

EDITED BY  
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# Perceptions of Iran

HISTORY, MYTHS AND NATIONALISM  
FROM MEDIEVAL PERSIA TO  
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

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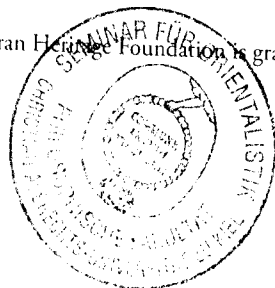
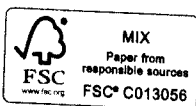
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## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	ix
Introduction <i>Ali M. Ansari</i>	1
1 Myth, history and narrative displacement in Iranian historiography <i>Ali M. Ansari</i>	5
2 History, national identity and myths in Iranian contemporary political thought: Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh (1812–78), Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853–96) and Hassan Taqizadeh (1878–1970) <i>Pejman Abdolmohammadi</i>	25
3 Ancient Iran in the imagination of the medieval West <i>Robert Bartlett</i>	37
4 History and chronology in early modern Iran: the Safavid Empire in comparative perspective <i>Stephen P. Blake</i>	47
5 Historiography in late antique Iran <i>Touraj Daryaei</i>	65
6 Reverse Orientalism: Iranian reactions to the West <i>Farhang Jahanpour</i>	77
7 Herodotus' Cyrus and political freedom <i>Lynette Mitchell</i>	101
8 Iran and the Aryan myth <i>David Motadel</i>	119

## **History and its meaning in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The case of the Mongol invasion(s) and rule**

Anja Pistor-Hatam

### **Introduction**

In his book *Dar khedmat va khiyānat-e roushanfekrān* (On the Service and Treason of the Intellectuals), Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69) asks whether it was not about time to assess the Mongol invasion of Iran anew. Why should Iranians, 800 years after this event, still mourn it and make it responsible for every kind of destruction and decline in their country?<sup>1</sup> Many years later, when Iran had become an Islamic republic, the Iranian-born American publisher Ahmad Jabbari, president of Mazda Publishers, sent an email to the Adabiyat news group. In this message, dispatched on 27 May 2003, Jabbari refers to an exhibition called ‘The Legacy of Genghis Khan. Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353’,<sup>2</sup> held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in succession from November 2002 to July 2003. In response to the exhibition’s heading, Jabbari writes:

The invasion of Iran in [the] thirteenth century by the three sons of Genghis Khan [sic] was brutal. Nearly three million perished in an act of genocide that finds its parallels only in the extermination of Jews and the Armenians in the twentieth century. Given that the Genghis invasion disrupted all kinds of production for nearly three decades and that, the art that followed was wholly that of the Iranian phoenix rising from the ashes (rather than the contributions of its brutal nomadic invaders), we find the title of this exhibition least appropriate and troubling. An analogy that may best explain the displeasure of the Iranian community with this title would be to name Jewish art following Hitler’s atrocities as ‘The Legacy of Hitler’.

This announcement by Jabbari is, of course, very provocative to say the least. First, his analogies do raise many questions concerning the definition of ‘genocide’ in

general, and of the Holocaust in particular, as well as the interrelation of war and genocide all through history.<sup>3</sup> Although the Mongol conquests have been described as ‘genocidal war[s]’,<sup>4</sup> the question remains how we define ‘genocide’; or rather, which of the many political and scholarly definitions proposed since the coinage of the term by Raphael Lemkin (1900–59) and its incorporation and definition in Article II of the UN Convention of 1948 one takes as a basis.<sup>5</sup> Second, the curators of the exhibition, Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni, were certainly not the first scholars to speak of a ‘legacy’ of the Mongols.<sup>6</sup> Third, Āl-e Ahmad’s declaration cited above had apparently been ignored if ‘the Iranian community’, as Jabbari claims, was still troubled by an exhibition called ‘The Legacy of Genghis Khan’ in 2003.

The statement made by Jabbari raises numerous questions. Is it true that Iranians – in our perspective meaning the inhabitants of the Islamic Republic of Iran – nowadays still equate the Mongol invasion and its aftermath (that is, the reign of the Ilkhanids in Iran) merely with devastation, atrocious cruelty and genocide? Has this epoch really left ‘permanent scars’ as J. A. Boyle claims in an article published in the *Cambridge History of Iran*?<sup>7</sup> In her 2007 book on Genghis Khan, Michal Biran contests Muslim authors who ‘treat the Mongols like an apocalyptic whirlwind of destruction, descending from nowhere and leaving swathes of wasteland behind’.<sup>8</sup> Even though the extent of their devastations was enormous and the loss of life was ‘on an unparalleled scale’,<sup>9</sup> there was still a strategy behind their ‘pragmatic cruelty’,<sup>10</sup> Biran says. In addition, one has to be aware that after the conquering came the revival and the reconstruction necessary for the consolidation of an empire.

Yet if we assume that in contemporary Iran, even scholars do primarily envisage the Mongols as barbaric and brutal invaders who lay waste to the Iranian plateau, its thriving cities and blossoming culture, do they also equate ‘Iran’ – whatever this notion may imply – with ‘a phoenix from the ashes’, rising anew after each devastation? In addition, what are the other or competing central ideas in the current Persian narratives concerning the Mongol invasion and rule?

Dealing with current narratives of Mongol history in Iran, one has to consider a number of contextual issues. Closely connected with these narratives and their perceptions of the Mongols is Iranian nationalism, which emerged during the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century. Against all odds, Iranian nationalism as the Pahlavi shahs fortified it seems to be still powerful in the Islamic Republic. Retrospectively, rulers of the Iranian plateau who did not belong to an ‘Iranian culture’ as it was constructed throughout the twentieth century came to be regarded as ‘foreign’. In recently published articles by Iranian authors, one comes across expressions like *bigāne*, ‘foreign’, or *hākemiyat-e bigāne*, ‘foreign rule’. Working with and translating such terms, it has to be considered that the English ‘foreign rule’ was originally translated

from the German word *Fremdherrschaft*.<sup>11</sup> This latter term had been introduced following the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century. It was soon generally associated with such negative connoted concepts as ‘bondage’, ‘oppression’, ‘arbitrariness’ or ‘exploitation’.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, in the case of ‘foreign rule’, nationalistic concepts recognise rulers and the ruled as a dichotomist pair<sup>13</sup> because they are perceived as belonging to different ‘nations’, ‘peoples’, ‘ethnic groups’, ‘creeds’ or – as is particularly important in the case of the Mongols – they are people with dissimilar ways of life, like nomadic and sedentary populations.

The genesis of nationalism is usually related closely to the coming into being of national history. National history, for its part, is strongly entwined with the construction of a national identity. Turning to modern history and the creation or imagining of a modern Iranian nation, the most important question to be asked is: what is the significance of the Mongol invasion concerning a modern Iranian identity and self-awareness? Directly linked to this question is a second one: why should the Mongol invasion be significant as to the meaning that Iranians gain from the creation of their history?<sup>14</sup>

By means of remembrance, history grows into myth. Thereby it does not become imaginary, but, on the contrary, initially develops into reality in the sense of an ongoing normative and formative power,<sup>15</sup> says the Egyptologist Jan Assmann in his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (Cultural Memory). According to Assmann, history and myth are not antagonistic. Regardless of its fictionality or its factuality, the past becomes myth by way of its consolidation and internalisation as history.<sup>16</sup> Myth, as defined by Assmann, does not deny the authenticity of events. On the contrary, it accentuates their binding nature for the future.<sup>17</sup> The internalised past – that is, the past that is remembered – expresses itself in the form of the narrative. The past is never remembered for its own sake.<sup>18</sup> Instead, remembrance as an act of the endowing of meaning results in the fact that only the significant past will be remembered and that only the past that is remembered is significant.<sup>19</sup>

If past events are remembered because they are significant, the question comes to mind in which way they are significant. What kind of meaning do these past events have in regard to those who narrate them? In the introduction to his book *The Mind of Egypt. History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (2002), Assmann states:

History is seen here above all in terms of the way changes, crises, and new departures reflect shifts in existing structures of meaning. Their sequence may indeed be understood as a ‘development’, but only as long as we resist seeing it simply as progress and decline – that is, as a one-way process heading straight for some ineluctable destination. If we discern coherence in this process, it is a coherence we owe to cultural memory and the way it contrives to take past meaning preserved in the written word and the pictorial image, reactivate it, and incorporate it into the semantic paradigms of the present. [...] History is a profoundly human affair: we produce it by producing

meaning. A 'history of meaning' discusses history as a cultural form in which the course of events forms the backdrop and the discourses generating and reflecting meaning occupy the front of the stage.<sup>20</sup>

The meaningful structure of the world we live in, Assmann goes on, is made up of collective projections and fictions: 'Hence narration and the construction of fictions of coherence is not simply and solely the work of historians, but rather a necessary condition for any kind of historical awareness, any experience of history.'<sup>21</sup> Drawing on Assmann's idea of the history of meaning (*Sinngeschichte*),<sup>22</sup> this chapter will look into the way Iranian authors relate to the Mongol invasions and their rule, the way they construct meaning and fictions of coherence to incorporate the Mongol legacy into the Iranian past and present. Consequently, by using a hermeneutical approach,<sup>23</sup> the aim of this chapter is to bring out the 'fabrications, constructions, and projections – the fashioning of meaning'.<sup>24</sup> It concentrates on articles collected in the proceedings of two conferences published in Tehran in 2000–1. These conferences concerning the Mongol invasion of Iran took place at the Shahīd Beheshtī University in Tehran in 1996 and 1997, respectively. Three years later, the same university printed two volumes of proceedings entitled *Hodjūm-e moghūl be Irān va pey-āmadhā-ye ān* (The Mogul [sic] Invasion and Aftermath).<sup>25</sup>

### Like a phoenix from the ashes

The two volumes of The Mogul Invasion and Aftermath, as the English title of *Hodjūm-e moghūl be Irān va pey-āmadhā-ye ān* is incorrectly given, contain a message of greeting by the then president of Shahīd Beheshtī University, Dr Hādī Nadīmī, whose profession is architecture. This is followed by a short preface written by Dr Allāhyār Hal 'atbarī, professor at the same university's history department with a PhD in the history of Islam. The two volumes of the proceedings include 58 articles, presented by scholars and PhD students alike. They deal with a range of subjects like architecture and urban development, trade, miniature painting, books and libraries, Mongolian rulers and their Iranian viziers, the religions of the Mongols, the Khvarazmshahs and the events at Otrār, poetry, Mongolian tents, literature, European travelogues, metallurgy or Mongolian foreign policy. The study presented here focuses on those articles or parts of articles that concentrate on the historical and political aspects of the Mongol invasion under Genghis Khan and Mongol rule under the Ilkhanids; the reasons that are given for the invasion; and how the situation in Iran after the invasions and the way it affected the people and the land of 'Iran' are described.

As a preliminary remark it has to be stated that neither in the proceedings nor in most of the bulk of the literature on the Mongols in Iran consulted so far is

the territory of 'Iran' of this time defined, let alone any kind of real or imagined political Iranian unity. Keeping in mind that a political and territorial concept of 'Iran' had vanished entirely after the Muslim conquest in the middle of the seventh century AD, one cannot be sure where to put the borders of this presumed territorial or political entity non-existent before the establishment of the Mongol *ulus* and, later, the state of the Ilkhanids.<sup>26</sup> The notion of 'Iran' as a 'territory, which pertained to generations of Iranians' who 'claimed territorial ownership'<sup>27</sup> evolved at the end of the nineteenth century and is still influential today. However, if used for pre-Mongolian times, this concept is misleading. Therefore, 'Iran' in the time of Mongolian rule shall be confined to the region of 'Greater Iran' – that is, the territories of modern Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

According to many authors writing through the ages, the Mongol invasion was a traumatic experience for the conquered peoples of the Iranian plateau. As stated above, this invasion has recently been equalled in its terrible consequences, as well as in the exact number of those killed, with the barbarous and well-organised annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany. Leaving aside the questions of whether the number of those killed by the Mongols has been exaggerated and whether the sources tell us anything at all about 'what really happened', this section will concentrate on the significance of the Mongol invasion with regard to the meaning of this invasion considering the construction of Iranian history and, of course, identity.

Pre-modern Muslim historians tried to explain why 'unbelievers' from the steppes outside of the Muslim realm were able to conquer Muslim lands and rule over its Eastern parts at all. Due to the fright and horror inflicted upon them by their defeat at the hands of the Mongols, the authors of Muslim sources often overestimate the numbers of those killed by the Mongol invasion. To justify this terrifying occasion as part of their own salvation history, Shi'ite authors writing in the centuries after the incidence often refer to Alī b. Abī Tālib. He is believed to have predicted the destruction of sinful Baghdad and the termination of the usurpatory Abbasid Dynasty by horsemen from the steppe in an apocalyptic divination.<sup>28</sup> The wrong done to the (as Shi'ites see it) legitimate successor of the prophet and his family had finally been reciprocated. Consequently, the Mongols were just the divine tools of an overdue penalisation.<sup>29</sup> We may therefore conclude that Shi'ite historians of the middle period tried to give a meaning to the Mongol invasion of most of the Abbasid Empire, the destruction of Baghdad and the killing of the caliph by integrating it into Shi'ite salvation history. Most of these authors, however, wrote in Arabic and lived outside the Mongol Empire. Iranian historians writing under Mongol rule and for their Mongol sovereigns had a more difficult task to accomplish. Whereas Atā Malek Djoveynī, who witnessed the second Mongol invasion personally, found himself in the difficult situation of having to justify 'as much to himself as to his readers, the terrible calamities that

had overtaken Islam',<sup>30</sup> Rashīd od-Dīn lived in a time of well-established Mongol rule. Although, just as Djoveynī, he could not represent the Mongol invasion and their rule simply as beneficial, he heavily relied on Ghāzān Khān, a convert to Islam. According to Rashīd od-Dīn, Ghāzān Khān or Soltān Mahmūd, the *pādeshāh-e eslām* 'was the apotheosis and justification of Mongol rule, a great monarch who had brought Persia back into the Muslim fold and who had set himself to reform abuses from humanitarian as well as pragmatic motives'.<sup>31</sup> Even if the Mongol conquest in itself had been horrifying for the conquered peoples, something good had at last come out of it: a just Muslim ruler.

Yet at least the presentation of the Mongol invasion as part of Muslim salvation history is lacking in the proceedings' articles. Instead, various historical and political reasons are discussed that may have led to the raid by Genghis Khan and his troops. Relying on historians of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some of the contributors mention internal political rivalries between the Khvārazm Shāh Soltān Alā od-Dīn Mohammad, on the one hand, and his mother and her followers, on the other. One of them quotes Will and Ariel Durant's statement that 'a great civilisation is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within'.<sup>32</sup> Already enfeebled by Saldjukid rule, Iran, and particularly Persian scholarship, was made completely powerless by the Mongol invasion.<sup>33</sup> Another argument frequently brought forward states that the moral condition in Iran had been weakened long before by luxury, differences of opinion and conflicts between various sects, corruption, depravity and sexual offence. When the Mongol 'unbelievers', a people of brutal nature (*derande-khū*), vindictive (*kīne-djū*) and bloodthirsty (*khūn-khvār*), finally attacked, they did not encounter strong resistance.<sup>34</sup> Overall, it was due to the arrogance and stubbornness of the Khvarazm shahs as well as the fanaticism (*ta'assob*) of the common people that the Mongols were able to set foot on Iranian soil at all.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the increase of flattery (*tamallogh*) and hypocrisy (*tazvīr*) that had taken place before the Mongol invasion damaged Iran to such an extent, summarises one author, that its influence is still visible in the warp and woof (*tār-o pūd*) of its people's lives.<sup>36</sup>

Searching for reasons to explain the Mongol victory, the enmity between the Khvarazm Shah and the Abbasid caliph is equally seen as having resulted in a weakening of the political situation in Iran, causing the Abbasids to provoke the Mongols to invade.<sup>37</sup> According to the historians of the time and to some of the contributors cited here, Soltān Mohammad of Khvarazm was the actual culprit responsible for the Mongol invasion. When he ordered a group of merchants coming from the Mongol Empire to be killed in Otrār in 1218, this was the pretence the Mongols had waited for to invade Iran. Other scholars, however, point to the fact that the Mongols had made their plans already, because nomads always invaded the territory of weaker neighbours. Furthermore, the Mongols had wanted to control the important trade routes leading from their territories to

the Mediterranean and to Europe, at any rate.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Soltān Mohammad Shāh is repeatedly accused of having been politically naive. On the one hand, he did not realise how powerful and dangerous his neighbours to the east had become when he expanded his realm that way. On the other hand, he provoked the Abbasid caliph when he sent his armies westward and by revoking his loyalty.<sup>39</sup> As far as the end of Abbasid rule is concerned, at least in one of the articles, this is estimated in a nationalistic sense. Since, as the author says, the Abbasids inhibited Iranian liberation movements as well as Iranian unity, their subjugation by Hülegü and his allies could be regarded as a chance. This author, it may be pointed out here, is in accordance with Jalal Al-e Ahmad's reading of Hülegü's invasion.<sup>40</sup>

In spite of the disastrous effects and the incomparableness of the Mongol invasion claimed by some of the authors cited here, others perceive the Mongol assault as one of many such incursions, albeit the most disastrous one, into Iranian territory. Alexander the Great, followed by the Muslim Arabs and then the Mongols, led the first of these raids<sup>41</sup> – others also name the Ghaznavids, Saldjukids and other Turkic peoples.<sup>42</sup> Iranians accepted Arab rule because the Arabs came as the heralds (*payām-āwarān*) of Islam, preaching brotherhood, equality and justice. Yet they refused to accept the sovereignty of arrogant (*khvod-kāme*) and racist (*nejād-gerāyān*) Arabs (*tāzīyān*). The Saldjukid invasion (*tork-tāzī*), for its part, turned into a long-lasting reign because the Saldjukids protected the Abbasid caliph and Sunni Islam. However, members of the Iranian elite later administrated much of the territory conquered by the Saldjukids.<sup>43</sup> The Arab invaders are blamed for bringing their tribal rivalries to Iran. Shortly after their conquest, Islamic ideals were replaced by tribal feuds and Arab control over Iranians. In addition, the clashes and debates of different religious schools, theological groups, Shi'ite revolts, Ismaili missions and so on instigated wars between provinces, which penetrated into the cities, and towns, causing internal fighting as a result.<sup>44</sup> Chaos prevailed and the people became used to the fact that they belonged neither to one religion (*dīn*) nor to one homeland (*mīhan*).<sup>45</sup>

In an article that compares the situation of the main towns in Khorasan before and after the Mongol conquest, a closer look is shed on Bukhara. Before the Muslim conquest, the town is said to have been one of the main cultural centres of Iran. When Bukhara was invaded by the Umayyad ruler Mu'āwīya's (r. 661–80) army commander 'Ubaidullāh b. Ziyād, many people were killed and large numbers of the male population were enslaved. After the town had prospered again in Islamic times – mainly during the Samanid period – the Mongols captured it in 1220. Libraries were burnt, the city was set on fire and a large part of its population was carried off to Samarkand.<sup>46</sup>

Iranians are also purported to have found a subversive way of resisting their new masters. In the case of the Umayyads and Abbasids as well as the Mongols, they used their influence at the court and elsewhere to give the Arabic and the

Mongol usurpers their own 'Iranian complexion' (*rang-e irānī*). As in Rashīd od-Dīn's famous history of the Mongols, Ghāzān Khān is often cited as a just ruler, having been, of course, influenced by Islam and his Iranian advisors. Accordingly, although the Mongol invasion proved to be disastrous, the Ilkhanids' Iranian viziers tried to rebuild their realm. In a time when the destructions were visible everywhere, says one contributor, Rashīd od-Dīn proved to be a considerate and refined cultivator (*ābād-konandē*).<sup>47</sup> Most of all, he cared for the welfare of the people, and tried to reduce poverty that was caused by unjust rule. At a time when deceit was the order of the day at the sovereign court, Rashīd od-Dīn showed nothing but sincerity (*sadāqat*), purity (*ekhlās*) and modesty (*hosn-e amal*), while devoting himself to the history of his people (*mellat*) and his fatherland (*mīhan*).<sup>48</sup> When Ghāzān Khān converted to Islam, a new era began in Iran. The 'Iranian religion [!] and language' (*dīn-o zabān-e irānī*) were made official, causing an era of rejuvenation of Iranian culture.<sup>49</sup> As far as this contributor is concerned, the Mongols finally capitulated in the face of a more powerful civilisation, leaving their Mongolian heritage to turn to the ancient Iranian culture.<sup>50</sup> While the Mongol invasion has to be regarded as a profound rupture in Iran, its particular national culture and civilisation (*farhang-o tamaddon-e mellī-ye Irān*) could not be destroyed.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, when the dust of slaughtering and destruction had finally settled, defeated Iran once more gained the upper hand on the cultural field. Like other conquerors before them, the Mongols gradually turned into Iranians. They earned Iranian honour and ambition, and tried to link themselves and their ancestors to the glorious Iranian past.<sup>52</sup>

If we take a look at the history of this region [that is, Iran], we witness procedures each of which accounts for the destruction of a powerful civilisation (*tamaddon-e kāfī*). Nevertheless, this ancient land (*sarzamīn-e kohan*) has endured thousands of invasions, aggressions and assaults by various peoples. Each time it seemed that its name would be extinguished. Yet, like a phoenix rising from the ashes (*qoqnūs az khākestar*), Iran arises again to superior heights, more adamant and enduring than ever before. She keeps upright and resumes her life.<sup>53</sup>

In order to be able to rise to new heights after the Mongol invasion, Iranian customs and civilisation had to survive in secure havens like the southern province of Fars, Asia Minor and Sind in India. Many poets of Persian literature fled to these hideouts and took not only their own poetry, but also Persian poetry, with them. Iran, it is stated, possessed an inner strength protecting Iranian art and culture against its obliteration. Some of the contributors refute that important changes in the arts and handicrafts of Iran were brought about by Mongol rule and, very importantly in this regard, through Chinese artistic impact. Contrary to what the curators of the exhibition on Genghis Khan and the Ilkhanids describe as their 'legacy', and in agreement with the above-quoted Ahmad Jabbari, these scholars can only detect an extrinsic Mongolian influence on Iranian arts. In fact,

as one article mentions, the true changes in artistic expressions evolved from an innate Iranian art: 'There has always been an inner power (*nīrū'i darūnī*) that protected and defended our arts and saved Iranian culture from destruction and extinction.'<sup>54</sup>

There is also one article trying to explain the subjection of the peoples on the Iranian plateau in psychological terms relating to Mongol psychological warfare – their 'pragmatic cruelty' as Michal Biran calls it. When the Mongol invasion under Genghis Khan began in 1219, Soltān Mohammad Shāh is said to have been overwhelmed by fear.<sup>55</sup> Dread, the same author writes, led the people of Khvarazm to irrational actions and superstition. In this way, they lost their power of reason, their determination and even the possibility of showing any reaction at all.<sup>56</sup> Because Genghis Khan and the Mongols were attributed with divine features and believed to be God's own soldiers, people were terrified.<sup>57</sup> In conclusion, states the same author, it was not least fear and the belief in the supernatural powers of the Mongols that led to the subjugation of Iranians. Ultimately, Iranians were conquered by their own ignorance regarding the true power and capability of the Mongols. Fear and terror were constantly instilled into their hearts so that they could neither fight nor take flight.<sup>58</sup>

In connection with the Mongol invasion and, later, the rule of the Ilkhanids in Iran, trade is seen as an important issue. Nomads often controlled trade routes, says one author, these being important meeting places for the representatives of various cultures like the Chinese, Irano-Islamic, Russian, Indian or European cultures. Iranian advisors – even a woman is mentioned here – who went to the Mongol court in China made sure that trade prospered and that the Persian language and Islam spread out in this part of the world.<sup>59</sup> Even though the Mongols shattered large parts of Iran, they also made possible the spreading of Irano-Islamic culture to other regions. At the same time, Muslims became acquainted with the cultures, literatures and histories of China, India and the Mongols themselves.<sup>60</sup> One of the contributors even goes so far as to say that the two ancient civilisations (*tamaddon-e kohan*) of China and Iran created a wholly new culture.<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion

As mentioned above, it is not the intention of this chapter to contrast the image created of the Mongol invasion and its aftermath by the articles of Iranian scholars cited here with the findings and assessments of other researchers.<sup>62</sup> Rather, the intention is to find out what meaning these and other Iranian students of Iranian history gained by constructing this particular part of the history of the Iranian plateau. Although a well-known fact, we should remember that many non-Iranian scholars also participated in the construction of an image that presented the Mongols simply as the destroyers of the great Islamic civilisation of the middle

period.<sup>63</sup> So, for example, E. G. Browne ‘saw in the Mongol invasion “a catastrophe which [...] changed the face of the world, set in motion forces which are still effective, and inflicted more suffering on the human race than any other event in the world’s history of which records are preserved to us”’.<sup>64</sup> Many Iranian students of history used the different threads of the narratives of contemporary Iranian and Arab historians, as well as the findings of European and American scholars,<sup>65</sup> to weave their own tapestry. This tapestry shows an image of Iran as an eternal, homogeneous cultural entity<sup>66</sup> shaped by the Persian language and its literature, as well as a certain understanding of just, central rule. Additionally, the civilisation thus imagined is presented as having been an urban civilisation. Ignoring the large contingent of nomadic peoples living in Iran at least since the coming of the Saldjukids, a dichotomy is composed of an ancient Iranian urbanised civilisation with a highly developed culture on the one hand, and a barbaric, uncivilised, unrefined, ignorant, ungodly and bloodthirsty people from the steppe on the other hand. The ‘other’ is constructed as the absolute antonym of the ‘self’ when these attributes are applied. To be sure, not all of the contributors to the mentioned proceedings agree, but the overall impression given in the books is one of the construction of a ‘self’ and an antagonistic ‘other’ as I have just described. Despite frequent nomadic onslaughts, be they Arab, Mongol or otherwise, the allegedly urban civilisation of Iran has been indestructible. Moreover, ‘Iran’ seems to remain within the cultural hemisphere of the Near Eastern Islamic world, although its reintegration into the central Asian world and beyond by becoming part of the Mongol Empire can hardly be ignored.<sup>67</sup>

If, as Assmann claims, remembrance is an act of the endowment of meaning and only the past that is significant will be remembered, then we have to conclude that the Mongol period in Iranian history was significant and that it has been endowed with meaning. The writing of history is a profoundly political act. Those who are writing historical narratives, and who select past events to be remembered and told, usually have more in mind than just to convey ‘what really happened’. Because nationalism has yet not been replaced by more powerful or more convincing ideologies, usually history is still written as national history. Therefore, it needs to have a meaning concerning the past and present of a ‘nation’. Helping to create a ‘national identity’, historiography has to fulfil certain needs. Additionally, the functional dimension of the meaning of history implies that this same meaning is relevant for the individual’s or the community’s problems to adjust to the present<sup>68</sup> and its contingencies. An important functional dimension provided by the cited texts surely is the ostensible fact that however disastrous the invasions by ‘uncivilised others’ on Iranian soil may have been, the ‘inner power’ of ‘Iranianness’ could not and cannot be destroyed. On the contrary, the ‘Iranian complexion’ was donned on these ‘others’<sup>69</sup> – these ‘foreign rulers’ and representatives of purportedly weaker civilisations. Also, the Mongols were allegedly only

able to conquer ‘Iran’ because its peoples were caught in internal political and tribal rivalries, moral decay and religious sectarianism, originally brought about by the Arab invaders some centuries earlier. These same Arabs incidentally also brought Islam, which, according to one of the authors cited here, simply became an ‘Iranian religion’.

Although individual Iranian scholars working and writing in Pahlavi Iran as well as in the Islamic Republic did and do discuss the Mongols and their legacy from various perspectives, thereby trying to shape an unbiased image, the Mongols have frequently been reduced to an alien destructive force by historical narratives of the twentieth century. Many of the texts mentioned here corroborate the idea of a purportedly eternally existing and indestructible ‘Iranianness’ – this could be the basis of the past’s fundamental consistency (*Fundament der Kontinuität*) making remembrance worthwhile.<sup>70</sup> In spite of the damage done to vast parts of Asia and Europe by the Mongol invaders, positive developments as, for example, in trade are equally described – here we find a possible driving force for progress (*Motor der Entwicklung*).<sup>71</sup>

What kind of meaning, then, do Iranians gain from the way the Mongol invasion has been interpreted? It seems that this meaning is strongly interwoven with the construction of a nationalist Iranian self to be observed since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to 1911 and especially during the following era of the Pahlavis. The same ‘barbaric and ungodly’ Mongols who wrought havoc in Iran and elsewhere laid the foundation for a territorial unity constitutive for a sense of an Iranian self until this very day.<sup>72</sup> Apart from the assumption that at the time the Mongol invasion constituted a traumatic experience for its victims, there remains the question why it had to be remembered as such. Surely it is no accident that the way the Mongol invasion is described very much resembles the description of the Arab invasion. Iran, as it is collectively imagined in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is understood as a homogeneous entity in opposition to non-Persian nomadic invaders, whether Muslims or ‘unbelievers’. Whatever their atrocities, be they the mass killings of human beings or the burning of precious libraries, the myth claiming that ‘Iran’ cannot be destroyed, but will always rise from the ashes, has to be repeated and remembered constantly. As one of the contributors to the mentioned proceedings emphasises, it belongs to the wonders of social life that the ‘Iranian nation’ (*mellat-e Īrān*) showed steadfastness when confronted with the Mongol invasion and in the face of a thousand years of foreign rule (*hākemīyat-e biḡāne*).<sup>73</sup> It would be interesting to find out, though, how much local history as it is remembered in various localities of Iran is commemorated differently from a unified national history.<sup>74</sup> Additionally, the question remains whether the Mongol invasions and rule were remembered in a certain way through the ages, or whether this part of Iranian history was only recently excavated again to serve special political and nationalistic needs.



Obviously, this creation of an indestructible Iranian self contrasts with historical reality. The Achaemenids were finally defeated by Alexander, the Sasanian Empire conquered by the Muslim Arabs, and the Khvarazm shahs and other rulers of thirteenth-century Iran were subdued by the Mongols. Although it never submitted to colonial status officially, modern Iran was divided into Russian and British spheres of influence and military dominance. This has been followed by American supremacy and open threats of invasion today. It may well be that the image created by modern Iranian scholars is the only way to depict a strong self – that is, an Iranian national entity – which in the face of predominant aggressors may always rely on its eternal cultural heritage, an ontological nucleus that never has been and never will be fissioned.

Let us finally return to the statements made by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ahmad Jabbari, the two authors who referred to the Mongols in opposite ways. Considering the central ideas brought forward in the mentioned proceedings published by Shahīd Beheshti University, we may conclude that there are, at least among the scholars cited here, Iranians who still mourn the Mongol invasion of Iran and make it responsible for destruction and decline in their country. And yes, some of these scholars believe that there exists an Iranian phoenix rising from the ashes which is solely responsible for the persistent existence of an ‘Irano–Islamic culture’. Taking the same line as Ahmad Jabbari, the then president of Shahīd Beheshti University, Hādī Nadīmī, even goes so far as to equate the number of people killed by the Mongols with the number of Jews murdered in Europe during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, other contributors to the publication under consideration here concentrate on issues like the expansion of trade or the spreading of the Irano–Islamic culture as far as China. In response to Ahmad Jabbari’s assertion that ‘the Iranian community’ was displeased with an exhibition bearing the title ‘The Legacy of Genghis Khan’, it may be concluded that at least part of its scholarly community in Iran is in agreement with the international community of scholars engaged in Iranian history that there certainly exists a Mongol legacy in Iran and beyond.

### Notes

1. Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Dar khedmat va khiyānat-e roushanfekrān* (Tehran, 1372sh/1993), 186–93.
2. Linda Kamaroff and Stefano Carboni (eds), *The Legacy of Genghis Khan. Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353* (New York, 2002).
3. Some scholars have used the term ‘holocaust’ before to describe the Mongol invasions. Yet they used the term in a more general sense and did not directly compare the Mongol onslaught with the atrocities of Nazi Germany. See, for example, *Ira Lapidus, A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, 2002), 226.

4. Adam Jones, *Genocide. A Comprehensive Introduction* (Oxford and New York, 2006), 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 10–22.
6. See, for example, Reuven Amitai-Preiss and David Morgan (eds), *The Mongol Empire and Its Legacy* (Leiden *et al.*, 1999).
7. J. A. Boyle, ‘The socio-economic condition of Iran under the Īl-Khāns’, in J. A. Boyle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. V: The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), 483–537, 556.
8. Michal Biran, *Chinggis Khan* (Oxford, 2007), 63.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 64.
11. Christian Koller, *Fremdherrschaft. Ein politischer Kampfbegriff im Zeitalter des Nationalismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 18.
13. *Ibid.*, 38.
14. For the ‘meaning of history’, see Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt. History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs* (New York, 2002), especially the introduction.
15. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1992), 52. (All translations from German and Persian are mine.)
16. Assmann, *Gedächtnis*, 72.
17. *Ibid.*, 77.
18. *Ibid.*, 75.
19. *Ibid.*, 77.
20. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, viii.
21. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
22. The German title of Assmann’s book is *Ägypten. Eine Sinngeschichte. Sinngeschichte* has here been translated into English as ‘history and meaning’ instead of ‘the meaning of history’. If I understand it correctly, this translation tries to reflect that *Sinngeschichte* does not repeat the notion of *der Sinn der Geschichte* – that is, the (singular) meaning (or sense) of history as it was discussed in Germany since the nineteenth century, but instead focuses on the meaning given to history by those who try to interpret it. For further discussion see some of the articles presented in Jörn Rüsen (ed.), *Meaning and Representation in History* (New York and Oxford, 2006).
23. I will use the definition suggested by Jörn Rüsen: ‘[...] I follow the hermeneutical rule first of all to take the view of the author in order to understand him as he sees himself, and then to be able to criticise him from there instead of applying a standard which would be alien to him.’ ([...] *ich folge der hermeneutischen Regel, mich zunächst auf den Standpunkt des Autors selbst zu stellen, ihn aus dem Horizont seines Selbstverständnisses heraus zu verstehen und ihn von daher zu kritisieren und nicht mit einem Maßstab zu messen, der ihm fremd ist.*) Jörn Rüsen, *Zerbrechende Zeit. Über den Sinn der Geschichte* (Köln, 2001), 265.
24. *Ibid.*, 8.
25. The conference proceedings analysed here are only one of a not very large number of publications on the Mongols in Iran since 1979. In regard to the perception of

- Mongol rule in modern Iran, further research will include more texts in order to see if the findings presented here can be generalised.
26. The first scholar to point out this fact seems to have been Dorothea Krawulski, 'Zur Wiederbelebung des Begriffs "Iran" zur Ilkhânzeit', in Dorothea Krawulski, *Mongolen und Ilkhâne. Ideologie und Geschichte* (Beirut, 1989), 113–30. See also Bert G. Fragner, 'Iran under Ilkhanid rule in a world history perspective', in Denise Aigle (ed.), *L'Iran face à la domination mongole. Etudes réunies et présentées par Denise Aigle* (Tehran, 1997), 121–31, 127–9; Bert G. Fragner, 'Die Mongolen und ihr Imperium', in Bert G. Fragner and Andreas Kappeler (eds), *Zentralasien 13. bis 20. Jahrhundert. Geschichte und Gesellschaft* (Wien, 2006), 103–19, 114. Some non-Iranian researchers even claim that Shi'ism was established as a 'national religion' due to the conversion of Öldjeytü to Twelver Shi'ism. Charles Melville, 'The Mongols in Iran', in Linda Kamaroff and Stefano Carboni (eds), *The Legacy of Genghis Khan. Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353* (New York, 2002), 37–61, 58, referring to Bausani, Calmard and Pfeiffer.
  27. Kashani-Sabet, *Firoozeh: Frontier Fictions. Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804–1946* (Princeton, 1999), 132.
  28. Heinz Halm, *Die Schia* (Darmstadt, 1988), 79. R. Strothmann, *Die Zwölfer-Schia. Zwei religionsgeschichtliche Charakterbilder aus der Mongolenzeit* (Leipzig, 1926), 44.
  29. Strothmann (1926), 45–6.
  30. J. A. Boyle, 'Juvayni and Rashid al-Din as sources on the history of the Mongols', in Bernard Lewis and Peter M. Holt (eds), *Historians of the Middle East* (London et al., 1962), 133–7, 133.
  31. David Morgan, 'Rašid al-Din and Gazan Khan', in Denise Aigle (ed.), *L'Iran face à la domination mongole. Etudes réunies et présentées par Denise Aigle* (Tehran, 1997), 179–88, 186.
  32. Seyyed 'Ali Mohammad Sadjjadi, 'Balâ-ye yazdân yâ khatâ-ye soltân', in *Hodjüm-e moghül be İrân va pey-âmadhâ-ye ân* (The Mogul [sic] Invasion and [Its] Aftermath, 2 vols) (Dânešgâh-e Shahid-e Beheshti, Tehran, 1379sh (2000/1)), vol. II, 701–11, 701. The original version of the quotation is to be found in Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilisation*, 11 vols (New York, 1935–75), vol. 3, 776.
  33. Farid Qasemlû, 'Negareshi bar asar-e hamle-ye moghül dar taghyir-e mobâdi-ye 'elmi-ye İrân', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 883–905, 892–3.
  34. Nür Allâh Kasâ'i, 'Sar-gozasht-e dânešmandân-o marâkez-e dâneš dar hamle-ye moghül', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 955–97, 956–7.
  35. Kasâ'i, *Sar-gozasht*, 990.
  36. Seyyed Ebrâhim Foyüzât, 'Tahavvol-e farhangî dar 'asr-e moghül', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 871–81, 879.
  37. Hosein Âlyârî, 'Chengîz-o 'Alâ' od-Dîn Mohammad Khvârazmshâh', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. I, 41–51; Mahbûbe Sharafî, 'Ellal-e tahâdjom-e moghülân-o naqsh-e khalife-ye 'abbâsi dar in tahâdjom', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 765–92, 781–6.
  38. Sharafî, 'Ellal-e tahâdjom', p. 778; Seyyed 'Abbâs Razavî, 'Ellal-e tahâdjom-e moghülân be-İrân', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, 639–52, p. 650.
  39. Kasâ'i, *Sar-gozasht*, 960. In contemporary Arabic sources, Soltân Mohammad Shâh is equally described as the mainly responsible person. Cf. Biran: *Chinggis Khan*, S. 112.
  40. See this author's 'Writing back? Ğalâl Âl-e Aḥmad's (1923–69) reflections on selected periods of Iranian history', in *Iranian Studies*, 40 (2007), 559–78, see especially 564–6.
  41. Dâvod Esfahâniyân, 'Ta'sir-e ilghâr-e moghül dar masir-e târikh-e İrân', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. I, 71–80, 71.
  42. Šarafi, 'Ellal-e tahâdjom', 777.
  43. Kasâ'i, *Sar-gozasht*, 955–6.
  44. *Ibid.*, 959.
  45. *Ibid.*, 960.
  46. Mohammad Fârûq Shâdorvân, 'Maqâyese-ye ouzâ '-e shahrhâ-ye khvorâsân dar qabl-o ba'd az hamle-ye moghül', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. 2, 815–37, 819–22.
  47. Rezâ Sha'bânî, 'As'ale-o adjuvâbe-ye Rashidi', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 803–14.
  48. Sha'bânî, *As'ale*, 805.
  49. Foyüzât, *Tahavvol-e farhangî*, 876.
  50. *Ibid.*, 877.
  51. *Ibid.*, 879.
  52. Kasâ'i, *Sar-gozasht*, 990.
  53. Esfandyâr Âhandjideh, 'Degargünihâ-ye monâsebât-e arzî-o mâliyâti dar 'asr-e moghülân', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. I, 53–70, 53.
  54. Mansûreh Sâbetzâdeh, 'Dezh-e honar dar taqâbel-e moghül', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. I, 381–94, 382.
  55. Mohammad Salmâsîzâde, 'Homâ-ye eqbâl-o sedâ-ye edbâr', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 724–44, 732–3.
  56. Salmâsîzâde, *Homâ-ye eqbâl*, 735.
  57. *Ibid.*, 741–3.
  58. *Ibid.*, 744.
  59. Ma'sûd Sharqî, 'Tedjârat dar 'abd-e ilkhânân-e moghül', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 793–801, 793–5.
  60. Mahmûd Fazilat, 'Yüresh-e moghül be-İrân va bâz-tâb-e ân dar zabân-o adabiyât-e fârsî', in *Hodjüm-e moghül*, vol. II, 839–69, 859.
  61. Foyüzât, *Tahavvol-e farhangî*, 875.
  62. Of course, as scholars we also need a 'scientific image of the past' – that is, a 'Realgeschichte' – in order to understand in which way meaning was attributed to history retrospectively. Gerhard Kaiser, 'War der Exodus ein Sündenfall', in Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München and Wien, 2003), 239–71, 243.
  63. See, for example, Bernard Lewis, *Islam in History: Ideas, Men and Events in the Middle East* (London 1973), 179.
  64. Quoted from *ibid.*, 180. Obviously, Browne did not take into consideration that brutal manslaughter – be it in the wake of war or otherwise – seems to be part of man's characteristic behaviour as to be witnessed throughout known history.
  65. Hardly any works published after 1979 in languages other than Persian have been used by the authors quoted here.
  66. Sivan describes three centres of national memory, among them the nation as 'eternal entity on inviolable national territory'. Emmanuel Sivan, 'Symbols et rituels arabes', *Annales ESC* 4 (1990), no. 4, 1005–17, quoted from Jocelyn Dakhliâ, 'New

- approaches in the history of memory? A French model', in Angelika Neuwirth and Andreas Pfitsch (eds), *Crisis and Memory in Islamic Societies. Proceedings of the Third Summer Academy of the Working Group Modernity and Islam held at the Orient Institute of the German Oriental Society in Beirut* (Würzburg, 2001), 59–74, 60.
67. Fragner, *Iran under Ilkhanid Rule*, 121–31; see also Melville, *The Mongols in Iran*, 43.
68. Regarding the functional dimensions of historic meaning, see Rösen, *Zerbrechende Zeit*, 36.
69. Apparently, a way for the Mongols to connect themselves to pre-Islamic Iranian history was to have the kings and heroes of the *Shahnameh* depicted in Mongolian clothes. See Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, 100.
70. Assmann, *Gedächtnis*, 75 (*Vergangenheit als 'Fundament der Kontinuität'*).
71. Ibid. (*Vergangenheit als 'Motor der Entwicklung'*).
72. Fragner, *Die Mongolen und ihr Imperium*, 114.
73. Foyüzāt, *Tahavvol-e farhangī*, 880.
74. See, for example, Dakhlia 2001, 61, discussing Pierre Nora's concept of the 'state-centered nation', and Paul pointing to the fact that on a local level ordinary people in Iran fought for their own communities, not for any kind of national entity: '*la loyauté du petit peuple s'adresse à des unités de petite taille*'. Jürgen Paul, '*L'invasion mongole comme "révélateur" de la société iranienne*', in Aigle, 1997, 37–53, 49.

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## Safavid Persia through Italian eyes: From reign of freedom to land of oppression

Elisa Sabadini

Italian voyagers who travelled through Persian lands during the two centuries of Safavid domination variously describe the country they discovered, and express different judgments in their written works about Persia and the Persians. In this way, they contributed to construct and diffuse among coeval Italian readers a specific image of the country, which would play a significant role in the subsequent elaboration of commonplaces and stereotype.

The perspective is that of perception, considering travel writings as sources to better understand travellers' imagery, their biases and prejudices.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason I have chosen to consider texts concerning voyages taken during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which were also published within the centuries or in the immediate aftermath, and which had a wide-circulation among Italian readers.<sup>2</sup> Those texts, due to their widespread readership, would have significantly influenced the contemporaries and contributed to the creation of an imagery of the country. It is not so important, in this context, to establish whether the travellers' tales refer to a wholly real experience or only to a partially real one, and if the accounts are original or take pieces from predecessors. Plagiarism phenomena, so common in early modern travel writings, suggest that later travellers felt that those particular images, judgments or sentiments were still in tune with their own.<sup>3</sup>

The Italian travellers that visited Persia in the early modern age and wrote about it were few: apart from diplomats and missionaries, they seemed to prefer other destinations in the East. In fact, the Italians directed themselves mainly towards India and the South-Eastern islands in the sixteenth century,<sup>4</sup> while they preferred the Turkish domain, Constantinople and Egypt during the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> Pilgrimages to the Holy Land, as well as the eastern Mediterranean (Lebanon and Syria), continued to attract Italian voyagers during the whole period.<sup>6</sup>