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Part 1. The Fall of Baghdad

Chapter 40: Fall of The ‘Abbasid Caliphate

The Mongol invasion, which shook the world of Islam to its very foundations in the seventh/13th century was an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of mankind. A people, hitherto unknown even to their neighbours, poured forth from the bare and bleak plateau of Karakorum (Mongolia) and with lightning speed overran the Asian and European continents from China to Hungary and East Prussia, and built up the largest empire know to man. These people were the Mongols[1] or Tartars as called by their contemporaries. Their invasion inflicted more suffering on the human race than any other incident recorded in history. They lived in a wild and primitive state of society. “They are,” says Matthew Paris, “inhuman and beastly, rather monsters than men, thirsty for and drinking blood, tearing and devouring the flesh of dogs and men...They are without human laws.”[2]

The Mongol storm burst on the Muslim world in two separate waves. The first dates back to 616/1219 when Chingiz Khan[3] (550/1155 – 625/1227), who first as the leader of a band of adventurers and later installed as their ruler in 603/1206 welded these barbarians into a strong and well-disciplined military force, attacked the Empire of the Khwarizm Shahs (470/1077 – 629/1231) which at the height of its power stretched from the Ural Mountains to the Persian Gulf and from the Euphrates to the Indus excluding the two Iranian provinces of Khuzistan and Fars. The second wave broke on Khurasan in 654/1256 when Chingiz Khan’s grandson, Hulagu Khan (614/1217 – 664/1265), was selected by his brother, Emperor Mangu Khan (649/1251 – 655/1257), and the great *quriltay*, i.e. the Mongol assembly, held in 649/1251, to annihilate the ‘Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad and the Isma‘ilis of Alamut and Quhistan in North Iran.

The first invasion, which probably could not have been averted, was provoked by a further incident in which the Governor of Utrar,[4] a frontier town in Khwarizm, murdered a number of Mongol tradesmen alleged to have been spies. Thereupon Chingiz Khan despatched an embassy consisting of two

Mongols and one Turk to the Court of ‘Ala al-Din Mohammad Khwarizm Shah (596/1199 – 617-1220) to protest against this violation of the laws of hospitality and demanded that he should hand over the Governor to them or prepare for war. In reply Khwarizm Shah behaved in a queer fashion which was both foolish and arrogant. He killed the Turk and turned back the two Mongols with their beards shaved off. Upon this the Mongols held a *quriltay* and decided to attack Khwarizm.

This was not the only evidence of Khwarizm Shah’s suicidal policy. According to the contemporary historian, ibn Athir (d. 632/1234), ‘Ala al-Din Mohammad had already destroyed or weakened the neighbouring Muslim States in order to build up an unstable, sprawling empire, so that in the dark hour of trial when, instead of showing any signs of resistance, he adopted the ignominious course of continued retreat, and left his unfortunate subjects at the mercy of the relentless enemy, there was no Muslim power left to protect or defend them. His gallant son, Jalal al-Din Mankoburni (617/1220 – 629/1231), however, put up stiff resistance against the full might of the Mongol attack and for years continued to show acts of great heroism in unequal battles until, unaided and deserted, he met his tragic end. By his desperate and indomitable courage against the Mongol blast of death, the dauntless prince has left a permanent mark of gallantry in the annals of Muslim history.

A big factor which hastened the Muslim downfall was the atmosphere of intrigue prevailing in the Muslim world on the eve of the Mongol invasion. According to ibn Athir and al-Maqrizi (766/1180 – 846/1442), the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir (576/1180 – 622/1225) actually encouraged the Mongols to attack Khwarizm, little knowing that his own house was destined to perish at the hands of the same irresistible foe.

The storm burst in 616/1219 and soon engulfed Transoxiana, Khwarizm, Khurasan, the territories lying north of the river Indus, and North Iran, until, instead of turning south or west, it swept across the Caucasus into South Russia, finally to advance as far away as the Baltic and the Adriatic.

The second wave of invasion struck Khurasan at the beginning of 654/1256; the Caliphate of Baghdad was destroyed in 656/1258 by Hulagu Khan who had earlier wiped out the Isma‘ili stronghold at Alamut in North Iran in 654/1256. The Mongol army advanced further into Syria, sacked Aleppo, and threatened Damascus into surrender in 659/1260. It was at ‘Ain Jalut (Goliath’s Spring) near Nazareth, however, that the Mongol tide was firmly stemmed by the gallant Mamluks of Egypt who gave them a crushing defeat in 659/1260. After the death of Jalal al-Din Mankoburni this was the first Muslim victory in 30 years and it broke the spell of the Mongol invincibility.

The Mongols were essentially an engine of destruction. They mowed down all resistance and their opponents “feel to the right and left like the leaves down winter.” They have been described by Sir Henry Howorth as one of those races “which are sent periodically to destroy the luxurious and the wealthy, to lay in ashes the parts and culture which grow under the shelter of wealth and easy circumstances.”[5] According to ‘Ata Malik Juwaini, Hulagu Khan’s secretary, who was appointed Governor of Baghdad after the destruction of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, Chingiz Khan described himself at Bukhara as the

“scourge of God” sent to men as a punishment for their great sins.[6]
The bewildering extent of the blood-thirsty ferocity, insatiable thirst for massacre, and devastating destruction which brought unprecedented suffering for the greater portion of the civilized world, would be just impossible to believe, had the facts not been confirmed from different sources, both Eastern and Western.

All historians agree that wherever the Mongols went they exterminated populations, pillaged towns and cities, wreaked special vengeance upon those who dared to resist them, converted rich and smiling fields into deserts, and left behind the smoke of burning towns. In the words of Chingiz Khan himself, quoted by Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, the famous Prime Minister of the Mongol period in Iran and the author of *Jami al-Tawarikh*,[7] “the greatest joy is to conquer one’s enemies, to pursue them, to see their families in tears, to ride their horses and to possess their daughters and wives.” In old Mongol traditions there is a story that the future world conqueror was born with a piece of clotted blood in his hands.[8] The senseless destruction, cruelty, outrage, spoliation, and the lightning speed of the Mongol attack have been described by Juwaini in the pithy sentence uttered by a fugitive from Merv, “They came and uprooted, they burned, they slew, they carried off, and they departed.”[9]

To have an idea of the brutal lust of conquest and ruthless ferocity shown by the Mongol hordes it would suffice to trace the wonton disregard of human life shown by them in some of the many prosperous cities and towns they ravaged. They reduced to ashes the city of Bukhara which was known for its magnificent palaces, gardens and parks stretching for miles on the banks of the river Sughd, put one million people to the sword in Samarqand, and brutally massacred all the inhabitants of Tirmidh and Sabziwar. Khwarizm suffered an equally tragic fate. According to Juwaini, 1,200,000 people were killed in the city. Amongst the scholars and saints who perished was the famous Shaikh Najm al-Din Kubra (d. 618/1221).

In Balkh the Mongol army came back a few days after the city’s destruction to kill the poor wretches who might have survived the first holocaust, and, having dragged them out of the hiding places, butchered them in the true Mongol fashion. Bamiyan, where a Mongol prince lost his life, was wiped out of existence and orders were issued not leave even babies alive in their wombs. This kind of sadism was not a stray incident, for ibn Athir characterizes the Mongols as a people who “spared none, slaying women, men and children, ripping open pregnant women and killing unborn babies.”[10] At Nasa they made a hecatomb of over 70,000 people. Merv, which was at the height of its glory, suffered, according to ibn Athir, a loss of 700,000 people, but Juwaini puts the figure at 1,300,000, excluding those bodies that were hidden at obscure retreats. The survivors were traced out, as in Balkh and mercilessly killed.

Nishapur, which was like the bright Venus in the galaxy of cities,[11] was completely razed to the ground and every living thing, including animals, was massacred. Pyramids of skulls were built as a mark of this ghastly feat of military “triumph.” According to Mirkhwand, 1,047,000 men were butchered in the city in addition to an unknown number of women and children.[12] He adds, however, that 40 artisans and

craftsmen were given shelter and transported to Mongolia. In Herat these barbarian hordes set up a new record by putting 1,600,000 men to the sword.

These figures give an idea of the cold-blooded, passionless cruelty of the invaders who, in the words of Matthew Paris, "spared neither age, nor sex, nor condition."[13] Juwaini mourns the loss of life in Khurasan in the following words, "Not one-thousandth of the population escaped…if from now to the Day of Judgment nothing hinders the growth of population in Khurasan and 'Iraq-I 'Ajam, it cannot reach one-tenth of the figure at which it stood before."

With the destruction of the scores of cities of fame also perished the priceless treasures of art and literature. The letter of ibn Khallikan (608/1211 – 681/1282) which he wrote from Mosul after his flight from Merv to al-Qadi al-Akram Jamal al-Din Abu al-Hassan 'Ali, vizier of the King of Aleppo, pathetically describes the nature of the Mongol cataclysm. In this letter, written in 617/1220, the author pays his last tribute to the libraries of Merv which had made him forget his dear ones, his home, and country, and to the advanced state of civilization in Khurasan which, according to him, "in a word, and without exaggeration, was a copy of paradise."

He proceeds to laud the achievements of its doctors, saints, scholars, the monuments of science, and the virtues of the authors of this region and then laments the tragedy of Merv in these words, "Those palaces were effaced from the earth…in those places the screech owls answer each others' cries and in those halls the winds moan responsive to the simoom." Ibn Athir describes the loss of life and culture in the same strain, "Those Tartars conquered…the best, the most flourishing and the most populous part thereof (the habitable globe), and that whereof the inhabitants were the most advanced in character and conduct."[14]

The reckless assassination of thousands of scholars, poets, and writers, and the destruction of libraries and colleges wrought irreparable disaster upon the Muslim civilization which had flourished for centuries with such remarkable vitality. Transoxiana and Khurasan were the worst sufferers. Fertile plains and valleys in these regions were turned into wilderness. The great highways of Central Asia on which passed the merchandise of China to Western Asia and Europe also lay deserted.

For 20 years after the death of Chingiz Khan in 625/1227, the Mongols continued to pillage Kurdistan, Adharbaijan, and regions to the west of Iran, at times marauding right up to Aleppo. But the Caliphate of Baghdad had survived. The inevitable occurred in 656/1258 when Hulagu Khan stormed Baghdad after he had extirpated the Isma'ili power at Alamut in 654/1256. The city which been the metropolis of Islam for more than five centuries 132/749 – 656/1258) was given over to plunder and flame. The massacre, according to Diyarbakri (d. 982/1574) in his *Tarikh al-Khamis*, continued for 34 days during which 1,800,000 people were put to the sword. For days blood ran freely in the streets of Baghdad and the water of Tigris was dyed red for miles. According to Wassaf, the sack of Baghdad lasted 40 days.[15] To quote *Kitab al-Fakhri*, "Then there took place such wholesale slaughter and unrestrained looting and excessive torture and mutilation as it is hard to be spoken of even generally; how think you, then, its

details?" Al-Must'asim bi Allah (640/1242 – 656/1258) who was destined to be the last Caliph of this renowned dynasty was beaten to death, and, according to another version, trampled on by horses.

The sack of Baghdad was a supreme catastrophe of the world of Islam and of the Arabo-Persian civilization which had flourished so richly for many hundreds of years. Its magnitude surpassed the devastation of other cities, because the political and psychological implications of this tragedy had a far greater import. The Caliph was regarded as the spiritual and temporal head of the Muslim world and even in its days of decline the caliphate of Baghdad had retained the semblance of Muslim unity and homogeneity. Baghdad, therefore, was more than a city. It was a symbol. With the end of the Caliphate this symbol also vanished. It was also the centre of the most advanced civilization of the time and from it emanated the rays of knowledge which illuminated the world. The destruction of Baghdad, therefore, meant the extinction of learning.

With it were destroyed the great libraries and unique treasures of art, philosophy, and science, accumulated through hundreds of years. Books were consumed to ashes or thrown into the river. Mosques, colleges, hospitals, and palaces were put to fire. The awful nature of the cataclysm, which completely blocked the advancement of knowledge of Muslim lands, and thus, indirectly the whole world, is, in the words of Percy Sykes, "difficult to realize and impossible to exaggerate."[16] No wonder the great Sa'di (580/1184 – 691/1291) was moved to write in far-off Shiraz an elegy on the destruction of Baghdad and the fall of the caliphate, which has gone down in Persian poetry as one of the most pathetic poems of all times.

What deepened the sombre effects of this tragedy was the fact that, with the extermination of men of learning and the total destruction of Muslim society, the spirit of inquiry and original research so distinctly associated with Arabic learning was practically destroyed. Western Asia was no plunged into darkness as earlier Khurasan and Transoxiana had been wrapped in gloom. The two races – Arabs and Iranians – which together had contributed to the medieval world the highest literary and scientific culture parted ways. For centuries Arabic had been the language of religion, science, and philosophy in Iran, and all thinkers and scientists had chosen Arabic as the vehicle of expressing their thoughts. But henceforth Arabic lost its position of privilege and its use was restricted mostly to the field of theology and scholastic learning. The Arabs themselves lost even the shadow of a major role in Islamic history. The fall of Baghdad, therefore, was also an ominous sign of the loss of Arab hegemony.

The Mongol invasion by its accumulated horror and scant respect for human life and moral values produced an attitude of self negation and renunciation in general and in Persian poetry in particular. The pantheistic philosophy of ibn 'Arabi henceforth made a strong appeal to the minds of subsequent mystics such as Auhhadi Kirmini, Auhadi of Maraghah, and Jami.

The infinite havoc caused by this cataclysm constitutes a melancholy chapter in the history of Muslim civilization. What Juwaini had called the famine of science and virtue in Khurasan[17] came true of all lands stretching from Transoxiana to the shores of the Mediterranean. Never, perhaps, had such a great

and glorious civilization been doomed to such a tragic fall. This tragic fall was not, however, a tragic end, for this civilization rose again and produced within two and half centuries three of the greatest empires of the world, and though the main current of its thought changed its course, even before, and long before, its political recovery, it produced the world's first destroyer of Aristotle's logic in ibn Taimiyyah and the first sociologist and philosopher of history in ibn Khaldun.

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1. The word is derived from the root mong which means brave.
2. E. G. Browne, A Literary History of Persia, vol. 3, p. 7.
3. His actual name was Temuchin. The title of Chingiz or Zingis Khan was presented to him by his people in recognition of his rising power. The word zin means great, gis is the superlative termination.
4. Also known as Farab.
5. Henry Howorth, History of Mongols Part 1, P. 10
6. 'Ata Malik Juwaini, Tarikh-i Jahankusha, Vol. 1, ed. Mohammad 'Abd al-Wahab Qazwini, Leiden, 1329/1911. p 81. 'Ala al-Din 'Ata Malik Juwaini (d. 682/1283) who belonged to a distinguished family of ministers and administrators was one of those Iranian officers whom the Mongols found indispensable in the civil service. He was Hulagu Khan's secretary and had served him throughout his campaign. He was appointed Governor of Baghdad by Hulagu Khan a year after the conquest of the city and held this office position for 24 years. His famous book which was completed in 658/1260 contains a first-hand account of Hulagu Khan's military exploits and is one of the most authentic books on the history of this period. It deals with the Mongols, the Khwarizm Shahs, and the Isma'ili sect and ends with the events of the year 655/1257.
7. Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah (645/1247 – 718/1318), the renowned scholar-administrator of the Il-Khani (Mongol) period of the history of Iran, served as Prime Minister under three Muslim Mongol rulers, namely, Ghazan (694/1294 – 703/1303) who, along with 10,000 Mongols, embraced Islam on Sha'ban 4, 694 A. H. and by declaring it the State religion restored its supremacy in Iran; Uljaitu Khuda-bandeh (703/1303 – 716/1316). In spite of his pre-occupation as the Prime Minister of a great empire, Rashid al-Din found time to pursue research and write books, both in Arabic and Persian. Of these his Jami' al-Tawarikh, which, in the words of Quatremere, the French editor of portions of this work, "offered for the first time to the people of Asia a complete course of universal history and geography," is the most celebrated. Though it is a general history of the world, yet it contains a detailed and highly authentic account of the Mongol Emperors from the time of Chingiz Khan to the death of Sultan Ghazan.
8. Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol 1, Part 2, p. 856.
9. Juwaini, op. cit. p. 105.

10. E. G. Browne, op cit. vol 2, p 428.
11. Juwaini, op. cit. p. 133
12. Mirkhwand, Raudat al-Safa, vol. 5, p. 46.
13. E. G. Browne, op. cit. vol. 3, p. 7.
14. Ibid. vol. 2, p. 429.
15. ‘Abd Allah ibn Fadl Allah Wassaf, Tarikh-i Wassaf, p. 87.
16. Percy Sykes, A History of Persia, vol. 2, p. 98.
17. Juwaini, op. cit., p. 4

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