

Libraries, Books, and Transmission of Knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad

(Michal Biran, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

One of the well known clichés related to the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258 is that following Hulegu's invasion, the Tigris' water blackened from the amount of ink drawn from the books that the Mongols threw into the water. This apparent destruction of the Baghdad libraries is often claimed by Arab nationalists to be point in which Muslim civilization had lost its leading position vis-à-vis the West and began its decline.

However, myths and political agendas notwithstanding, looking at the actual state of the libraries in Ilkhanid Baghdad reveals a picture of thriving intellectual community, in which pre-Mongol libraries (mostly al-Mustansiriyya's) continued to develop, novel libraries were established in newly built *ribats* and *madrasas*, and book trade had been a profitable profession, catering for both personal libraries and the more institutionalized ones.

Based on a close reading in biographical dictionaries and contemporaneous chronicles, mainly in Arabic and Persian, this paper seeks to review and analyze the roles, dimensions and functions of libraries in Ilkhanid Baghdad and to portray the career of several local librarians and book sellers. On the basis of such data, the paper will also discuss the role of the Mongols and their administrators among Baghdad's intellectual community and what impact their rule had on the book culture and on the transmission of knowledge in Ilkhanid Iran.