

# History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

## The Battle of Ayn Jalut

**Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD**

Not since the Battle of Badr had the Islamic world stood face to face with extinction as it did at the Battle of Ayn Jalut. Just as the Prophet had triumphed at Badr 600 years earlier, the Mamlukes triumphed over the combined armies of the Mongols, the Crusaders and the Armenians at the Battle of Ayn Jalut. The Muslim world survived by a margin that was as small as any allowed by history to any civilization.

As the Mongols turned back from central Europe after overrunning Hungary and Poland, it became obvious to the Christian powers that Western Europe was safe. At the Council of Lyons (1245) they resolved to seek an alliance with the Mongols against the Muslims. In 1246, one of the delegations under John de Plano Carpini reached Karakorum, the Mongol capital and made representations to Kuyuk, the Great Khan. Two of Kuyuk's ministers were Christian and John was received cordially. A second delegation under Anselm, a Dominican priest, was dispatched in 1247. Louis, King of France, sent a third delegation under William of Rubruquis in 1253. Hayton, King of Armenia, represented himself and traveled to Korakorum in 1254.

The Christian overtures to the Mongols paid off and were rewarded with promises of military help. The Christian population in the major cities was spared even as the Mongols continued to slaughter the Muslims. For instance, while Baghdad was ravaged and pulled to the ground, the Christian populace of Baghdad gathered under the local cathedral and was spared. Hulagu, the destroyer of Baghdad, had several wives, of whom Dokuz Khatun, a Nestorian Christian, was his chief wife. So enthralled were the Christians at their initial success, that Pope Alexander IV wrote to Hulagu in 1260, expressing his pleasure that the latter was disposed to accept the Christian faith.

The news of the fall of Baghdad (1258) was received with great joy in Christendom who saw in it an opportunity to redress the loss of Jerusalem. It was during this period that the Fatimid Assassins sent a delegation to Henry III of England asking for his help to protect them from the Mongols. The reply from the Bishop of Winchester was curt: "Let those dogs devour each other and be utterly wiped out and then we shall see, founded on their ruins, the universal Catholic Church".

The Christian-Mongol axis continued its aggression against Muslim territories. While the Mongols devastated Asia, the Crusaders continued their onslaught on the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. In 1218, a German army invaded Egypt, occupied Damietta and proceeded towards Cairo. The Egyptians allowed the invaders to enter the delta, then opened the dykes on the Nile, trapping and drowning the German army. In 1261, the French attempted an invasion of North Africa, while Spain and Portugal were militarily active on the Moroccan coast.

Meanwhile, Hulagu followed up the sack of Baghdad with the capture of Iraq and Syria. After consulting with his astrologers, he established his base in Maragha. The Atabeg Seljuk Shah was captured near Shiraz and beheaded. In 1260, Aleppo was stormed and its population was put to death. Damascus surrendered without a fight. The Mongol commander Kitbogha, the Armenian King Hayton and the Crusader King Bohemund of Antioch marched together in the streets of the ancient Umayyad capital and forced the Muslim inhabitants of the city to kneel before the cross. Summons was issued to Kutuz, the Mamluke Sultan of Egypt to surrender or face annihilation.

The choices before the Mamlukes were stark indeed. They knew that either surrender or a loss in battle would mean annihilation and the last bastion of Islamic culture would be destroyed (Although Delhi was as yet safe from the Mongols, Islam had barely established itself on the plains of Hindustan by the year 1260). Jerusalem, Mecca and Madina would be taken. Summons went forth from Sultan Kutuz for a *jihad* under General Baybars. The response was overwhelming and a motivated Muslim army advanced through the Sinai towards Palestine to meet the invaders.

The Mamlukes were a Turkish tribe who had made their home in the islands of the Nile. Hence, they are sometimes called Bahri Mamlukes. The word Mamluke derives its origin from the word *Malaka* (to own). During the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, slave trade was brisk along the River Volga (in today's Russia) and around the Caspian Sea. The Vikings (Swedes) were the primary vehicles for this trade. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Vikings were the imperial power around the Baltic Sea. They conducted raids deep into what are today Russia and Germany, as well as the Slavic lands of the Balkans, captured slaves and sold them to Jewish and Muslim merchants. These slaves were adopted by the Turkish sultans, often married princesses of the royal households and rose to become rulers themselves. Thus, it was that the transcendence of Islam elevated slaves to kings. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century both Egypt and India were ruled by Mamluke (slave) dynasties.

The armies of Baybars met the combined armies of the Mongols, the Crusaders and the Armenians near Nazareth at Ain Jalut in September 1261. A great battle ensued. The Mamluke right flank charged against the invaders and forced it back. But the Mongols counterattacked on the left and the Mamlukes hesitated. General Baybars took charge and a battle cry went forth for the defense of Islam. The enemies were routed. Kitbogha was killed. Hayton, King of Armenia and Bohemund, King of Antioch fled. The Mongols were pursued to Aleppo and destroyed. Egypt, and with it Hejaz and Palestine, were saved. The dark spell that the Mongols had cast across the Eurasian continent was broken.

Ain Jalut was undoubtedly one of the decisive battles in human history, comparable in its importance with the Battle of Tours (765) and the Battle of Plassey (1757). It marked the farthest advance of the Mongols across Eurasia. With the defeat at Ain Jalut, Christendom lost its hope for recovery of Jerusalem and its hold on the Syrian coastline was made untenable. The Armenians receded to their mountain strongholds in the Caucasus Mountains. Had the Mamlukes lost, Cairo would have met the same fate as Baghdad, the Cross would have supplanted the Crescent and the shamanist Mongol would have ruled over the sacred sites of Mecca and Madina.

Upon his return from Ayn Jalut, Baybars displaced Sultan Kutuz, invited a relative of slain Caliph Al Musta'sim to Cairo and re-established the Abbasid Caliphate in Egypt. There the temporal seat of Sunni Islam stayed, until it was displaced by the Ottomans in 1517 and moved to Istanbul.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)