In 1251 Möngke Qa’an, the eldest son of Tolui Khan, became the Qa’an, the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire. The House of Tolui had to assert itself and establish a solid power base, a project to which the indomitable Sorqoqtani Beki had devoted herself since the death of her husband, Tolui Khan, in 1232. Sorqoqtani Beki (d.1252) had ensured from the outset that her sons were her priority.1 They received training and education which enabled them to realise her ambitions for power and influence, and she often took a direct role in the choice of their tutors, in the selection of their companions, and in the early administration of their allotted lands. It is recorded that the accomplished Qazvini scholar Malik Iftikhar al-Din Muhammad was employed for the tutoring of the young Toluid princes in the decades following the initial irruption of the Mongol forces circa 1220.2 Although there is no direct evidence that Tolui’s widow ever travelled to this northern Iranian city, a tomb tower in Maragha, 400 km to the west, has been dedicated to Sorqoqtani Beki’s memory, just possibly in recognition of her role in recruiting locally for the education of her sons.3 Certainly, these princes retained a special affection for Qazvin; Mustawfi records that Hülegü, his son Abaqa, and his grandson Arghun spent 18 days as guests of the Qazvini Malik and particularly enjoyed the warming “Muslim hamam,” and that their enthusiasm for Qazvin was shared by their entourages and all the other Ilkhan.4

When word filtered westward that the new Toluid Great Khan had been elected, that his coronation was to be held in Qaraqorum, and that all his loyal subjects would be expected to attend, excitement was extreme in the city of Qazvin. For three decades, Iran’s city-states had been in turmoil. Herat – the capital of Khurasan and seat of the Karts, whose ruler, Shams al-Din, had close personal ties of friendship with both the Chinggisid leadership and the military officers with whom he had campaigned in Hindustan – welcomed the news, as did the Khitan Qutlugh Khans of Kirman and the Armenian rulers of Cilicia, both strong supporters of the Chinggisid revolution. For most, the tidings of a novel and strong leader were good news especially so since it was widely known that the Toluid qa’ans had connections with Iran and might bring an end to these three decades of instability. The notables of
Qazvin, in particular, realised that Möngke’s elevation as Qa’an could prove highly advantageous to Iran and especially to their city. By invoking Möngke’s personal connections to Qazvin, they could appeal for his help in restoring order and stability to their country and bring an end to the military governance of Baiju, a Jochid appointee, and the Isma’ili attacks which they claimed to be a perpetual threat and disruption to their lives.

The Chief Qadi of Qazvin led the Iranian delegation to Möngke’s coronation, and they made a personal plea to the Great Khan to put an end to the 30 years of turmoil and anarchy which the military governor Baiju Noyan (ex.1260) had failed to suppress. The impassioned speech requested that the Great Khan Möngke “build a bridge of Justice” across the Amu Darya River and unite Iran with the Empire proper. The Qazvini delegation wanted an end to Iran’s peripheral status and wanted to be incorporated fully into the Chinggisid empire, and for that reason they wanted Möngke to appoint a royal prince to come westward, restore order and stability to their country, and, in particular, end the tyranny of the Isma’ilis which threatened not only Iran but world peace. In a dramatic finale, the speaker uncovered a hidden Assassin hiding among the congregation gathered before the emperor. Mustawfi, a descendant of the qadi who led that delegation, claimed that it was the Qazvinis who actually chose Hülegü, “seeing in his countenance the royal farr.”

Möngke Qa’an ordered his brother Qubilai to head east to complete the task of bringing Song China into the Mongol Empire, and he dispatched Hülegü, with what proved to be the last united tamma army fielded, to bring the Muslim west, from the Amu Darya to the Nile, fully into the empire, declaring with trepidation that, while chaos would be brought to an end, he hoped he “would later not have to bite my lip [regret, express distress].”

Hülegü’s march on the West stands in clear contrast to that of his grandfather. Whereas Chinggis Khan had unleashed his forces on the Khwarazmshah and Iran in anger and in pursuit of bloody revenge, his grandson spent many months in gentle travel, stopping for hunting, merriment, and festivities as he greeted the many delegations of well-wishers there to offer their allegiance and loyalty. After crossing the Amu Darya, he relaxed with some lion hunting and then enjoyed the elaborate welcome arranged by Iran’s current governor, Arghun Aqa (d.1278). The wily Arghun Aqa shared power with the unpopular military governor Baiju Noyan (d.1260), particularly in the west, but Arghun Aqa retained the ear of the Ilkhan. Hülegü arrived by invitation and as a king, neither on a war footing nor as a conqueror. Before the confrontation with the Caliph in Baghdad, the only military engagement that had taken place was the assault on the Isma’ili stronghold of Alamut, high in the fastness of the Elburz mountains. For this military operation he summoned all the local rulers of Iran, and these maliks, governors, khans, princes, generals, and leaders came in droves, united behind their new Shah, Hülegü, and in their opposition to the young Rukn al-Din of Alamut.

I [Hülegü] am setting out against the Heretics. If you send assistance in the form of troops and armaments, provisions and military supplies, I will count it as a favour and your province will have peace and security. But if you neglect to do this, as soon as I become free from my present concerns, I will deal with you and after that no excuses or apology will be acceptable.
They came from Khurasan, Badghis, Georgia, Armenia, central Anatolia, Sistan, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Jibal, Iraq al-Arab, and Iraq al-‘Ajam, from Kirman, Shiraz, Yazd, and Isfahan. The one leader who did not send troops or supplies was the Caliph of Baghdad. The Kurdish governor of Irbil and Mosul was not the only one who felt disquiet at these unfolding events. Coinciding with Hülegü’s request for military provisions, Badr al-Din Lu’lu also received a command from the Caliph which, in contrast to the Khan’s request, demanded musicians. “Look at the two requests, and weep for Islam and its people!”

Alamut fell after a prolonged siege. The walls of the fortress, along with the fortifications of most of the other Isma’ili strongholds, were razed, and the Isma’ili “menace” was ended. The young Rukn al-Din had finally surrendered to Hülegü, and his life was not only spared, but he was treated with respect and even presented with a Mongol wife. He fatally squandered this mercy shown him by Hülegü by insisting on an audience with Möngke Qa’an himself, who, on hearing of Rukn al-Din’s approach, reproached his brother for this blatant waste of resources and manpower and immediately ordered not only the execution of the arrogant Isma’ili imam but the rest of the Isma’ili community in Iran. Those of the community who escaped slaughter went immediately into hiding, donning the blanket of tāqiyya and the hijab of anonymity.

‘Ala’ al-Din ‘Ata Malik Juvayni, the future Ilkhanid governor of Baghdad, brother of the future prime minister of the Ilkhanate, witnessed the conquest of the Isma’ils and Hülegü’s journey from the east. He was from a long line of Persian courtiers and advisers to power, and his father had entered Chinggisid service after his former master, Jalal al-Din Mangubirni, the last Khwarazmshah, had fled across the Indus. Juvayni, currently Hülegü’s personal adviser and historian, reflected on this turn of events as he surveyed the ruins of Alamut after the surrender. He wrote that now “God’s secret intent” had become clear. For Juvayni and for many of Iran’s Sunni establishment, the apparent annihilation of the Isma’ils, whose presence they perceived as divine blasphemy and a spiritual insult, was proof of God’s sanctioning of Hülegü’s actions. Möngke’s very ascension to power had heralded the triumph of Islam in many scattered outposts in the Orient, recalling the hadith that the Faithful should “Seek knowledge even in China,” which Juvayni concluded “related to this age and to those who live in the present era.”

The Banner of Islam is raised higher and the candle of the Faith lit brighter; and the sun of the creed of Moḥammad casts its shadow over countries whose nostrils had not been perfumed by the scent of Islam . . . and whose soil had not been trodden save by [infidels].

Juvayni’s father had despaired that Uyghur rather than Persian and Arabic had become the language of the court of the age and of scholarship, but his son noted with pleasure that since the ascension of Möngke Qa’an and the arrival of Hülegü in the western climes, all had been transformed. Juvayni emphasised that though the infidel Mongol khans ruled the world, their power was executed through men like him, Persians, and Muslims. The keys to the world had been “placed ready for use in the hands of the [Mongols’] power,” and he saw himself and his fellow Iranians as those hands.
THE FALL OF BAGHDAD

The fall of Baghdad in 1258 has often been portrayed as one of the greatest calamities ever to have befallen the Islamic world. Hülegü has been reviled as the butcher of Baghdad, who caused the Tigris first to run red with the blood of its martyrs and then to run black with the ink from the libraries of books flung into the river. All these tales have no basis in reality and emerged as Arab-inspired propaganda against the Chinggisids and their allies, the Persians. Hülegü had arrived in Iran to restore the ancient region to its former glory, and to achieve this he needed and desired the cooperation and assistance of all its citizens. His essentially peaceful progress across the country had been marred only by his assaults on the Isma’ili strongholds, for which he had received the full support of the country’s many leaders and rulers. The Caliph of Baghdad, Musta’sim, alone refused to endorse the sovereignty of Möngke Qa’an and the new Ilkhan, Hülegü. The Caliph was acting on the directions of his mendacious minister, the Dawatdar, Mujahid al-Din Aybak, while ignoring the advice of his more pragmatic Shi’i minister, Ibn al-Alqami.

Caliph Musta’sim was a victim of his bickering courtiers and the internal politics of his palace machinations, still locked in the vicious religious civil war which had been destroying the city-state for more than two years now. While the Shi‘i minister Ibn al-Alqami advised a negotiated surrender, the wily and ambitious royal nephew, the Dawatdar Aybak, a Sunni, fed paranoia and venom into the body politic and convinced the deputy of God, the Caliph Musta’sim, that he could do no wrong. Aybak pleaded that these upstart, barbarian Mongols braying at his gates and the treacherous, blaspheming Shi‘is undermining his government and sapping its confidence must be resisted and ignored. The envoys bearing gifts and honours which the Shi‘i minister, Ibn al-Alqami, had dispatched to Hülegü’s camp were intercepted and their treasures returned to the Caliph’s coffers, while the letters that they carried bearing conciliatory words and urging compromise were produced before the Caliph as examples of Ibn al-Alqami’s secret correspondence with the invaders and his treachery. In addition, the Caliph was also pathologically avaricious. He was a man who was reluctant to even pay his own soldiers, and he reacted with horror at this “needless” squandering of his riches.

Baghdad fell, and the death toll, capped by the execution of the Caliph and his sons, was shocking. The victorious armies were permitted to indulge in a short period of plundering and looting, though strict limitations and restrictions were enforced. Wanton destruction was not encouraged. Most of the deaths were caused by unchecked pestilence, and much of the widespread physical damage had been caused by the years of civil war and a devastating flood which had swept through the city some months before Hülegü’s arrival. Accounts survive of individual local notables and merchants coming to personal understandings with Chinggisid amirs, such as the musician ‘Urmavi, whose musical entertainment and lavish feast saved his district from destruction and ensured him an audience with and a future in the service of the Ilkhan, Hülegü. The Christian residents were spared, and Shaykh Ibn Tawus guaranteed the safety of the Shi‘i community and their mosques and homes in Baghdad, as did the arrangements of certain merchants and businessmen who had dealings with the Chinggisids elsewhere. Baghdad’s libraries, despite the later widespread reports of their destruction, were transferred to the safe-keeping of Nasir
al-Din Tusi at his university and observatory in Maragha, along with a young novice librarian, Ibn Fuwati, who eventually succeeded Tusi as the director of the library and in fact many years later oversaw the re-establishment of Baghdad’s libraries.21

After the execution of the Caliph, swaddled in carpets and kicked to death as beffitted a royal personage, Hulegu, who had himself contracted the pestilence, ordered the end of the violence and looting and re-opened the city and its bazaars.22 Ibn al-Alqami, the former minister, was appointed governor, which disproves those who accused him of treachery, since any suspicion that he had acted against his legitimate master, the Caliph, would have disqualified him from office and would probably have earned him a death sentence under the yasa. Though Hulegu had judged him favourably, saying, “[Ibn al-Alqami] is an intelligent man; he attends both to our interests and to those of his own master,” he died not long after taking office. In his stead ‘Ata Malik Juvayni was appointed governor of Baghdad, and his brother, Shams al-Din, became prime minister, the two forming a very powerful alliance which lasted another two decades.23

Hulegu was mostly well-regarded by his new subjects and the Iranian establishment. A court observer and chronicler noted that:

We had seen Hulegu in his court enough times to see that in one day he dealt efficiently with the affairs of this province [presumably Azerbaijan] and that in every one of the provinces under his command, he governed well, in such a way that his justice was total wherever was il to him.24

During his youth, Hulegu had been nurtured like his brothers by his remarkable mother, Sorqoqtani Beki.25 She had instilled in her sons a love of learning and a respect for scholars. Though a Christian, she had been an intimate of Sayf al-Din Bakharzi, the master of the Kubraviyya Sufi brotherhood.26 Such love of learning and of the learned was a trait found amongst steppe leaders and manifest in the popular practice of public debates. Where other cultures glorified the thrusts of swordplay, animal taunting, or jousting on horseback, the Chinggisids relished the clash of ideas and the drama of the debate. Rashid al-Din recognised the khan’s deep love of wisdom and his encouragement of debate and scholarship while admiring his court “adorned with the presence of scholars and wise men,”27 a view endorsed by Bar Hebraeus, another intellectual giant who had personal knowledge of the king. The latter believed Hulegu “was possessed of an understanding which endeared him to wise men and ‘ulema,” which was a characteristic he shared with his brother, Qubilai, who “loved wise men, the ‘ulema and the godly of all sects and nations.”28

Nasir al-Din Tusi, almost as soon as he was “released” from the Isma’ili stronghold Alamut, found himself as Hulegu’s special adviser with enormous influence and power, a position he owed solely to his reputation for erudition and wisdom and his known deep knowledge of science.

The Ilkhanate was established by Hulegu Khan after the fall of Baghdad in 1258 with its capital originally in the market town of Maragha, approximately 150 km south of Tabriz. The term “Ilkhan” recognises Hulegu and his successors’ loyalty and ties to the Qa’an, Qubilai, and acknowledges the lower status of the Ilkhans. The term il suggests fidelity, trust, and loyalty. The establishment of the Ilkhanate almost coincided with the short-lived civil war pitting Qubilai against his youngest
brother, Ariq Böke, which followed the death of Möngke Qa’an in 1259. Hülegü alone among the ruling princes pledged his support for his elder brother, and Qubilai in turn awarded Hülegü with his support for his enthronement as Shah of the Ilkhanate, despite counterclaims on Iran by the Jochids to the north-east. Chinggis Khan had assigned the lands to the west “where Tatar hoof had trod” to the Jochids, and the khans of the Golden Horde had interpreted this to include at the very least Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, and northern Iran, which Jebe and Sübedei had entered after the fall of the Khwarazmshah in the early 1220s. The Toluid coup was more than just a change of khans, it was a revolution. The Toluid khans embraced their sedentary subjects, and their Chinese and Persian ministers jointly ruled their multi-cultural, multi-ethnic realms rather than dominate and cow the lands and subjects that had fallen under the hooves of the Tatar armies.

The Ilkhanate can be divided into three broad periods. The first period, covering the reigns of Hülegü (d.1265) and his son Abaqa (d.1282), was marked by political stability and general prosperity as Iran benefitted from the opening of the borders and access to the markets in the East. Hülegü assumed his responsibilities as Shah of greater Iran, but it should not be forgotten that he remained an imperial prince. He retained lands throughout the empire and actively controlled his estates in Tibet, land which remained under direct Ilkhanid control until at least the reign of Arghun Ilkhan. Hülegü and his descendants continued their claims and power over their considerable holdings throughout the empire, but their ties with the Yuan Empire ensured that isolation never became a reality. The second period, marked by political and economic instability, lasted through the short reign of Abaqa’s brother, Ahmad Tegüder (1282–84); the longer reign of his son, Arghun (1284–92); and the chaotic years of Gaykhatu (d.1294) and Baidu (d.1295) until the ascension of Ghazan Khan in 1295 after a short civil war. The final period, the so-called Golden Age, covered Ghazan’s reign from 1295 to 1304, when Islam became once again the state religion of Iran; Ghazan’s brother Öljeitü’s rule from 1304 until 1316; and finally the reign of the last Ilkhan, Abu Sa’id, who ruled from 1316 until 1335, when he died without issue and the country collapsed into chaos, some would say at its economic and political height. Though war against its neighbours continued for almost its whole history, the Ilkhanate never came under existential threat, a positive reflection of the regime’s political and social integrity.

THE FIRST PERIOD, 1260–82

The first period of Ilkhanid rule is often celebrated as an era of growth and prosperity, with the country healing the wounds of many decades of war and civil strife and enjoying its revival after seven centuries of disunity. The Ilkhanate defined its borders by the strife outside. After the battle of ’Ayn Jalut in 1260, the fluid southern border region with Mamluk Egypt was marked by constant warfare. Though the battle of ’Ayn Jalut was militarily insignificant, it had enormous symbolic importance, since it was seen as the first time the Mongols had suffered a complete military defeat.29 In the north-east the Chaghadaid prince, Baraq Khan, invaded Khurasan with the backing of the ambitious Qaidu Khan (d.1301), great-grandson of Ögödei Qa’an, and even though he was decisively defeated by Abaqa after the battle of Herat in 1270, the Silk Road unifying Ilkhanid Iran and Yuan China was cut to all state traffic. Qaidu Khan’s animosity was directed more at Qubilai, and
he manipulated his Chaghadaid cousin, Baraq, after the Talas quriltai of 1269, to launch an attack on Herat to cement his own political and military situation and hasten Baraq's inevitable fate. The growing ill-will between the cousins Hülegü and Berke (1209–66) finally erupted into warfare after Berke’s conversion to Islam, his alliance with Mamluk Egypt, and his claims on Iranian Azerbaijan.

Relations between the Jochids and the Toluids had been deteriorating since the death of Batu in 1255 and the opposition of Hülegü and Qubilai to Berke’s assumption of power. The spark which Berke needed to initiate hostilities was provided by the misbehaviour of the Jochid prince, Balagha, who Hülegü had wanted to return to Berke for punishment. Berke had instead returned the errant prince to his cousin to deal with as he saw fit, and since the charge was witchcraft, execution was inevitable. Two other Jochid princes, Tutar and Quli, were then also seized and met their deaths, though in more obscure circumstances. As a result of the deaths of the three Jochid princes there was an immediate exodus of troops loyal to the Jochid Ulus sent to Iran as part of the vast tamma army. Many fled south to the Mamluks, while others under the command of Negüder Noyan fled eastward and eventually settled in the marchlands of eastern Afghanistan, where they gained notoriety as the shadowy Qaraunas, a “mercenary” army that remained generally hostile to the Ilkhanate and often allied with their Chaghadaid or Jochid neighbours to the north and were responsible for repeated attacks on Ilkhanid targets and incursions into Khurasan and eastern Iran.30 Abaqa finally defeated Berke’s troops after a confrontation on the Kura River in modern-day Georgia, and Berke’s successor, Möngke Temür, was not so keen on pursuing hostilities, so the Caucasus lapsed into an uneasy truce.

Hülegü’s subordination of Baghdad reflected his treatment of other cities and provinces in his considerable domains. He was willing to use people and power structures so long as those appointees offered him il and full cooperation. A shahna, basqaq, or daruqachi would be appointed to work alongside the local ruler in order to oversee the administration and ensure that dues were paid and that the Ilkhan’s interests were safeguarded. The Qutlughkhanid dynasty founded by the Khitan Baraq Hajib (d.1234) ruled the southern province of Kirman. Terkan Khatun (r.1257–82), the regent, ruled with the full support of her Muslim subjects and the trust of the Ilkhang in Tabriz. The shahna became more her aide than an overseer. In Herat, the Karts, a Persian dynasty founded by the Chinggisid loyalist Shams al-Din (r.1245–77), retained considerable autonomy but remained loyal and supportive despite disagreements and personality clashes. The Seljuk sultans of Rum continued to rule from Konya and again retained considerable autonomy, though in their case, their Tabriz-appointed overseer, the parvana, was a Persian Muslim who held firm control over the administration and the finances. Despite Möngke’s original stricture to eliminate the Kurds and the Lurs of Iran, Kurdish warlords such as Badr al-Din Lu’lu of Mosul and Irbil continued to administer their provinces with minimal interference from Tabriz. In Shiraz, where the local dynasty, the Salghurids, did not enjoy a warm relationship with the Ilkhangs, the shahna played a more intrusive role, and eventually the Salghurids were replaced by more loyal rulers, the Persian Injuids (1304–57), whose name reflects their status as administrators of crown (inju) lands. In Yazd in central Iran, the Muzaffarid dynasty’s loyal service ensured their continuation and power after the collapse of the Ilkhanate. The Ilkhangs were willing to devolve power to local governors overseen by shahnas, and loyalty and competence were rewarded by increased autonomy.32
Map 16.1 The Ilkhanate (1260–1335)
Source: Created by Mapping Specialists, Ltd.
THE SECOND PERIOD, 1282–95

Abaqa’s death in 1282, following a public display of delirium and hallucinations involving black crows and terrible visitations, plunged the country into crisis as the Ilkhan’s brother, the weak and unprepared Ahmad Tegüder (d.1284), assumed the throne. It was widely claimed that it was Ahmad’s adoption of Islam that undermined his reign, but there is little evidence that religion as such played any role in the growing hostility to his rule. In fact, the ulama of Iran were as united in their opposition to Ahmad as were the military. The conservative ulama were initially suspicious of his claims to having embraced Islam since he had had no schooling, instruction, or guidance in the religion from any recognised religious figures, and the major Islamic influence on him seemed to have been the scandalous figure Ishan Hasan Mangli, a hashish-smoking qalandar who exerted a powerful influence over the new Ilkhan. While Ahmad and Mangli explored the paths of “permissiveness” (ibahat) and immorality (fusuq) in the company of muwallah (forsaken souls) and other undesirables, his mother, Qutui Khatun, and the amir, Asiq, attended to matters of state, and popular disapproval grew. However, it was Ahmad’s reliance on and trust in another extremely suspect figure, Shaykh Kamal-al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahman, who raised the wrath of not only the ulama but the political and military elite. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Rahman was a religiously heterodox figure who gained the confidence of Ahmad Tegüder and whom the Ilkhan entrusted to lead an embassy to Mamluk Egypt to explore the prospects of peace and fraternal relations between the two Muslim neighbours. Ahmad authorised the dispatch of this sensitive mission without consultation with or, more importantly, the authorization of either the military or his political advisers. There were deep and sensitive reasons for the enmity which had fired the conflict between the Mamluks and the Ilkhanate, and these fissures could not be bridged by the snake-like charm of the charlatan ʿAbd al-Rahman. In the event, the humiliating pleas for peace were summarily rejected and the Shaykh was imprisoned, tortured, and ended his days in a Mamluk jail. But Ahmad’s greatest crime was the murder of his brother, Qongurtai, “a wise and powerful cypress,” the crime which eventually assured his downfall.33

The military did not take well to Ahmad’s insubordination, blatant disregard for their guidance and understanding of the delicate position vis-a-vis Egypt, and complete neglect for security concerns in dispatching envoys to the Mamluks, one of which contained the scientist and knowledgeable insider Qutb al-Din Shirazi. 34 Before his coronation there had been many who had supported Abaqa’s son Arghun, and following the fratricide, his outrageous behaviour at court, and finally his ill-considered dispatch of these Egyptian envoys, any support for Ahmad Tegüder finally evaporated, and he was run to ground and executed in the same manner as he had murdered his brother, the breaking of his spine.

The instability that Ahmad had spawned continued into the reign of Arghun, and as the Ilkhanate settled into its borders and grew into its institutions, the longer-term rivalries began to establish themselves, particularly those between the Mongol elite, the noyat, and the new multi-ethnic, multicultural Ilkhanid political elite. Arghun oversaw one of the early show-downs between these groups when he charged his new Jewish prime-minister, Sa’d al-Dawla (1240–91), a loquacious Mongolian and Turkish speaker, with rooting out corruption in Baghdad. The minister performed an admirable job and deposed the leading noyat brothers, Buqa and Aruq, who many considered
untouchable and even a threat to the king himself. Sa’d al-Dawla’s success followed him into the economic sphere, but his triumph sowed his downfall as his growing power allowed him to choose his own team and for that he used his own community and family. Under the Ilkhans, Iran’s minorities had been enjoying a period of liberation and unprecedented opportunity, and even the usual rivalries between Sunnis and Shi’is and the various Sunni schools all enjoyed a respite. Sa’d al-Dawla’s nepotism did not go unnoticed, so much so that people joked that the Jew had taken control of the government. “Behold . . . there is a Jew governor and a general director on the throne of the House of Abbas. Observe how Islam has been brought low.”35 The jokes fuelled a whispering campaign of satirical tracts, libellous stories, and religious hatred which slowly undermined his government’s credibility and, after Arghun’s death, sparked a bloody pogrom led by the amir Taghachar, whose “flashing falchion on their flesh did feed” after he enticed the minister to dinner and his own brutal death.36

Arghun’s appointment of Sa’d al-Dawla is one of the reasons that he earned a reputation for having been anti-Muslim, a charge without any basis. In fact, Arghun was very sympathetic to Islam and the Sufi poet ‘Ala al-Dawla Simnani (1261–1336) even suggests that the shah came very close to converting on at least one occasion. Indeed, the highly respected and influential Sunni theologian and religious leader ‘Abdallah Baydawi dedicated his commentary on the Qur’an to the Ilkhan, Arghun, in the expectation that the work would help the king understand and communicate with his Muslim subjects. It would also have provided Baydawi a gateway into the royal court in order to deliver lectures and lessons on the orthodox message that he preached to the Muslim subjects of the Ilkhanate.37 While other members of the old and established Simnani family were serving in the Ilkhanid bureaucracy, ‘Ala al-Dawla Simnani served as Arghun’s nadim or boon companion, charged with keeping the king company and keeping him safe while he relaxed and caroused. Arghun was loath to lose such a valued intimate, and when the young poet pleaded to leave the king’s service to enter a Sufi hospice and abandon his life of indulgence and royal service, Arghun initially refused. Simnani’s account of their relationship recalls their intimacy and Arghun’s interest and attraction to Islam and also makes it clear that the Ilkhan harboured no ill-will towards his Muslim subjects.38

If Arghun does not deserve his infamy, his successor, Gaykhatu, certainly does. Gaykhatu is known for two things only, neither of which impart honour or credit. His lust for young flesh, either male or female, was insatiable, for “in his day, there was not a beauty who was not called upon to satisfy him. . . . His excesses were such that there was no sign of kingly virtue in him.” He also embarked upon a reckless financial experiment in the hope of meeting his growing expenses for his costly indulgences.39 Gaykhatu oversaw the introduction of paper money (cha’o) in Iran. Admittedly he was encouraged by the recently arrived envoy from Qubilai Qa’an, Bolad Aqa Chingsang (c.1240–1313), who regaled him with the success of the venture in Yuan China, where the tightly controlled currency reaped rich rewards for the court. However, Tabriz was not Khanbaliiq (Daidu), and the merchants of Iran were not so adventurous as the notables of China’s cities. The introduction of the cha’o in 1294 was a disastrous failure, and despite Gaykhatu’s heavy-handed enforcement, the system was met with almost complete non-compliance. Despite the threat of the death sentence for the continued use of metal currencies, the experiment was abandoned after two months as economic chaos devastated the markets. The situation
was compounded by the appearance of yut, a livestock disease which depleted stocks throughout the country. The cha’o’s only positive legacy is that it is the first recorded incident of block printing outside of China. Marco Polo, who was in Tabriz at the time, makes no mention of the introduction of this Iranian paper currency despite his enthusiasm for the system in China. The sharp economic decline which followed Gaykhatu’s financial adventure opened Iran up for revolutionary change.

THE GOLDEN AGE

It was possibly in sharp reaction to Gaykhatu that Ghazan and his adoption of Islam were so readily accepted. Baidu’s brief reign was marked by violent conflict, and for the first time religion seemed to play a role. Baidu advanced the course of Christians, whereas the amir Nawruz, son of the legendary Arghun Aqa, made his decisive support conditional on Ghazan’s adoption of Islam. Taghachar, Sa’d al-Dawla’s killer, came to Ghazan’s aid, and Baidu was soon defeated. Because of the conditional nature of Nawruz Noyan’s support for Ghazan, questions have always been raised as to the sincerity of Ghazan’s conversion to Islam. Such questions miss the point about Ghazan’s reign. Unlike Ahmad Tegüder, Ghazan was trained in the strictures of Islam. His conversion was overseen and conducted by the leading ulema of the time. He proclaimed his commitment to Islam and made Sunni Islam the official religion of the land. But he was a pragmatist and he was a politician, and his main concern was with uniting his country and establishing himself as king of all Iran, shah of both Turk and Tajik (Turco-Mongols and Persians), commander in chief, guardian of Iran’s borders, and sovereign of all his subjects. In recognition of this role he adopted the religion of the majority of his people and vowed to protect them physically and spiritually. Ghazan’s adoption of Islam represented his recognition of his duty to Iran and the Iranian people and his pledge to be the king of both Turk and Tajik. Not only were most of his indigenous subjects Muslims, but growing numbers of his Turkish and Mongol troops were also Muslims. Islam spread from the grassroots, and Ghazan’s conversion was a recognition of this. Hülegü led his troops into Iran in the 1250s; those men had settled, taken wives, and formed families, and by 1295, so much integration had taken place that the traditional social and racial stratification and divisions had evolved and transformed the urban landscape in particular. Pur Baha’s Mongol Ode presents the street language of Tabriz that re-creates a society in transition but asserts the practicality of Iranian life, resisting the lure of “credit for cash.” In Ghazan’s Tabriz, beggars were as likely to be impoverished Mongols as Persians, and the court decisions went against notable Muslims as often as against Turkic power brokers. Ethnicity did not define power. The royal family remained ethnic Mongols, but the Ilkhanid establishment seethed in ethnic, religious, family, and financial rivalries.

Ghazan’s conversion to Islam should in no way be seen as a repudiation of either his Mongol heritage or his recognition of the Qa’an in Khanbaliq. Relations between the two wings of the Toluid Empire were closer economically, culturally, and politically under Ghazan than at any other time during the Ilkhanid period. The close personal relations between Ghazan’s prime minister, Rashid al-Din, and the ambassador from the Yuan court, Bolad Chingsang, cemented this close union, and the Persian minister’s unprecedented access to hitherto secret and highly restricted documents from the Mongol archives and courts, subsequently revealed in Rashid
al-Din’s universal history, was the fruit of this friendship. In fact Rashid al-Din had
ambitions to initiate a cultural fusion of Chinese intellectual achievements and
Islamic wisdom, utilising such erudite giants of scientific learning and theosophy as
Safi al-Din, Siwse, and Asutai, the son of Isa Kelemechi, in the same way as Harun
al-Rashid oversaw the assimilation of Hellenistic and Islamic learning during the
Abbasid’s golden age. His friend and colleague Bolad Chingsang opened the conduit
to the Hanlin academy and the Medical Bureau in Khanbaliq, enabling access to
the Great Yuan Materia Medica and the Mishujian (Imperial Library Directorate).41

The so-called Golden Age of the Ilkhanate was named by historians reflecting wist-
fully on the past from a present which deprived them of so much that had been plen-
tiful and taken for granted such a short time before. “In that time of [those Il-Khan] K-
kings, Iran was tranquil and free from the aggression of intruders, especially in the
days of the Sultanate of Ghazan Khan, Öljéitü Khodabanda and Abu Sa’id Bahadar
Khan.”42 It was an age he even compared to an earthly paradise, “admirable and lux-
uriantly cheerful like the Garden of Paradise, tranquil and secure like the sanctuary
of the Ka’ba,”43 a view echoed by a Jalayirid historian (c.1360), Abu Bakr al-Quṭb
al-Ahari, who saw the turn of the century during Ghazan’s reign as a time of peace
and justice. “During that time the whole of Iran was graced by the justice of the King
of Islam, who held back the oppressor’s hand from (harming) the oppressed,” and this
prosperity continued under the rule of his brother, Öljéitü Khodabanda.44 “The country
(was) flourishing and the army well organised” but reached its apogee in the time of
Abu Sa’id, “The time of his government was the best period of the domination of the
Mongols.”45 In fact, the Chinggisid Empire achieved a brief period of unity during this
time due in part to the efforts of Ghazan, though he did not live to witness the official
though short-lived union. Öljéitü sent his ambassador, Buscarello de Ghizolfi, to the
courts of Europe to boast of the renewed unity of the Chinggisid khans.46

GHAZAN KHAN

Shaykh Zahid Gilani (d.1301), Sufi master of Safi al-Din Ardibili (1252–1334), the
eponymous founder of the Safavid dynasty, established close connections with the
new Ilkhan as early as 1296 and ensured that those relations blossomed. Shaykh
Sadr al-Din Ibrahim al-Hammuya officiated at Ghazan’s conversion ceremony
earlier still in 1295, and Ghazan observed the Ramadan fast immediately afterwards
to demonstrate his commitment to Islam. As Ghazan’s example as a devoted con-
vert to Islam was taken up by his associates and military commanders, the ulema
were once again welcomed into the royal courts of the Iranian kings and Mongol
headdress disappeared in favour of the turban.47

The titles that the new king awarded himself reflected his status and confidence,
and Ghazan assumed the leadership of this major western province of the Mongol
Empire, which dominated the region, but also the leadership of the Islamic world,
directly challenging the Mamluks, who he regarded as upstart bastards without lin-
eage or ancestry. His own royal pedigree was indisputable, and few believed that
Chinggis Khan had not been divinely ordained. As a Muslim he alone had the farr
and the prestige to dominate the Islamic world.

Ghazan’s reforms (1295–1304) were designed to make the government more
accountable and to curb the power of the Mongol noyat. He appointed the
polymath Rashid al-Din to implement his sweeping re-structuring of the government and economy which had suffered so much over the previous decade. Taxation was regulated and its collection formalised. Weights and measures and the bazaar were all standardised and overseers appointed. Control over highways and caravanserais was tightened, and the yam system was severely curtailed to ensure that the widespread abuses of the past were minimised and only identifiable officials on specified government projects were allowed to make use of this institution, which had caused local people who had been charged with the yam’s financial burden such distress. The barat was abolished, a system whereby high-handed officials, the powerful, or just those brazen enough and armed would issue government cheques for services or goods provided on demand, though payment was rarely realised. Subsidies were granted for the cultivation of fallow land, something unprecedented for a nomadic ruler. Forced, involuntary prostitution was prohibited, and while alcohol was allowed, public drunkenness was punishable. Citizens had the right to appeal to the courts, both the religious and the secular courts were able to give independent rulings, and their decisions often favoured native Persians over powerful Mongols. Property laws were reformed and institutions strengthened. While shari’a law was revived and greatly increased in its reach, the yasa continued to hold sway, for which Ghazan earned himself rebuke and accusations of insincerity. Tabriz and later Sultaniyya became centres of learning and enterprise.

Öljeitü’s construction of Sultaniyya, a new capital between Qazvin and Tabriz started by his father, Arghun, was a particularly eloquent monument to Ilkhanid sophistication and appreciation of scholarship and learning. He built magnificent halls and audience chambers, many open to the public, who were invited to attend the seminars and scholarly debates, where doctors of medicine and of philosophy and artists and artisans, agriculturists and botanists, veterinarians and physicians would all be on hand to exchange expertise and dispense knowledge and learning. The links with Khanbaliq established by Rashid al-Din, including medicine and agriculture and botany, would have contributed to the intellectual wealth of the city. Rashid al-Din recounts in the Tanksuq-nama that he had translated a book on “medicines from herbs, minerals, trees, animals, fish.” In the same book which explores so much learning and scientific knowledge from China, he admits to his ambition of replicating the achievements of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (d. 809), who oversaw the translation of so much Greek learning into Arabic.

The intellectual factories of Tabriz had soon absorbed the scholarly communities of Maragha, and Öljeitü had constructed his vision of cultural synthesis in Sultaniyya. Halls and chambers accommodating scholars, thinkers, and scientists were open to ordinary people to witness their discourse and exchange. The pleasures of the debate had long been cherished by the Chinggisids, and now they shared and assimilated their intellectual jousting with their Persian subjects, who had their own tradition of debates.

A marked contrast with the earlier period of Ilkhanid rule was not just the revival of religion and Islam in particular, but the re-awakening of religious strife. Ghazan’s assumption of the throne allowed many to vent their long-held animosities and resentments, and there followed a period of vicious reprisals against Christians, Jews, and other groups who had been enjoying a prolonged period of liberalty and freedom. Though Ghazan quickly reacted against and halted this more obvious
religious bigotry, he failed to foresee the revival of the rivalry and animosity between Sunni schools, which soon revealed itself and grew as the Sunni establishment began to strengthen their traditional positions and teachings. Ghazan had taken on the power of appointing qadis (Islamic judges), a position of considerable reach and influence, and his court and the courts of his successors and family members became centres of intrigue and manipulation.

The appearance of bickering and intriguing mullahs and imams filling the corridors of power was resented by the traditionalist noyat. The old guard, already uneasy with the emerging Mongol Iranians and Persian “Mongols,” found this new assertive addition to the mix disquieting. During a staged debate, so beloved of the Chinggisids, an argument between a Hanafi cleric and ‘Abd al-Malik of Maragha, a Shafi’i and chief judge with wide jurisdiction over the ulema, descended into ill-concealed hatred, with both parties deliberately misreading their texts and misquoting the hadith while trading insults and threats. Öljeitü and his amirs observed this venomous exchange with increasing distaste until Qutlugh-Shah Noyan was driven to demand why the Mongols had abandoned the faith of their ancestors for this “Arab religion,” which would seem to endorse marriage between a man and his daughters, mother, and sister, and which was divided into so many squabbling sects. Apart from revealing a serious though not unsurprising misunderstanding of Islamic practice, this exchange also revealed the wider impact that Ghazan’s conversion had had on the court. The ulema were once again an important presence, but they had returned without having solved the theological disputes that had poisoned their history over the centuries. Anti-Islamic sentiment swept through the royal courts as wholly erroneous stories of Muslim practices spread through word of mouth, reaching a peak during a particularly violent thunderstorm where Öljeitü witnessed the death from lightning of some of his fellow revellers. So shocked was the Sultan that he re-introduced shamanist practices to ward off evil spirits, and bakhshi (Buddhist monks) were permitted once again at court. Öljeitü reacted to the bickering amongst the Sunni clerics and the exasperation of his Mongol commanders to this rivalry by adopting Shi’ism, which appeared to him to present a more unified and coherent face.

Abu Sa’id returned to more mainstream Sunnism under the influence of his military commander, chief of staff, and initially the real power behind the throne of the boy-king who was proclaimed king in 1316 after the death of his father, Öljeitü. Choban Noyan was a devout Muslim who established a secure power base within the Ilkhanate. He and his children held the throne in their grip, a situation which initially worked in Abu Sa’id’s favour. Choban was in a position to challenge the amirs who had long resisted the rising influence of the Ilkhanid bureaucracy, whose long multi-ethnic tentacles increasingly controlled the institutions of state and the finances of the country. The tension between the state and the noyat reflected the divisions in the wider Mongol Empire, where the traditionalist, mainly Mongol elites resented their dwindling power and influence, especially in the Toluid lands of Yuan China and Ilkhanid Iran. Rashid al-Din became a victim of those tensions, and his execution in 1318 was almost a side-show in the cascade of events, conspiracies, and baseless accusations of those early years of the boy-king’s reign. However, Abu Sa’id’s reluctance to prevent Rashid al-Din’s murder and Choban’s refusal to become involved in the contrived conflict between the two ministers, Rashid al-Din...
and Taj al-Din 'Ali Shah, was a stain on both men's reputations. So too was their willingness to employ the incompetent and corrupt 'Ali Shah until his death of natural causes a few years later.

Amir Choban confronted the mutinous noyat and disgruntled amirs such as Qorumshi and Irenjin of the Kereit but achieved a Pyrrhic victory, which left an undercurrent of ill-feeling that Abu Sa'id was quick to exploit to his own advantage. If the amir had served the king loyally though paternalistically, the same could not be said of his sons. Choban's sons were not woven from the same moral cloth as their father. Choban's second son, Timurtash, one-time governor of Rum, had already been pardoned once for his contacts with the Mamluks, and he eventually fled to Egypt where, after alienating his hosts, he was executed (1328) on the request of the Ilkhan.

Dimashq, Choban's eldest, began to take full advantage of the youth of the king and the power of his office. For Mustawfi, “in the land of Iran, he was amir and vizier; in fact, Dimashq was the shah.” When Dimashq was discovered dillydallying with ladies of the Ilkhan's harem, his fate was sealed, and an assassin, Khwaja Lu'lu, was dispatched to eradicate the wayward son. However, Abu Sa'id did not feel confident simply to have the errant noble executed. Thus, he first fabricated a complicated conspiracy to subvert the throne in which Dimashq was intimately implicated. The “masses” were encouraged to rally to their king's support, and it was only then that the Ilkhan moved. Abu Sa'id exploited the ill-feeling and sometime hatred murmuring beneath the surface of the noyat and the Ilkhanid administration, all resentful of the over-bearing presence of the Chobanid family. The Amir fled the court and sought sanctuary in Herat, where the powerful Kart ruler granted him haven and then proceeded to oblige the young Shah, Abu Sa'id, and in 1327 executed Amir Choban.

One reason for the strained relations between the king and his chief of staff was the demand that Choban should bless not only the marriage of his daughter, Baghdad Khatun, to the Ilkhan but also ensure that his daughter first divorce her own husband, the influential and well-respected amir Shaykh Hasan-i-Bozorg (Big Hasan). Abu Sa'id, with a young man's blind passion, had fallen completely in love with the lady, and calling on his rights under the yasa to be entitled to any woman he so chose, he demanded her hand in marriage.

Baghdad Khatun seems to have been a highly intelligent and coldly calculating young woman, who appreciated the potential of marriage to the Ilkhan, despite the fact that he had killed a brother and her father, exiled another brother, and also humiliated her husband for whom she continued to harbour warm feelings. She embraced marriage to Abu Sa'id and built up her own power base within the Ilkhanate, and she was regarded with respect and affection by the chroniclers of those tumultuous times. When, however, her royal husband's glances and then affections strayed and embraced the favours of her young niece, the lady Dilshad (Happy-Heart), her poisonous jealousy led her, too, astray. In collusion with her ex-husband, Hasan-i-Bozorg, she was accused of poisoning the Ilkhan Abu Sa'id, who subsequently died (1335) without issue, and with him the line of Hülegü and the Ilkhanate.

ENDGAME

Arpa Ke'ün (d.1336), a claimant to the Ilkhanid throne through the youngest Toluid brother, Ariq Böke, was an able army commander respected for his honesty, his
adherence to the law, and his belief in traditional values. What Arpa Ke’ün possessed in guileless honesty and determination to root out corruption and punish the wicked, he lacked in political and strategic cunning. He seized and executed the popular Baghdad Khatun and attacked those accused of corruption without consideration for the political repercussions. Within a short time, the support and enthusiasm with which his enthronement was greeted had evaporated, and his liberal distribution of death warrants and assassination squads ensured his own early demise. Mustawfi, no fan of the rude soldier-king, summarised his reign: “the triumph of his affairs was to be seen in the disruption of other’s affairs.”

With Arpa Ke’ün’s death in 1336, Iran collapsed into a confusion of vying claimants to the throne, including the forces grouped around Big Shaykh Hasan and the Jalayirids based in Baghdad, opposed by the Chobanid family centred in Tabriz, the Karts in Khurasan, the Muzaffarids of Shiraz and former loyal servants of the Ilkhanid regime, the Sarbadars in Nishapur, the former Ilkhanid loyalist Injuids in the south, and the Kurdish Shabankara, and along with these disparate groups a plethora of claimants to the elusive Ilkhanid throne. The one figure who does survive this very confusing and bloody period with his integrity and reputation intact is Shaykh Hasan’s son, Shaykh Uways (r. 1356–74). By 1360 he had managed to take control of Tabriz, the southern Caucasus, as well as much of western Iran, and he restored some kind of stability before the advent of Timur.

One of Chinggis Khan’s greatest achievements, remarkable especially in Muslim Iran, is that he became a source of legitimacy, replacing the Caliphate and religious figures in that role. In fact, it was not until the appearance of the Safavid shahs in 1501 that links to the Chinggisids were replaced by a link to the Shi‘i Imam, Sadiq Ja‘far. The Muslim Turco-Mongol dynasty of the Aqqoyunlu abolished the yasa in their final years but still sought legitimacy from their Chinggisid roots.

The Mongols never left Iran. They integrated and were absorbed. The Ilkhanate is a testament to their legacy and the multi-cultural assimilated state they inspired and created with the many peoples who joined Hülegü’s original enterprise.

NOTES

1 Lane 2013.
3 It is not known when, why, or by whom the so-called “Tomb Tower of Hülegü’s Mother” was built, nor is it known when, why, or by whom the inscription and “name” of the tomb tower were added. However, Andre Godard dates it to 593/1196–97. Godard 1936, 138–143.
4 Qazvini 1983, 793.
5 Qazvini (Unpublished), 5–6.
6 Qazvini (Unpublished), 13.
7 Qazvini (Unpublished), 14.
8 Qazvini 2011, 164.
9 Lane 1999.
11 Lane 2018b, 50.
12 Ibn Tabataba 1947, 43.
13 Dissimilation, allowed in Shi‘i theology under duress or when one’s life is considered in danger.
— The Ilkhanate —

18 Lane 2018b, 54.
19 Biran 2016.
20 Biran 2018.
21 Saliba 2006; Melville 1997.
22 Lane 2018b, 55 [34].
23 Atabeg Ahmad 1962, 316; Lane 2012–13.
24 Lane 2018, 48 [22].
25 Lane 2013.
26 Krawulsky 2011, 128.
27 RDRM, 1048.
28 Bar Hebraeus 1985, 281.
29 In fact, their first major military defeat was against the Vietnamese circa 1258; see Lane 2011.
30 Jackson 2017.
31 These terms are more or less interchangeable, being of Persian, Turkish, and Mongolian origin.
32 Lane 2003.
33 Ward 1983, II, 204; Lane 2018b.
34 Lane 2018b.
35 Bar Hebraeus 2003, 490.
36 Vassaf 1967, 247; Browne 1920, III, 35–36.
37 Baydawi, 34.
38 Lane 2003, 253; DeWeese 2014, 35–76.
39 Qazvini 1983, 349.
40 Pur Baha in Minorsky 1956, 286, line 13.
41 My thanks to Yoichi Isanhaya and his presentation in Jerusalem, November 2017 at the HUJ. Jackson 2018, 230.
42 Amuli 2014, 178.
43 Amuli 2014, 178.
45 al-Ahari 1954, 51.
46 Boyle 1968, 399.
50 Lane 2016.
51 Sawma 1928.
52 Qashani 1969, 98.
53 Hope 2016; Melville 1999.
55 A powerful Persian dynasty (1245–1381) whose founder’s son, Shams al-Din, had welcomed Hülegü to Iran.
57 Qazvini (unpublished), 12.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Boyle, John A., ed. (1968) *CHI5*.


HWC, See List of Abbreviations.


RDRM, See List of Abbreviations.


