

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Fall of Baghdad

The Fall of Baghdad (1258 CE)

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Genghiz Khan died in 1227. Upon his death, his vast empire was divided up into five parts: (1) Mongolistan consisting of the Mongol home turf, (2) Chagtai, consisting of Khorasan and Farghana Valley, (3) Persia, ruled by the Il-Khans, (4) Russia and Kazakhstan, ruled by the Golden Hordes and (5) China. The Mongols continued their advance after Genghiz. In 1229, they planned three great expeditions. The first was to complete the conquest of southern China. This effort was not completed until 1276 during the reign of Kublai Khan. The second expedition was to complete the conquest of southern Russia, Poland, Hungary and Bulgaria. The Mongols were successful in this campaign and ruled these territories for over two hundred years. The third expedition under General Charmagun was against Prince Jalaluddin of Khorasan.

After crossing the Indus at the Battle of Attock in 1221, Jalaluddin sought refuge with Altumish, the able Mamluke Sultan of Delhi. But Altumish knew the risks associated with giving refuge to a foe of Genghiz. Although he was treated with the dignity befitting a prince, Jalaluddin knew that his welcome mat in Delhi was very thin. In 1223, he returned to Isfahan via Sindh and Makran, suffering the ravages of that inhospitable desert, much as Alexander had done fifteen centuries earlier. Soon, with the help of his brother, Jalaluddin was in possession of what was left of Khorasan, Mazandaran and Iraq. In 1225, he marched against the Caliph Al Nasir to seek revenge against an enemy of his father. The armies of the Caliph were routed and Baghdad was besieged. Jalaluddin continued his march into Georgia and occupied Tiflis in 1226. This infuriated the Georgians who made an alliance with the Mongols and the Russian Kipchaks against Jalaluddin.

Jalaluddin now had to face the combined armies of the Georgians, the Russian Kipchaks and the Mongols. At the Battle of Isfahan in 1227, he defeated the Mongols. His strategy in war was to face the Mongols in the open field and to avoid the pitfalls of his father who had tried to hole himself up in one fort after another. This gave him the advantage of mobility and rapid enveloping movements, tactics that the Central Asian horsemen were masters of. In 1229, he made peace with the new Caliph Al Muntasar (1226-1242). But now his good fortune ran out. The Mongol armies of Charmagun caught him unprepared on the Moghan plains (1230) and Jalaluddin narrowly escaped with his life. Shortly thereafter a Kurdish robber assassinated him.

Thus perished the bravest of Muslim soldiers who was the only one amongst the kings and princes of his era, Muslim or Christian, to face the Mongol hordes in open combat and defeat them on several occasions. Brilliant as he was in war, Jalaluddin suffered from a lack of organizational skills required of a statesman. He was always restless, moving from battle to battle. It would have taken a combination of his prowess with the wisdom of a Nizam ul Mulk (d. 1091) to contain the fierce Mongols.

In the meantime, the devastation of Khwarazm continued. The Mongols revisited the cities and provinces they had already destroyed and what was left after the invasions of Genghiz Khan was devastated once again. In 1251, Mangu was elected the Chief Khan of all Mongols. His first act was to launch two expeditions, one under his brother Kublai Khan to conquer southern China and the other under Hulagu Khan to bring an end to the Caliphate in Baghdad. On both counts, the Mongols were successful.

Hulagu established himself in Isfahan and methodically moved to eliminate all resistance. His first objective was the Assassins who posed a potential threat to his rear guard. Hulagu knew that the Assassins, an offshoot of the Fatimid sect, were a major factor in the instability of the Muslim world during the 11th and 12th centuries and had terrorized successive Muslim dynasties by assassinating generals, viziers and sultans alike. It was the dagger of an assassin that had brought to an end the life of the brilliant vizier, Nizam ul Mulk (1091). During the year 1256, Hulagu attacked the hideouts of the Assassins, eliminating them one after the other.

In the winter of 1257, Hulagu moved towards Baghdad. A de-facto alliance was formed between the Christian powers and the Mongols to eliminate Islam. The Crusaders and the Armenians attacked in northern Syria diverting some of the Turkish contingents that might have been available for the defense of Baghdad. Al Musta'sim was no military match for Hulagu. Suffering from the same kind of fatalistic self-delusion that had characterized the encounter of Shah Muhammed of Khwarazm with Genghiz Khan, Al Musta'sim failed to organize an effective defense of the capital. The treasury of the Caliph that could have been used to raise a large army remained closed. Hulagu sent a summons to Caliph Musta'sim to surrender. When the Caliph refused, Hulagu laid siege to the Abbasid capital and methodically moved to reduce it.

In June 1258, the city of Baghdad surrendered. No description can do justice to the horrors that followed. The sack of Baghdad lasted a week. More than a million inhabitants were slaughtered. Al Musta'sim was wrapped in a carpet, beaten with clubs and trampled to death by Mongol horses. Mosques were pulled down. Libraries burned. Great men of learning were tortured to death. Artisans were enslaved. Women were dragged, abused and left to die along far-away roads. The dams on the Tigris and the Euphrates that the Abbasids had built up over a period of five centuries were demolished. The destruction of dams throughout Central Asia depressed agriculture and slowed population and economic recovery for many centuries. Baghdad, which was once the premier city of the world, became a ghost town.

The fall of Baghdad marked a major event in world history. With it, the curtain fell on the classic Islamic period. Baghdad had been founded and established by the Abbasids as the capital of orthodox Islam after Madina and Damascus. It was the seat of the Caliphate and the vortex of Islamic political life. It was to Baghdad that kings and sultans alike turned, seeking legitimacy for their temporal power and guidance on spiritual matters. With the demolition of the Caliphate in Baghdad, Muslims had to reinvent that institution so that the temporal and spiritual life of Islam might continue to have a focus.

Hulagu established himself in Hamadan from where he organized more expeditions. All of Iraq was subjugated. Aleppo in northern Syria fell in 1260 to the combined onslaught of Mongol, Armenian and Crusader armies. Palestine lay ahead and held the key to Egypt and the cities of Mecca and Madina. Only the Ganges plains of India escaped the Mongol conquests thanks to the resistance of the Mamluke sultans of India and the statesmanship of Altumish and his daughter Razia Sultana. The hour was dark indeed. It appeared that the light of Islam that had been lit six hundred years earlier might be physically extinguished.

The classic Islamic civilization was the light that had kept learning, art and culture alive for 600 years while Europe lay in the stupor of its Dark Ages. This civilization, even in its waning years, was at once spiritual and empirical, absorbing and transforming the best that the ancient civilizations of Greece, India, Persia and Egypt had to offer. After the fall of Baghdad, Islam went through a process of self-renewal. It turned increasingly inward, towards *tasawwuf* and the sciences of the soul. It was this Sufi Islam that was to conquer the conquering Mongols, win the hearts of millions in India, Indonesia and Africa and shape the destiny of three continents for the next 400 years.

Thus, it was in the year 1258 that a civilization died even as it renewed and expressed itself on a different plane.

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