CHAPTER 2

VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE IN THE MONGOL CONQUEST OF BAGHDAD (1258)

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The Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 656/1258 has often been described as a medieval holocaust, an extremely violent act, which led not only to the collapse of the 'Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) and the city of Baghdad, but to the decline of Islamic civilisation as a whole. Clichés such as: 'If the Mongols had not burnt the libraries of Baghdad in the 13th century, we Arabs would have had so much science, that we would long since have invented the atomic bomb' can still be heard in the Arab world. Moreover, this anachronistic view has been revived in the last decade when the Mongol conquest of Baghdad became a favourable metaphor for the American occupation of 2003. Descriptions of the fall of Baghdad as an act of infidels' vandalism directed against Islamic or Iraqi civilisation or as a burst of violence that took centuries to overcome prevail in contemporary Arabic literature and in Muslim Internet sites, as well as in some of the Western general surveys that seek to explain Iraq from Chinggis Khan to Saddam Hussein and after.  

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2. E.g., R. al-Sarghati, Qiṣṣat al-Taʾtir (Cairo, 2006); Ahmad Manṣūr, Qiṣṣat suqūṭ Bābdid
This chapter aims to look afresh at the question of violence in the conquest of Baghdad. While not denying that the conquest was a violent occupation, it highlights the non-violent means that were involved in it, and the ways in which such violence was understood and legitimised by the contemporaneous Muslim writers. On the basis of biographical literature from both the Il-Khanate and the Mamluk sultanate, it argues that the violence was not addressed towards the Islamic civilisation as a whole, and that the non-violent means and Baghdad’s swift and overall successful restoration contributed significantly to the legitimisation and marginalisation of the violence involved in the conquest in the collective memory of the Eastern Islamic world until the rise of nationalism. As a starting point I would like to refer to a unique and highly personal eye-witness account of the conquest, which is quite different from its conventional descriptions.

The evidence in question is that of ‘Abd al-Mu‘min b. Yūsuf b. Fākhīr Šāfi‘ al-Din Urmawī, one of the more illustrious musical artists and theoreticians in the Muslim world. Born in Urmia (a city in modern-day Iran), he arrived in Baghdad as a young boy. Urmawī launched a career as a Shāfī‘ite lawyer at the newly established Mustansiriyah College, but in addition to his expertise in Shāfī‘ite and comparative law, he was also well-versed in calligraphy, Arabic language, poetry, history, mathematics and, of course, music. By the age of twenty-one he had already completed his magnum opus, Kitāb al-adwar (The book of cycles), a systematic exposition on the modal system, which became one of the most influential works on Islamic music theory. In addition, he was also an accomplished singer and lute player. Urmawī was first employed at the court of the last ‘Abbāsids Caliph, al-Musta‘ṣim bi-Allāh (r. 640–656/1242–58) as a calligrapher, responsible for the Caliph’s library. With the recommendation of one of his students, the Caliph’s favourite songstress Luḥāz, his musical talents were brought to the Caliph’s attention and he was appointed as a court musician, earning a generous salary, becoming a close companion of the Caliph and his ministers and tutoring the Caliph’s son.4

1 (Beirut, 2003); W. R. Polk, Understanding Iraq: The Whole Sweep of Iraqi History, from Genghis Khan’s Mongols to the Ottoman Turks to the British Mandate to the American Occupation (New York, 2005).


neighbourhoods to his commanders, giving them permission to kill, capture, and loot for one to three days according to their ranks. Urmawi’s quarter was allotted to a commander of 10,000 riders, named Bajit (probably Bajit) Noyan, who was granted a three days’ “looting span.” The commander arrived at the quarter with his troops, and stopped at its gate, which was barricaded with wood and earth. He knocked on the gate, shouting: “Open the gate and obey us, and we will give you safe conduct (amān). And if not, we will burn the gate and kill you.”

Urmawi went out, terrified for his life. He identified himself as the neighbourhood’s leader and said he would bring whatever the commander asked for in order to save the quarter. He invited the commander to stay at his house while his troops plunder the other neighbourhoods, and hosted the commander and his retinue in great pomp, sitting them on silken carpets embroidered with gold, serving them delicious food and wine in gilded vessels, and arranging the neighbourhood’s women singers to give a special concert for the conquerors. The Mongol commander, animated by the music, hugged a songstress he liked, and had intercourse with her (wālaq al-ḥāl) during the assembly, while the crowd was watching. According to Urmawi, “His day came to a close in the best possible way.”

By the evening, the commander’s troops arrived with loot and prisoners from the other neighbourhoods. Before they left, Urmawi brought them presents of gold and silver dishes, coins, cash and splendid clothes. Apologising for the dearth of gifts, however, he promised the Mongol commander that he would get better treatment tomorrow. After Bajit was gone, Urmawi gathered the quarter’s people of means, explained that they still had to host the Mongol noble for two more days and that they should double the presents each day. The Baghdaḍis collected all kinds of gold, precious clothes and arms worth 50,000 dinars, and when Bajit returned early the next day he was amazed by the assembled wealth. On the third day, again after presenting Bajit with various precious offerings including the Caliph’s jennet, Urmawi told him: “This quarter is already under your command; and if you grant its people their lives, he

(i.e., Hūlegū) will be blameless in the eyes of God and men, for all that is left to them is their souls.” Bajit answered: “I know this. From the first day I gave them their souls, and my soul did not tell me to kill or capture them. But before doing anything else, you should come with me to see Pir Khan.” The terrified Urmawi, afraid for his life, tried to avoid the meeting, but Bajit promised him that he would be safe and added, “Hūlegū is a man who likes the men of talents (ahl al-fadā’il).”

Once more Urmawi collected from his neighbours gold, silver and cash. From his own house, he brought the best food and wine in exquisite dishes, chose a few beautiful songstresses to accompany him and put on his best suit. When the commander saw him, he was impressed and Urmawi explained: “Indeed, I am the caliph’s singer and his companion, but so long as I feared you, I wore those tattered and filthy clothes. When I became [one of] your subjects, my status was restored and I felt secure. Hūlegū is a great king, greater than the caliph, and I can only enter his presence with countenance and dignity.”

The commander liked his answer. When they reached Hūlegū’s camp, Urmawi won his favour both by the magnificent presents he brought and by his musical skills: when Hūlegū, after making sure that Urmawi indeed had been the caliph’s singer, asked him, “What is the best thing you know in the science of music (‘ilm al-jarab)?” Urmawi answered that it was “a song that I sing which causes the listener to fall asleep.” Upon Hūlegū’s request, Urmawi and his accompanying songstress sang a lullaby to the Khan, and made him fall asleep (with the help of a few cups of wine that the musician encouraged him to drink first). The impressed Hūlegū allotted to Urmawi a generous annual stipend—twice the one that the Caliph bestowed upon him—and, in response to Urmawi’s request, a garden (bustān) that belonged to the Caliph—note that had the musician asked, he could have gotten a whole city or a fortress. The Khan ordered not to harm the musician’s quarter, and sent him back with fifty riders, who guarded the neighbourhood until Hūlegū left Baghdad.

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While it is difficult to verify the details in Urmawi’s vivid account, its main contours seem plausible enough, as they echo Il-Khanid sources, and many of the
elements dovetail neatly with other contemporaneous descriptions of Baghdad's fall. As for Urmawi, after the conquest he received a lucrative job in Mongol administration in Iraq, remained in contact with Hulagu, and later became a protégé of the Juwairis.\textsuperscript{10} He continued to teach and study music in Baghdad and was considered one of the most prominent scholars in the reign of Hulagu's son, Abuqa (r. 663–81/1265–82).\textsuperscript{11}

For the question of the violence practiced in the conquest of Baghdad, its alternatives and legitimation, the story is instructive in several ways: first, even this story, that highlights the non-violent alternative offered to certain Baghdad groups, attests for the high amount of violence involved in the conquest. The Mongols plundered various Baghdad neighbourhoods and did not hesitate to rape a songstress at their host house. Moreover, their reputation for violence was well known in the city, as attested by Urmawi's frequent references to his fear throughout his account.\textsuperscript{12}

However, the sack of Baghdad as displayed in Urmawi's story was not an outburst of barbarism, but a meticulously organised campaign of systematic and controlled violence, the application or cessation of which was based on the strict discipline of the Mongol troops to Hulagu's orders.\textsuperscript{13} Urmawi's account

an annual pension of 10,000 dinars (twice the amount of his caliphal stipend) from the government's revenues of Baghdad, a pension that was supposed to be conferred on his descendants as well. Wassif, Ta'rikh-i Wasiif = Ta'ziyiyat al-ammar wa-ta'ziyiat al-a'zam (Bombay, 1852–3 [1269]; repr. Tehran, 1959–60 [1339 shamsi]), pp. 42–3, 55; 'Abd al-Mu'mammad Ayubi, Ta'rikh-i Ta'rikh-i Wasiif (Tehran, 1346/1967), pp. 23, 35; for latter variants see Khwandsdrisi, Ta'rikh-i khudab-i syyar (Tehran, 1333 shamsi/1955), 3, p. 107; Wheeler M. Thurlston, trans. Khudab-i syyar (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 3, p. 60; Haji Khafif (Khatib Cizbe), Khudab-i su'ud al-walid al-kutub wa-l-faridun (Istanbul, 1941–55), 1, p. 876; Biran, 'Musici', p. 140.

10. The Jewwazi brothers held important administrative positions in the B-Khinate: 'Ali-al-Din 'Ajam Malik (623/831/1226–83), the famous historian, was the Mongol governor of Baghdad, and is mentioned below; Shams al-Din (d. 682/1284), served as the chief financial minister (akhdab al-dawla) of Hulagu and his successor, Abuqa. Both were also great patrons of scholars. See, e.g., G. Lax, Early Mongol Rule in Thirteenth Century Iran: A Persian Renaissance (London and New York, 2003), pp. 177–212.

11. Wassif, Ta'rikh-i Wasiif, p. 55; Ayubi, Ta'rikh-i Ta'rikh, p. 22; and see Biran, 'Musici', pp. 140, 144–5.

12. Al-Ummari, Musiliik, 10, pp. 6–353; see also the quote from al-Ummari/Lach, Das Mongolische Weltreich, p. 102 below.


also attest that the war was not total: this was true both for the Mongols — as both Hulagu and his commander found time to hear concerts during the warfare before the city was fully subjugated — and for the Baghdad population, for whom death and violence were not the only option.

Hulagu's commanders were assigned 'looting spans' of one to three days, a description that supports the contention that the sack of Baghdad lasted for a week, as opposed to those sources claiming that it dragged on for thirty to forty days.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the need to obey Hulagu's orders, the leading commanders — or at least the commander in this case — had a certain freedom of action according to their group of the situation, so that they could replace the plunder with 'tribute' from the residents. The ability of the commanders (both Hulagu and Batu) to enjoy a concert before the city was fully subdued (as the caliph was probably still alive), attest to their confidence in the outcome of the campaign.

As for the Baghdad population, Urmawi's example implies that certain groups and individuals managed to survive the conquest by a combination of submission, payment and skills. The alternative to violence was proposed by the Mongol commander, who suggested a safe conduct to those who would surrender and eventually buy their life. Although the tactic of foisting a 'pax or die' proposition on the defeated populace was not alien to the Mongols, Urmawi is the only one to bluntly note that it was imposed on the residents of Baghdad after the conquest: if the Mongols proposed such an option, it was usually before they attacked the city and only if the city offered no opposition.\textsuperscript{15} That said, certain other Baghdad groups are known to have received safe conduct (amün) from Hulagu,


often in return for exorbitant sums of money. While the details vary from source to source, most of them agree that amān was granted to the city’s Christians, the Shi‘ites from Hilla (a town between Baghdad and Kufa), merchants from Khuristan (who already had relations with the Mongols) and several Muslim nobilities.16 The Shi‘ites, merchants and perhaps others indeed secured their lives at considerable cost.17 In all these instances, neighbours flocked to those who received protection, in the hope of saving their own lives. In the Shi‘ites’ case, their leader, Ibn Tawús, attested that all together the safe conduct enabled about 1,000 men (nafs) to find refuge with him.18 As in the case of Umayyad’s quarter, Mongol commanders were dispatched to guarantee the safety of the newly submitted groups, at least in the cases of the Christians and merchants.19

Another way to avoid violence was by skills: there are several other cases in which ‘men of talent’ like Umayr received a safe conduct and an office in the Il-Khānid administration. One of them is Falak al-Dîn Muhammad b. Sayf al-Dîn Aydāmir al-Mustas‘nishī (639/1240–710/1310), a mamlûk of the last ‘Abbasid Caliph who became a notable ‘Abbasid commander and scribe (amīr kātib), and is described as an expert in calligraphy, belles lettres and horsemanship, and was also famed for his beauty. When Baghdad was conquered he ‘remained with the King of the Georgians (Malik al-Kurj; probably the commander of the Georgian troops that fought with Hulagü). Then he was brought to Hulagu, who appointed him as the supervisor (shihāna) of the wise men (lukāmû) who found refuge in his court and were dealing with chemistry’.20 This seems like a case similar to Umayr’s, in which the skills of the conquered subject impressed both the local commander and Hulagu and led to the subject’s joining the future Il-Khânid administration. No payment is mentioned here, but it may have been part of the deal. This story also suggests that other ‘wise men’ were employed in Hulagu’s court, a fact referred to by various sources, most bluntly by Rashīd al-Dīn, who says, ‘A great lover of wisdom, [Hulagu] encouraged the learned to debate the basic sciences and rewarded them with stipends and salaries. His court was adorned by the presence of scholars and wise men (‘alāmad wa-lukâma)’.21

The fate of the famous Baghâdī calligrapher – and Umayr’s student – Yaqūt al-Mustas‘nishī, also a mamlûk and close companion of the last ‘Abbasid Caliph, may have been another example of this pattern. When the conquest began, Yaqūt was hiding from the Mongols in a minaret. He took out a towel over which he wrote a few words in extremely beautiful hand writing.22 We do not know what happened next, but certainly Yaqūt continued to be active under the Il-Khans and won great fame: he is considered one of the top scholars of Aqaq’s reign together with Umayr.23 Thus, we have here two or three examples of extremely talented Muslims, all of whom closely connected to the ‘Abbasid court, who won Hulagu’s grace.

This was also true for some other famous Baghâdī functionaries who sided with Hulagü during the siege, such as the famous vizier Ibn al-‘Alaqmī who retained his post (but died a few months after the conquest), the Caliph’s gâshîb al-duwan (chief financial minister), Fâhr al-Dîn b. al-Dâmgâni and Ibn Darnî. The two last mentioned persons served as the Caliph’s messengers to Hulagu and after the conquest were appointed by him as the gâshîb al-duwan and the artisans’ supervisor, respectively.24 A few lesser Muslim functionaries

16. For example, see Kitâb al-Hawâdîth, pp. 359, 360 and Gilly-Eleyâwī, ‘Al-Hawâdîth’, pp. 367, 368; Boyle, *The Death*, p. 159. According to Tâhir, scholars, sheikhs and whoever offered no resistance to the Mongols were offered amân. He also claims that this option was suggested at the early stages of the conquest. Such an option is also mentioned by Rashād al-Dîn (Rashād al-Dîn, Jami‘, 1, p. 710, and Rashād al-Dîn/Thackston, Jami‘u‘îr-Tawârikh, 2, p. 496) as offered to qâds (judges), scholars, shaykhs, ‘Aldûs, Neotaron priests and ‘persons who do not combat against us’. Christians were spared according to Bar Hebraeus, Chronography, 1, p. 431, and according to the Arabic version of his work, Christians, Shi‘ites and scholars avoided the sword: Ibn al-Thîr (Bar Hebraeus), Ta‘rîkh maktabât al-duwan, 3rd edn (Beirut, 1992), p. 271. Ibn Kathîr notes that the Jews were saved as well: Ibn Kathîr, al-Bidâya, 13, p. 235.


who met Hülegü also received administrative posts. More revealing, the chief judge (qādī al-qudūt) of Baghdad, al-Bandari, newly appointed by al-Mustaṣim in 655/1257, also went to see Hülegü ‘when Baghdad fell’, and secured his continuous employment – he held the position until his death in 667/1269.

In this respect, it is worthwhile referring to another passage of ‘Umair that appears in his history of the Il-Khānate, a part of the volume he devoted to the Mongols in the same encyclopedia from which Urnawi’s story was taken. After describing how the Mongols of Iran married the Persians (a‘qīm) and assimilated with them until in most cases the Mongols acted ‘according to the customs of the Caliph and Malikis while their own (Mongol) laws were set aside’, he says:

When Hülegü conquered Baghdad at first he meant to leave things as they were (i.e. not to destroy the city), but he was unable to do it due to the forcefulness/violence (shidda) of the Mongols who were with him, and the excessive fear (fitna takhanawaf) of the people from them (the Mongols). Because they were so afraid of him they refused to meet him, while he wanted to convince them by obedience and payment not by eliminating the land. Yet the verdict of destiny is impossible to change.

I will return to this paragraph below, for its fatalism, and while it may generally refer to Hülegü’s pre-conquest expectations that the Caliph would surrender peacefully and save him the need to destroy Baghdad, it also fits nicely with Urnawi’s description of obedience and payment as ways to avoid destruction after the conquest. While the text suggests that some of the Mongol troops and commanders were less inclined towards non-violent means, our previous examples show that those who dared to meet Hülegü often secured their life and positions.

What was the benefit of the Mongols from the non-violent arrangements? Financially, the gifts and payments were used not less than the plunder and more easily attained (Urnawi estimated his investment in Hülegü as worth 60,000 dinars – six or twelve annual pensions, that is, a quite considerable sum). Moreover, like former imperial conquerors, the Mongols needed the expertise of the

26. Ibid., The al-Fawwar, Taḥkīm mawṣura al-adabāh, 1, p. 87; Rashed al-Dīn, ʿAṣrī, 1, p. 714
27. Al-ʿUmarī/Loch, Das Mongolische Weltreich, p. 102.
who do not obey us will be destroyed’) continued to be practised quite cruelly in the Mongol advance from Baghdad, into al-Jazīrah and Syria during the conquest of Masyaf, Hama and Aleppo. These areas, despite the Baghdad example, refused to submit immediately. Yet, Hulagu’s arrangements in Baghdad, hardly look like an attack on Islamic civilisation. Instead, it can be argued that Hulagu, while punishing the city for the Caliph’s stubborn behaviour and his refusal to submit, was attempting at maintaining the city’s stability and, furthermore, sought to enhance his kingly reputation by appropriating to his court some of the main representatives of ‘Abbāsid glory.

It may be worth adding that another reason for doubting the alleged anti-Islamic character of the conquest of Baghdad is the fact that many Muslims – mostly Sunnis – took part in Hulagu’s troops. This is best manifested in the newly discovered and published chronicle ascribed to the polymath Qub al-Dīn Shīrāzī (634-710/1236-1311), according to which Hulagu’s troops included segments sent from Turkestan and Transoxania, the Atabegs of Fārs, the Sultans of Rūm (Anatolia), and the kings of Khorāsān, Sīstān, Māzandarān, Kūr, Ruzmūr, Shirwān, Gurgūstān, Iraq, Adharbājjan, Arān and Lūristān, namely all the places already conquered by the Mongols. Apart from the Georgians, these troops were all or mostly Muslim.

HOW WAS THE VIOLENCE LEGITIMIZED?

If we start again with Sa’d al-Dīn Urmarī, while there is no doubt that he was scared to death of the Mongols’ reputed cruelty, he refers to Mongol violence as a fact of life: Urmarī nonchalantly sent the Mongols to loot and capture the residents of other quarters, and he did not condemn the rape that was perpetrated at his home. The Mongols’ actions were considered as a hateful but familiar prerogative of the conquerors, and did not prevent Urmarī from throwing his lot with them.

This mundane description of the violence derived from the fact that the invaders were perceived as divine punishment, as part of God’s plan. This view can also explain the relatively matter-of-fact character of early descriptions of the conquest, such as those of Aḥū Shāma (d. 665/1268), Tūsī (d. 672/1274) or al-Kāzīnī (d. 697/1298) as opposed to its later, more elaborated reconstructions. Certainly, the Mongols embraced this view, presenting themselves as the vanguard of God in their letters to the Caliph and to Muslim and Christian rulers that they contacted before and after Baghdad.

After the conversion of the Mongols to Islam, their violence received a more thorough justification, or God’s plan became clearer. Yet in Baghdad’s case the legitimacy of Mongol violence must have been also related to the quick pace of


38. This is best expressed by Rashīd al-Dīn in his beginning of the story of Chinggis Khan: ‘May it not remain concealed from those of thought and contemplation that every destruction of a country or dispersal of a people that occurs through changeability and mutability in the world of generation and corruption is caused by divine grace and justice and contains within its folds great and magnificent godly wisdom. The carrying out of God’s fate in creating infinite beings necessitates that, since with the passage of eons all things must fall into lassitude, and with the turning of days and nights nations and realms must fall into ruin, in every epoch a great and mighty lord of fortune be singled out by heavenly assistance and garbed in a rainment of power in order to do away with that lassitude and degeneration and to endeavor mightily with his glittering sword to lay down the foundation and base, to cleanse the field of realms, which has become a snare of death, of the deliquence of all types and sorts of evil and self-serving men, and to cause the dust of sedition and corruption to settle.

Rashīd al-Dīn/Thackston, Jami’aTawarikh, 1, pp. 141–2; Rashīd al-Dīn, Jāmi‘, 1, pp. 213–14. This goes much deeper than the general legitimation of violence as God’s plan apparent in the former quotes. In fact, it even brings to mind Sallān’s modern concept of the Strong King, used for justifying colonial rule. (M. Sahlína, ‘The Stronger King’, Indonesia and the Malay World 36,105 (July 2008), pp. 177–99; I thank Dr Yoni Brauner for this reference.)
the post-conquest restoration. For this I would like to cite another evidence, from the biography of ‘Imād al-Dīn Qazwīnī, the deputy of the first Mongol governor of Iraq, which is brought in Ibn al-Fuwāṭī’s biographical dictionary, Ta’līkāt muqtaṣī al-ṣūdādī’. Ibn al-Fuwāṭī (d. 723/1323) personally experienced the fall of Baghdad, lost quite a few relatives there and was himself taken captive. Later, he was bought and released by Naṣr al-Dīn Ţūsī, who brought him to Marāgha. After an illustrious career as a librarian in the Marāgha observatory, in 679/1280–1 he returned to Baghdad, where he served as the librarian of the Mustansīriyya College. In the biography of ‘Imād al-Dīn he says:

When God performed his verdict and ability (qaddā’īra ha and qadarahus) and killed the Caliph, when Baghdad was devastated, its central mosque burned, and the houses of God deserted, then Allah showed his grace, causing the appointment of ‘Imād al-Dīn. He came [to Baghdad and] built mosques and colleges, and restored the shrines and hospices. He gave salaries to scholars, lawyers and suffis from the endowments of these places, and the glory of Islam came back to the city of peace.

The annihilation of the Caliph and the devastation of Baghdad are ascribed here not to Hūlegū or the Mongols but to God himself, namely Mongol violence is part of a divine plan. Moreover, ‘Imād al-Dīn Qazwīnī, who received this generous credit died in 660/1262, i.e. less than four years after the Mongol conquest. According to Ibn al-Fuwāṭī, these four years were enough time for restoring the city to its former religious glory. Undoubtedly, this positive attitude has a lot to do with the Mongols’ decision to leave the city’s endowments intact, thereby continuing to subsidise lecturers and students. They used their investment in scholarly institutions as a powerful tool for co-opting the religious and social elites whose members tend to write histories and lead the public opinion. Of course, contradicting evidence that stress the magnitude of the massacre and devastation and their endurance can easily be found in other sources, but I tend to accept the version of Ibn al-Fuwāṭī, who was by far one of the best-informed


41. This Mongol policy is comparable to the rights conferred in Yuan China upon the Confucian households (ta), that also received pensions for continuing their studies. See M. Biran, ‘Libraries, Books, and Transmission of Knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad’, Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, forthcoming.


46. Notable examples are Ibn al-Sī’i (Pseudo), Kitāb markhazān akhīrār al-khalifa’ī (Caïro, 1891), p. 177 that claims that the Mongols built horse-feeders from the books of the Bagdadi ‘islām’ (the fact that Mongol horses were usually fed on pasture, without feeders, does not give much credibility to this description); al-Saḥīh, Yabālī
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This is also the period in which the most apocalyptic—and nowadays often quoted—descriptions of Baghdad fall were composed at the Mamluk sultanate—by people like al-Dhahabi (d. 749/1349), al-Suhrbi (d. after 769/1368) and Ibn al-Khatir (d. 774/1375). Perhaps after the Il-Khānate’s fall, when the Mamluks had no real enemy vis-à-vis they can define their identity, they tried to magnify the fall of Baghdad in order to boost their subsequent victory in ‘Ayn Jallūt, where they defeated the Mongols in 658/1260. Soon afterwards, however, the great historian Ibn Khalidān (d. 808/1406), while lamenting Baghdad’s fall, saw it as a natural phase in history, which brought to the fore the rise of the Mamluk Turks, who revived the ‘Abbasid caliphate and saved Islam from both the Mongols and the Franks.

In the Turco-Persian medieval and early modern world, not only the references to the conquest’s cultural traumas are few, but the Il-Khānate’s cultural splendour is highlighted: in the Safavid and Ottoman periods the Il-Khānate is remembered mainly due to its ‘men of talents’. The Safavid historian Khwāndamīr finished his description of the ‘Abbasid caliphate not with the death of the last Caliph but with Hulagü’s revival (nahḍat-i Hulagü), praising the many scholars who were active under the Il-Khānate (many of them Baghdadī figures

al-Shāfiʿiyya al-kabūra (Aleppo, 1964), 8, pp. 271–7, who brings plenty of anecdotes of the Mongol anti-Islamic behaviour, e.g., that they—or their Christian troops—forced the Muslims to drink wine and eat pigs in the month of Ramadān (p. 271), as the conquest took place in Mahram, nine months before Ramadān, this is not too credible either; wine was quite common in Baghdad anyhow as is clear from Urmawī’s description); and Ibn Khalidān, Kitāb al-ʿībār (Beirut, 1957), 3, p. 1106; 5, p. 1155, who says that the Mongols threw the Muslim scientific books (zawāhīr al-ʿībār) from Baghdad’s libraries into the Tigris, just like the Muslims did with the Persian books when they conquered al-Maʿādī (in the seventh century). Ibn Khalidān, however, did not think that the Persian culture was ruined after the Arab conquest.


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such as Yaʻqūb or Urmawī),50 and Hulagü’s patronage of scholars is brought as an important part of his legitimation by Muhammad ʿAli Pasha, the Ottoman historian.51 In retrospect the violence of the Mongol conquest was replaced with the brilliance of rule, and the Il-Khān cultural splendour, although this was at least partially because the annihilation of the caliphate facilitated the ability of both Şafawīs and Ottomans to gain legitimation as rulers.

In conclusion, the violence in the Mongol conquest of Baghdad was less total than previously thought and could have been spared by a combination of payment and/or skills. The violence was not directed specifically against Islamic religion or civilisation, the best representatives of which were quite respected by the Mongols. Moreover, even in the Arab world, Mongol violence was understood as legitimate—a hatred right of the conquerors—and as manifesting God’s will. Furthermore, the quick restoration and intellectual growth of Il-Khānī Baghdad, followed by the conquerors’ later conversion to Islam and the Ilkhanate’s cultural splendour, made the violence of the conquest not only legitimate but also rather marginalised in the historical memory of the Turco-Iranian world. It was depicted in apocalyptic light mainly by some historians of the Mamluk sultanate, especially from the mid-fourteenth century, namely after the fall of the Il-Khānate, and due to the Mamluks’ need of legitimation. However, even in the Arab world, the violence of the conquest was eventually downplayed up to the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century and the upheavals of the early twenty-first century.