

Unicorn in the Woods, Tigers at the Gates – Different Stages in the Contacts between the Il-Khanate and the Delhi Sultanate

Na'ama O. Arom (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

It was a unicorn, speaking human words, which stopped the unstoppable army of Chinggis Khan on the north-western border of India, in 1222. But it will take more than a unicorn to keep the Mongols from trying to return.

The Mongol Empire and its successive Khanates never conquered the Indian sub-continent; yet they never stopped trying to subjugate certain powers in it, as the Delhi Sultanate in the north, and Pāndya Kingdom in the south-east. This was done by diplomacy – dotted all over with the paw prints of many different animals.

Tracking these prints, this paper attempt to line the evolving contacts between the Mongol Khanate of the Middle East, centered in Iran, Iraq and Azerbaijan – the Il-Khanate, or Ulus Hülegü – and the Muslim Delhi Sultanate, situated in modern day northern India and eastern Pakistan. From a myth-like beginning ensued an unarmed contest of horses and elephants, in which each side described itself victorious; and it might be so, for people and trade continued to flow between the two. At the end of the road, tigers from Delhi awaited outside of the capital of the Il-Khan Abu-Sa'id (ruled 1316-1335). That contact hinted at a change in the Mongol attitude toward Delhi – from one seeking submission, into another, content with peace.