

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Genghiz Khan

The Destructions of Genghiz Khan (1219-1222 CE)

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It was the century when three powerful traditions-Islamic, Medieval Christian and Mongol-collided. The aftermath of this collision transformed all three traditions in ways that were profound and basic. The cataclysm of the Mongols was a global event, which left its indelible mark upon human history. It destroyed ancient dynasties, remade human races and fundamentally changed the way people approached religion and culture. The impact of the Mongols is to be felt even in the geopolitics of the world today.

To view the events of the 13th century from a Muslim perspective, one must look at the geopolitical situation of Eurasia in the year 1200. To a Muslim living around the turn of that century, the prospects for Islam could not be better. Salahuddin Ayyubi had thrown off the yoke of the Crusaders and had liberated Jerusalem (1187). Muhammed Ghori had conquered Delhi (1191) and had established the Delhi Sultanate. The Al Muhaddithin had defeated the Christian Crusaders at the Battle of Alarcos (1196) and retained Muslim rule in Spain. The Fatimid schism in Egypt had ended. Imam Ghazzali's dialectic had overcome the challenge to orthodox (Sunni) Islam both from the Fatimid Gnostics and the philosopher Agnostics. Islam was taking root in Hindustan and had established a foothold in the Indonesian Islands.

Yet, in the midst of these triumphs, dark clouds were gathering on the distant horizon. Indeed, within a generation after 1200, the Muslim world came close to physical extinction. Never have the Muslims faced annihilation as they did during the 13th century. And never in Muslim history has Islam triumphed in its darkest hour as it did in the 13th century.

Between the years 1200-1220, three rulers of vastly different capabilities dominated the geopolitics of Central Asia: Caliph Al Nasir of Baghdad, Sultan Alauddin Muhammed Shah of Khwarazm and Timujen (later known as Genghiz Khan) of Mongolia.

Sultan Alauddin ascended the throne of Khwarazm in the year 1200. Ambitious, egotistical and haughty, he was gifted with three able sons and soon consolidated his empire from the Amu Darya in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. The lush and fertile valley of Farghana with its legendary cities of Samarqand and Bukhara were part of his domain. His successes evoked a jealous response in Baghdad from Caliph Al Nasir (1180-1225). Relations between the two went from bad to worse. Alauddin marched on Baghdad (1205) with the intent of replacing the caliph. As it sometimes happens at critical

moments in history, Caliph Al Nasir was saved by the vagaries of nature. A powerful winter storm dumped enormous amounts of snow in the mountains of southwest Persia and Alaaddin had to retire to Khorasan without a victory. Al Nasir did not forgive the shah for this intrusion and sent word to Genghiz Khan in far-away Mongolia inviting him to teach Sultan Alaaddin a lesson. Historians record that a messenger's head was shaved, the message tattooed onto his shaven head, the hair allowed to grow back and the messenger sent through the territories of the Shah to Genghiz Khan. The latter, however, did not respond since he was busy with campaigns to the east in China.

Timujin, born in the year 1162 into a Mongol tribe, had to struggle in his early years to retain the leadership of his clan. By the year 1206, he had succeeded in unifying the Mongol tribes and had taken the title Genghiz Khan. Successful raids into northern China followed and the northern Chin Empire was brought under his sway by the year 1215. From the Chinese, Genghiz acquired the latest technology of the day in tunnel engineering, siege engines, defensive silk armor and most important, gunpowder.

Relations between Genghiz Khan and Alaaddin were at first friendly, although skirmishes had taken place in Sinkiang between the forces of the two empires over succession issues of the local princes. However, a fateful turn of events took place in 1218. Genghiz bought stock in the goods of three Khiva merchants and with them sent Mongol representatives to obtain Khorasani products. Nasiruddin, the governor of the frontier province Otrar, suspected that the Mongols were spies and asked the permission of Alaaddin to execute them. The permission was granted and the merchants were slain. Furious, Genghiz sent an ambassador to Nasiruddin and demanded retribution. With the haughtiness and self-delusion that has so often characterized Muslim interfaces with other civilizations, Nasiruddin put the envoy to death. This was an insult that Genghiz Khan could not tolerate. The drums of war were beaten.

Genghiz gathered the Mongol tribes and preparations for war began. Great conquerors pay as much attention to the detailed preparations for war as to the strategies of war itself. Men, horses and supplies were carefully planned and the great mountains of Central Asia were successfully crossed in the winter of 1218-1219. Genghiz was a general par excellence. The first skirmish between Alaaddin and the Mongols took place at Otrar on the Amu Darya. The outcome was indecisive. But the Sultan, in his characteristic haughtiness, declared victory, distributed presents to his troops and retired towards Samarqand.

It was at this historic moment that Alaaddin Muhammed made a strategic military blunder. He divided up his armies into two main columns and sent smaller contingents to fortify the cities in the Farghana Valley. He thought that the Mongols would withdraw after looting border areas and thus chose a defensive strategy to protect his cities. This gave Genghiz the initiative to focus overwhelming military power at any given geographical point without the risk of facing the full might of the Shah's forces.

The contrast between Genghiz Khan and Alaaddin Muhammed was as marked as it ever was between two generals who have squared off against each other. Genghiz was a warrior, cruel, merciless, relentless, master of deception but who led his armies with the skill becoming of a great conqueror. Alaaddin, by contrast was lacking in skills both of tactics and strategy and was a coward who fled with his own men without giving battle. Genghiz always gathered intelligence about his adversaries before combat. Alaaddin knew nothing of his mortal enemy but provoked him into war. This was a civilizational encounter wherein the Mongols had the advantage of technology, skills, intelligence, tactics and leadership. The Sultan, by contrast, demonstrated a fatalistic self-delusion and knew nothing of the technologies, skills, tactics, motivation or capabilities of his enemies.

Genghiz followed up his assault on one city after another. In the year 1219 the cities of Otrar, Jhand, Khokand, Bukhara, Samarqand and Signac fell one after the other. In each city the pattern was similar. Men, women and children were slaughtered except those needed as slaves for work during the military campaigns. Agricultural land was turned into grazing ground for Mongol horses and the cities were razed to the ground.

Dams were destroyed, libraries burned, mosques demolished and learned men tortured to death. Shah Alauddin Muhammed fled before the Mongols and was hunted from city to city. During the year 1220, Balkh, Nishapur, Ghazna as well as the provinces of Kuchan, Isfahan and Damgan fell. The Shah finally escaped to an island in the Caspian Sea where he died a pauper, leaving a legacy of cowardice rarely matched in Islamic history.

The Mongol armies split up and rampaged through central and western Persia, Afghanistan and northwest India. Only one valiant prince, Jalaluddin, had the backbone to stand up to the marauding invaders. Jalaluddin, the third son of the Shah, fought the Mongols at every turn and on one occasion in 1220, inflicted a defeat upon a Mongol division in Afghanistan. Pressed further by the Mongols, the Prince retreated eastward and took a stand by the Indus River near Attock, located in modern Pakistan. With the great river to his back and a high ridge to his left, Jalaluddin charged like a lion towards the Mongol center where Genghiz Khan was stationed. He succeeded in reaching the spot. But man plans and God disposes. Despite the most well thought-out human plans, the outcome of great wars is a moment of Divine intercession. As providence would have it, Genghiz had dismounted his horse at that moment and had gone off to attend to other matters. Genghiz escaped and the wheels of history turned. Jalaluddin's bodyguard was cut to pieces. Desperate, the undaunted prince plunged his horse from a ridge into the Indus and as he swam the great river towards Hindustan, Genghiz is said to have exclaimed: "Proud should be a mother who bore such a son!"

By 1222, when Genghiz finally retreated towards Mongolia, he had destroyed what are today the states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Iran, Afghanistan and western Pakistan. The great cities of Samarqand, Bukhara, Marv, Herat, Ghazna, Kabul and Nishapur were razed to the ground. In the words of Ibn Kathir, not even one hundredth of the population of the area survived. This was only the beginning. After the death of Genghiz Khan, the Mongols continued their advance into west Asia and central Europe, destroying whatever lay before them and reshaping the destinies of Asia and Europe alike.

Thus it was that in the first two decades of the 13th century, the opening gambit of the great geopolitical game between the worlds of Islam, Medieval Christianity and the Mongols was played and the stage was set for the global struggles that were to follow in the latter part of the century.

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