Or, more likely, did he genuinely want peace for his family and his people. His messages to Hulegu were unequivocal; he was prepared to acknowledge the Mongol Great Khan as his overlord. However, many of the fortress commanders disagreed. From then on, the Imam was doomed. To other Nizaris, his compromise was a betrayal; for Hulegu, a leader who could not deliver was of no value as an ally.

As for the Caliphate, its glory days were long gone. The previous Caliph, like the Nizari Isma'ilis, had taken advantage of the Kwarazmian defeat and moved in on some of the Shah's territory. He had also repulsed the Mongols on more than one occasion. Al-Musta'sim was a different kind of man. He was an incompetent ruler, hardly able to check the rivalries and petty squabbling within his own city. He was not the first Sunni leader to irritate the Shi'ite population, including his own Shi'ite advisers.

Whilst the Shi'ite Imams derived both spiritual and secular authority by virtue of their descent, the Caliphs could make no such claim. Although

calling themselves *Commander of the Faithful*, Caliphs were not religious leaders but essentially political and military ones. By 1256, they had lost any real political power. Al-Mustasim had allowed the army to break up.

That was bad enough, but there was another disaster looming. The Mongols had sacked and burned cities, and devastated the infrastructure - especially the superb irrigation systems of many more. Baghdad's infrastructure was disintegrating without any Mongol intervention and Al-Mustas'im was doing nothing to prevent it. His claim that all Islam would rally to the defence of Baghdad was a vain boast given the nature and history of the Caliphate, and only a vain and foolish man would not have realised it.

So, on the one hand you have a spiritual leader who is not ready for military responsibility, and on the other a political figurehead who believes himself invincible. Ranged against them are the forces of some of the most successful military leaders in the history of mankind. It was a no contest situation.

Not least of the puzzles surrounding the fall of Baghdad were: what was the true death toll of the fighting? and what role did Hulegu's wife *Doquz Khatun* play in saving the lives of Christians there, as it has been claimed she did?

The Baghdad casualty statistics make horrific reading if they are to be believed. But are they? Estimates range from 60,000 at the lower end to 10 million at the upper, depending I suppose on the political or religious agenda of the historian giving the estimate. Historians, even the professionals, seem to tie themselves in knots over this issue. There are no reliable figures.

This much is clear. There was mass slaughter, as is the case with all such episodes in history, some of it conducted with great glee in pursuit of old rivalries and in revenge for past slaughters. No doubt the efficient Mongol killing machine was once again in operation but it is equally clear that Shi'ites in Hulegu's army took delight in massacring Sunnis, and his Christian forces in cutting down mercilessly any Baghdad Muslim they could

lay sword upon.

For the first time in Mongol conquests, religious partisanship raises its ugly head. Hulegu himself was probably neutral in the matter. However, guided by his favourite wife, he seems to have given orders that the Christian population of the city was to be spared. Doquz, like many of the Kerait clan to which she belonged, was a Nestorian Christian and, whatever her opinions about warfare in general, would have been inclined to intervene on behalf of people who shared her beliefs.

Her partisanship and consequently her husband's may even have gone further. According to several accounts, Hulegu handed over the Caliph's palace to the leaders of the Syriac Christian Church, of which another of his wives was an adherent.

Marco Polo tells a strange story that may have its origins in the partisanship of these Mongol women. In Chapter VIII of his Travels, he writes that ... *even the khalif secretly embraced Christianity*, as a result of a miracle performed by an artisan of the city. Incredible though his conversion might be, is it possible that al-Musta'sim, faced with execution, saw his only hope in a petition to Doquz herself? What better chance of survival than claiming the faith that had been the saving of so many!

Hulegu chose as his capital the town of Maragha. It lay, and still lies today, on the southern slopes of Mount Sahand. As the eagle flies, it is about 75 kilometers from Tabriz; by the main road, round the mountain, it is 120 kilometers. Sahand is a double mountain, 3,700 meters high, and volcanic. The region is renowned for its fruit growing. Some people believe it to be the site of the mythical Garden of Eden.

Why not Baghdad? With the Caliph out of the way, it might have been the ideal place from which to rule. The symbolism would have been there for all to see; the old empire was gone and a new one had taken its place. Baghdad lay in the Fertile Crescent so it would have provided for the Mongol ponies, so essential for the conquerors' kind of warfare.

However, the Mongols had been too effectively ruthless for their own good. They had shot themselves in the foot. Baghdad, the most splendid

city in all history, had been destroyed, its walls broken and its buildings demolished. Its riches were looted and plundered. Its irrigation system was no longer in working order and few engineers and artisans remained who could rebuild it. It was to be centuries before it recovered even part of its former glory.

But Maragha too was fertile. It had a pleasant climate, neither too hot nor too cold for Hulegu and his court, and it lay on a main route from east to west, one that the Mongols themselves had travelled during their invasion of Europe and Russia. Maragha had been an important city under the Seljuk and would be again. It was the ideal place from which to rebuild the Iranian empire.

So, what kind of a man was the first Il-khan of Persia?

Hulegu is often depicted as a barbarian. He seems to have shown aggressive tendencies from an early age and he was certainly capable of acts of the most appalling savagery. However, this dark side of his character vied with another, more cultured persona. As a youth, he was exposed to Chinese influences, as was his brother Kublai. Their mother, *Sorqoqtani*, had seen to it that both were educated by Christian priests.

Hulegu's response to enemies who defied or attempted to deceive him was uncompromising and violent. On the other hand, he rewarded loyalty and was open to the arguments of those he trusted. Juvaini relates how, during his advance on Alamut, Hulegu allocated funds for repairs and rebuilding in the town of Quchan, which had been damaged during the first invasion. The Il-khan also allowed Juvaini to salvage books and scientific equipment from the Assassin stronghold at Alamut.

Hulegu was known to respect learning and the sciences, and he was somewhat in awe of scholars. When the astronomer and scholar Nasr ad-Din Tusi presented him with the outline plans for an observatory at Maragha, he agreed to fund a large part of the expenditure. Thus it was under Hulegu's patronage that the now famous Maragha Observatory, with its huge library of 40,000 books, was built.

Tusi, like the Il-khan himself, is something of an enigma. When the

Mongols attacked his home town in 1220, he sought refuge with the *Isma'ilis*, followers of the same branch of Islam to which the Assassins belonged. He wrote extensively on science and philosophy, and translated works from Greek into Arabic and Persian. Whether or not he adopted Isma'ili beliefs is disputed. However, over the next thirty-five years he lived among them. Whatever his standing in matters of religion, it seems likely that from being a willing refugee he became a virtual prisoner. In 1256, he was part of the Nizari delegation to Hulegu, negotiated the surrender of Alamut and took service with the invaders. Claims that he was a Mongol spy are unproven and probably untrue. It is likely he simply wanted to carry on his work in peace. With Hulegu he was given the opportunity.

Like his fellow Persian, al-Kharaizmi, who wrote the first treatise on algebra in the ninth century, Nasr ad-Din Tusi is one of the fathers of science and was certainly one of the finest minds of the age. As well as his many contributions to astronomy, he was the founder of trigonometry as a branch of pure mathematics.

However, Tusi was not only a scientist, historian and intellectual, but a man with a practical understanding of economics and the ethics of commerce. These were skills that the Il-khan badly needed.

Hulegu ruled as Il-khan until 1264. At his death, his kingdom stretched from the Oxus in the east to the western end of the Black Sea and from Armenia in the north to the Persian Gulf. He had begun negotiations with the Roman Emperor Michael VIII with a view to forming a marriage alliance.

Despite the barbarous side to his nature, Hulegu was widely mourned by Christian peoples in the region. Undoubtedly, his defeat of the Caliph, even if not prompted by any anti-Muslim sentiments, and his continuous warring with the Mamluk warriors of Egypt endeared him to Christians in Syria and Armenia. An Armenian historian, Kirakos, described him as a 'second Constantine'.

Bar Hebraeus, historian and theologian of the Syriac Church wrote that the *wisdom of this man, and the greatness of his soul, and his*

wonderful actions are incomparable.

Lest these should be taken as fitting epitaphs for a man who spread destruction and death across the Middle East, it should perhaps be recorded that when the Il-khan was buried at Lake Urmia several Mongol girls were sacrificed and buried with him. Genghis Khan had been similarly 'accompanied' into the after-life. It was an old custom!

Mongol atrocities should be placed in context. For sure, they killed a lot of innocent people, but probably far fewer than the Nazis or the Soviets in the twentieth century. Conquerors in mediaeval times did what they did, and there was some excuse for them. The execution of a few dozen girls in the name of shamanistic custom is an appalling horror and tragedy. How much more horrific was the brutal torture and burning of hundreds of thousands of alleged heretics and witches, mostly women, in the name of the Christian religion.

Empire building at the time of the Mongols was overtly cruel. Today, it is a much more insidious process. In the name of concepts such as democracy, free trade and globalisation, nations are invaded and peoples impoverished; children are enslaved and die of starvation. In the twenty-first century we are supposed to know better!