

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Ghazan the Great

The Conversion of the Mongols

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The Mamluke victory at the Battle of Ayn Jalut stopped the Mongol advance and ushered in a new struggle between Christianity and Islam to convert the conquering Mongols. In the last third of the 13th century, the geopolitics of Eurasia was dominated by this struggle.

The Christians played the initial gambit in this geopolitical chess game and sent missionaries to the Mongol rulers to convert them (1245-1270). Some of this zeal was motivated by the loss of Jerusalem to Salahuddin (1187) and the inability of the Crusaders to recapture Palestine. In this endeavor, the Christians used other methods as well as military pressure on the Muslims. Christian wives were offered to the heathen Mongols to gain favor. Dokuz Khatun, the chief wife of Hulagu, was a Christian. Mary, a daughter of Emperor Paleologus, was sent as a bride to Hulagu Khan. Hulagu died (1265) before Mary arrived at the Mongol court, so she married his son Abaga (1265-1281).

The first break in this galactic struggle between Christianity and Islam for the soul of the Mongol came with the conversion of Baraka Khan. It is said that Baraka Khan, a grandson of Gengiz Khan, met a group of Muslim merchants, while hunting near the ancient city of Bukhara. So impressed was he with the sincerity and piety of the merchants that Baraka enrolled in a seminary near Samarkand and received instructions from a Shaikh in tasawwuf. The love of God illuminated his heart and Baraka Khan embraced Islam in 1254.

Baraka was a prince of the Golden Horde Khanate of Russia. When he assumed the leadership of the Golden Horde in 1256, Baraka Khan reached out to the Muslim Mamlukes of Egypt for friendship and trade. This infuriated Abaga, the Shamanist IlKhan of Persia, who was an avowed enemy of Islam. Conflict ensued. At the Battle of Kur in Georgia, Abaga prevailed over the Russian forces of Baraka Khan and forced them to withdraw. But the real military challenge to Abaga came from Egypt. Baybars, Sultan of Egypt, followed up his victory at Ayn Jalut (1262) with a campaign against the invading Armenians and Crusaders. Syria was cleared of the Crusaders and Armenia was forced to surrender several cities in northern Iraq. Baybars pursued his enemies and met up with the Mongols at Abulistin in 1277. A fierce battle ensued. Baybar's army was animated with faith and sought the recovery of the Muslim heartland. The Mongols were defeated and half of their army was decimated. Baybars died in

Damascus the following year. His death touched off a brief struggle for succession in Cairo. Abaga, sensing an opportunity, marched against the Egyptians but was soundly defeated at the Battle of Hims (1281).

Undeterred by his losses, Abaga sought an alliance with Christian powers for a joint attack on the Egyptians. However, he died in 1284 and his brother Tagadur ascended the throne of the Il-Khans. Although the Christians had baptized him under the name Nicolas, Tagadur accepted Islam and changed his name to Ahmed. Prince Ahmed sought friendly relations with the Mamlukes of Egypt, which were reciprocated. However, the triangular struggle between the Mongols, the Christians and the Muslims was not over yet. Many in his army were unhappy with Ahmed for his friendliness towards the Muslims. He was dethroned and Arghun, the son of Abaga was made the ruler.

Arghun, like his father Abaga, was a bitter enemy of Islam and made several proposals to Christian kings for a joint attack on the Muslims. But before an attack could be mounted, Acre the last stronghold of the Crusaders in Palestine, fell to the Mamlukes (1289). With its fall the fate of the Crusaders in west Asia was sealed. Arghun died in 1291 and a struggle for succession followed.

In 1295 Ghazan Khan ascended the throne of the Il-Khans and proclaimed himself a Muslim monarch. With his conversion, Islam won the battle for the soul of the Mongols. This victory was decisive. From now on Asia would belong to Islam. Christianity was to be relegated to the west.

The accession of Ghazan did not bring to an end the rivalry between the Mamlukes and the Il-Khans. A struggle ensued for the control of the Syrian highlands. Ghazan briefly occupied Damascus but this time the occupation was done in the name of the Qur'an. Ultimately however, the Mamlukes prevailed at the Battle of Marju-as-Suffar (1301). Syria remained closely tied to Egypt rather than to Persia. Ghazan's armies retreated east of the Tigris.

Ghazan is known in history as the first Great Mongol Khan who attempted to introduce administrative reforms in his empire and to rebuild Persia, Iraq and Central Asia after the devastations of the previous century. A man of piety and good sense, he reduced taxation, reformed the revenue system, helped the peasantry, founded a postal system, organized the administration of justice and punished the Mongol bandits who had roamed the countryside since the days of Genghiz Khan. The Il-Khani era, which began on March 14, 1302, is recognized as a landmark in the benevolent administration of Persia and the Central Asian republics.

Ghazan made Tabriz his capital and adorned it with some of the finest buildings of the era. Utilizing the legacy of Pre-Genghiz artisans, he built a magnificent *jamia masjid*, founded several universities and invited many of the scholars of the age to teach there. He built roads, hospitals and an astronomical observatory, which was one of the finest in the world. Stipends were offered for advanced studies and the study of Farsi and Arabic was encouraged. Geometry, art, astronomy, architecture and Farsi literature thrived. The Persian highlands once again became a center for Islamic learning.

Ghazan's conversion provides a benchmark in the history of the Muslim peoples. With the conversion of Ghazan and the consolidation of his power in Persia, the geographical divide between the Mediterranean world and Central Asia was reestablished at the Euphrates River, just as it was at the time of Caliphs Amin and Mamun. For 500 years prior to the Mongol invasions, the Arabic language had dominated Islamic learning. The scholars in far-away Farghana as well as Andalus wrote in Arabic. The 75 years between Genghiz and Ghazan (1218-1295) was a period of trial during which the fate of the Muslim world hung in the balance. The fall of Baghdad (1258) was the mid-point of this period of trial. With the conversion of Ghazan, a new era dawned and the initiative passed on to the Farsi-speaking

peoples. The Mongol invasions had exterminated the urban populations of Central Asia and Persia, including the Arabic-speaking elite. Rural sheikhs who survived the slaughter were more at home with Farsi.

After the 14th century, Farsi became the lingua franca for the Muslims of Asia even while Arabic remained the language of prayer and the sacred scriptures. Sufi masters such as Rumi, poets such Sa'adi, Hafiz, Jami and modern writers such as Muhammed Iqbal wrote in Persian. The Ottomans, Safavids and the Moghuls as well as lesser dynasties in the Indian Deccan used Farsi as their court language. Sufi thought profoundly influenced the Farsi language as well as modern languages such as Turkish, Urdu, Pushtu and Malay. These observations illustrate a major difference in the historical experience of the Muslims of non-Arab Asia as compared to that of the Arab heartland. Whereas the former is more "spiritual", the latter emphasize *Fiqh* and Shariah. The differences in the historical experience of Arabs and non-Arabs might explain some of the misunderstandings that arise when Muslims from different parts of the world interact in a melting pot like America.

Islam had conquered the conquerors. The Mongols, along with their cousins the Turks and the Tatars, became the champions of Islam in the succeeding centuries and carried it to India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Africa. But this Islam was different in its approach to the transcendent from the Islam of the classical Islamic era. It was more spiritual and less ritualistic, more intuitive and less empirical and it arrived in the new lands with the great Sufi shaykhs of the era.

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