

The Memory of the Mongols in Central Asia and the Islamic World 1300-1800

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The Mongols had an enormous impact on the Islamic world, destroying the caliphate and introducing a new dynasty claiming universal rule. Throughout former Mongol territories the house of Chinggis Khan became the only legitimate sovereign dynasty. The lasting force of Chinggisid legitimacy sprang from several quite different sources. One was the extraordinary figure of Chinggis himself. Another source was the grandeur of the united empire under his successors, Ögedei and Möngke, who restored order after the trauma of the conquest. Finally, the conversion of Mongol rulers and subjects provided a drama of Islamization recorded in semi-mythical conversion narratives. However, Chinggis himself had not been Muslim, and this presented a problem. By the fourteenth century some Persian histories presented Chinggis Khan himself as almost a prophetic figure, who would have been Muslim under other circumstances.

After the fall of the Mongol Ilkhanate, the eastern and western regions of the central Islamic lands diverged in their use of steppe traditions. In Anatolia, where much of the population descended from western Turks, a competing genealogical tradition developed, leading back to Oghuz Khan, connected to the ancient Turk empire but supposedly a Muslim. In the east, new non-Chinggisid rulers still ruled through puppet khans, and often married into the Chinggisid house. The conqueror Temür went further, and presented himself both as an inheritor of the Chinggisid tradition and as a dynastic founder in his own right. As a Muslim, a charismatic conqueror and a preserver of the Turco-Mongolian heritage, Temür became a new source of legitimacy.

The Ottomans, Safavids, Uzbeks and Mughals all recognized their common ties to the steppe heritage. The Uzbeks presented themselves as restorers of the Chinggisid order, while the Mughals celebrated their descent from both Temür and Chinggis Khan. The Ottomans and Safavids invoked the Timurid cultural heritage, and the Safavids, while emphasizing religious legitimation, also manufactured an historical connection to Temür. The 18th century warlord Nadir Shah put Temür at the center of his legitimation. Finally, when tribal leaders took over Bukhara in the 18th century they turned against the Chinggisids and attached themselves to Temür. Chinggis retained his importance as a towering historical figure, but Temür had largely replaced him as a source for Turco-Mongolian legitimacy in the central Islamic lands.