

# Il-Khanate Empire

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The Il-Khanate was a Mongol state that ruled in Western Asia c.1256–1335. It was known to the Mongols as *ulus Hülegü*, the people or state of Hülegü (1218–1265), the dynasty's founder and grandson of Chinggis Khan (Genghis Khan). Centered in Iran and Azerbaijan but ruling also over Iraq, Turkmenistan, and parts of Afghanistan, Anatolia, and the southern Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia), the Il-Khanate was a highly cosmopolitan empire that had close connections with China and Western Europe. It also had a composite administration and legacy that combined Mongol, Iranian, and Muslim elements, and produced some outstanding cultural achievements. The name, a Western construction, is derived from the title *ilkhan* (submissive khan or ruler of a polity), adopted by Hülegü and used to some degree by all members of the dynasty.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

Mongol rule in what later became the Il-Khanate began under the united Mongol Empire. Chinggis Khan's bloody invasion of the 1220s reached up to Khurasan (today's northeastern Iran, northern Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan) and the Caucasus. Under his son Ögedei (r.1229–1241), Mongol governors and garrisons were stationed in northeastern Iran, Afghanistan, and, after 1243, also in Anatolia, and many Muslim polities in Iran and Iraq became tributaries. The birth of the Il-Khanate, however, was in the

1250s, after the new Great Khan, Möngke (r.1251–1259), sent his brother Hülegü to expand Mongol territories into western Asia, primarily against the Assassins, an extreme Isma'elite-Shi'ite sect specializing in political murder, and the Abbasid Caliphate. Hülegü left Mongolia in 1253. In 1256, he defeated the Assassins at Alamut, next to the Caspian Sea, adding to his retinue Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, one of the greatest polymaths of the Muslim world, who became his astrologer and trusted advisor. In 1258, with the help of various Mongol tributaries, including many Muslims, he brutally conquered Baghdad, eliminating the Abbasid Caliphate that had nominally led the Muslim world for more than 500 years (750–1258). Hülegü continued into Syria, but withdrew most of his troops after hearing of Möngke's death (1259). The defeat of the remnants of his troops by the Mamluks at 'Ayn Jalut (in northern Palestine) in 1260 put an end to Mongol advance into West Asia and opened a 60-year war between the Il-Khans and the Mamluks.

The limits of Hülegü's mandate are still debated, but apparently Möngke intended him to return to Mongolia – where his chief wife and sons remained – following the campaign. However, with Möngke's death and the subsequent succession struggle between the brothers, Hülegü seized the opportunity to carve out his own state. He supported his brother Kubilai (Kublai), thereby securing his victory, in return for the latter's acknowledgment of Hülegü's position in West Asia. The title *ilkhan*, by then adopted by Hülegü, stressed the distinctiveness of *ulus Hülegü*, whose territory, unlike that of the other Mongol branches, was not assigned by Chinggis Khan but by Kubilai. Indeed, the Golden Horde, which saw parts of the Il-Khanate

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territories, especially Azerbaijan, as their own, opposed the new polity. In 1262 Golden Horde forces attacked Hülegü's; although they were repulsed, tension between the two polities continued. The Golden Horde also collaborated with the Mamluks, thereby encouraging Hülegü to find allies in Western Europe and its Crusader clients. Hülegü established the orientation of the Il-Khanate's foreign policy from then on: close political, economic, and cultural cooperation with Yuan China; diplomatic – albeit futile – attempts to cooperate with Western Christianity; and continued hostility toward the Mamluks and its Mongol neighbors, the Golden Horde in the Caucasus and the Chaghadaids in Central Asia. Inside his realm, Hülegü worked for reconciliation. Despite his sympathy for Buddhism and Christianity, he patronized and closely cooperated with local Muslim bureaucrats and scholars, notably the Juwayni brothers, a Khurasani family who had served in various Muslim administrations for centuries, and Tusi. Shams al-Din Juwayni became Hülegü's chief minister (*sahib diwan*), while his brother 'Ala' al-Din, a notable historian of the Mongols, governed Baghdad. Tusi established for Hülegü the observatory in Maragha, which became a magnet for international scholars, and was also appointed as inspector of endowments (*awqaf*). All three retained their prominence under Hülegü's son and heir Abaqa (r.1265–1280), whose descendants became the dominant rulers of the Il-Khanate.

Abaqa managed to repel a Golden Horde threat (1265–1267), and a more serious Chaghadaid invasion of Khurasan (1270). This eastern threat, however, undermined Abaqa's attempts to cooperate with Prince Edward of England in his 1271 Crusade. Four embassies to the West proved to be equally unsuccessful. The Mamluk advance into Anatolia (1277) led Abaqa to launch a full-scale offensive on Syria, but the Mamluks defeated his troops

at Homs (northern Syria) in 1281, and he died while planning a campaign of retaliation. Despite this, his reign marked a period of consolidation and prosperity, as the conflicts were limited to the borders.

The next decade (1284–1295) was marred by relative instability that affected the economy. Abaqa was succeeded by his brother, Ahmad Tegüder (r.1282–1284), who rose to the throne as a Muslim. His religion and its implications – the preference for Muslim mystics (Sufis) over Mongol commanders and attempts to conciliate the unimpressed Mamluks – together with his general incompetence and continued strife with Abaqa's son Arghun, eventually led to Ahmad's murder by Mongol rebels, who enthroned Arghun in his place.

Arghun's reign (1284–1291) saw a rapid succession of ministers: upon his rise he deposed the Juwayni brothers, executing Shams al-Din and replacing him with the Mongol Boqa. Three years later, Boqa shared Shams al-Din's fate, and Arghun appointed Sa'd al-Dawla (d.1291), whose financial efficiency and Jewish religion aroused much opposition, eventually costing him his life. Arghun did not launch any attack against the Mamluks, but sent four embassies to the West in a vain attempt to cement an alliance against them. (A famous Syriac record of one such embassy describes the experience of Rabban Sawma, a Nestorian Onggut born in Beijing, who in 1289 served as Arghun's envoy to Western Europe, visiting, among others, Rome and Paris.) From 1288 Arghun was preoccupied by invasions of the Golden Horde and the Chaghadaids, and from 1289 his commander in Khurasan, the Muslim Mongol Nowruz, rebelled, joining forces with the latter.

The turmoil continued under Arghun's brother and heir, Geikhatu (r.1291–1295), infamous for his disastrous attempt to employ paper currency (*chao*) in Iran. While this

medium worked well in Yuan China, in the Il-Khanate commerce simply stopped and the court had to abolish the experiment, thus hampering the Il-Khanid economy, which was damaged further by the Il-Khan's extravagance. Arghun's nephew, Baidu, thus deposed Geikhatu in early 1295, but was himself dethroned only a few months later by Arghun's son Ghazan (r.1295–1304).

Ghazan's reign is considered the apex of the Il-Khanate, partly because the greatest Il-Khanid historian, Rashid al-Din (d.1318), served as Ghazan's vizier and commemorated him as an ideal ruler, a fact facilitated by Ghazan's conversion to Islam. Ghazan, formerly the governor of Khurasan, converted before his accession, partly under the influence of Nowruz, with whom he had become reconciled. Under Ghazan, Islam became the state religion of the Il-Khanate. But while Ghazan appropriated Islamic trappings and policies – persecuting Buddhists, reinstating the *jizya* (the tax paid by Jews and Christians under Muslim rule), and patronizing Islamic monuments – he did not renounce his Mongol legacy or change his foreign policy, continuing relations with China and Europe and attacking the Mamluks with new vigor and now, also, Islamic justifications. In 1299 Ghazan's forces won the only decisive Il-Khanid victory against the Mamluks, which led to a hundred days' conquest of Damascus. The Mongols soon evacuated Syria, partly due to troubles in the East (and perhaps logistical concerns), and their further attacks in 1300 and 1303 were repulsed. Ghazan's reign also witnessed successive purges of Mongol princes and commanders (including Nowruz), a tendency that continued under his heirs. Ghazan is also famous for a series of reforms, again lauded by Rashid al-Din, their architect, which aimed to limit the commander's power and restore agriculture, road safety (through the *Jam*, the Mongol postal system), and the state's revenues. Their

success is hard to estimate, but they certainly resulted in at least a modest increase in the state's revenue and in public order.

Ghazan died childless at age 33. He was succeeded by his brother Öljeitü, who was in a uniquely favorable position, unthreatened by princes and commanders, enjoying the continued service of Rashid al-Din, and benefiting from the general Mongol peace concluded in 1304. Öljeitü tried to ally with Europe in a major attack against the Mamluks, but when this came to naught, he attacked them himself in 1312, only to acknowledge his inability to defeat them. He managed, however, to repulse a Chaghadaid threat in 1316. Öljeitü had more success with his domestic policies, subjecting Gilan, Kirman, and Anatolia to direct Il-Khanid rule (at the expense of local dynasties), encouraging trade with China and India, and in general overseeing a period of prosperity. He is also famous for adopting Shi'ism, a fact that might have triggered his anti-Mamluk policies, and building a new capital, Sultaniyya in northwestern Iran, where his mausoleum still stands.

Öljeitü was succeeded by his son, Abu Sa'id (r.1316–35), who acceded to the throne at the age of 12. Real power lay with his Mongol guardian, the chief commander and devout Muslim Chopan, who orchestrated the execution of Rashid al-Din. Chopan coped successfully with various threats from the Golden Horde and the Chaghadaid. He also initiated a peace agreement with the Mamluks, eventually signed in 1323. His growing power, however, stoked the opposition of other commanders, perhaps initially encouraged by Abu Sa'id, who eventually moved to Chopan's side (1319). Abu Sa'id's attempts to assert his independent rule, however, led to Chopan's execution in 1327, together with many supporters and family members (though by then Abu Sa'id was married to Chopan's daughter, whom he took from another commander).

Throughout his actual rule, Abu Sa'īd was assisted by his able vizier, Ghiyath al-Din, son of Rashid al-Din. Abu Sa'īd's last years were peaceful, and economic and cultural relations with China and the Delhi and Mamluk sultanates flourished more than ever. Nevertheless, the period was also marked by inter-commander rivalries and the growing power of the court's women, often the commanders' relatives. When Abu Sa'īd died suddenly without an heir (perhaps poisoned by Chohan's daughter), the royal house, curtailed by repeated purges, had no good candidate for the throne. The Il-Khanate was divided among various competing polities, many of which were led by military commanders, mainly Chinggisid sons-in-law, who used a lesser Chinggisid prince as puppet khan. Simultaneously, dynasties of Persian origin ruled in southern Iran, and various local dynasties – including the Ottomans – rose to power in Anatolia. Il-Khanid pretenders held power in Khurasan up to 1353, but only Timur Leng (Tamerlane) (r.1370–1405) managed to forge the scattered fragments of the Il-Khanate into his newly created empire, centered in Samarkand. Unlike the situation in China, the Mongols never left Iran but were eventually assimilated into the local population (probably mostly with Turkish groups).

#### INSTITUTIONS, ADMINISTRATION, AND ECONOMY

The Il-Khans retained a distinct Inner Asian style of rule even after adopting Islam. Their composite administration, however, combined the local bureaucratic tradition with the Mongol patrimonial one, and, in a typical Inner Asian amalgamation, was characterized by various forms of duality. Throughout their reign, the Il-Khans remained nomads, moving between summer and winter pastures, their mobile camp (*ordu*) accompanying them with

a considerable retinue of officials, women, merchants, scholars, adventurers, and soldiers. It was mainly in the *ordu* that policy was decided and ambassadors received, despite the fact that the Il-Khans built palaces and cities. The *ordu*'s summer pastures were mainly in Azerbaijan, while their winter pastures were either there or in the environs of Baghdad. Likewise, the Il-Khanid army remained mainly a nomadic army of lightly mounted archers, although it made use of various auxiliaries, some of them infantry. The nucleus of this army was the invading troops that arrived with Hülegü in the Middle East, and included representatives of all the Mongolian branches, many Muslim Turks from Central Asia, as well as auxiliaries such as the thousand Chinese siege engineers. To this were added the Mongol troops who had already been serving in the Middle East and a substantial number of auxiliaries from subservient rulers, such as Armenians, Georgians, Iranians, and troops from al-Jazira (today's northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria) and Anatolia, most of them also mounted. The Mongol troops were organized decimally, in the regular Inner Asian fashion. For most of the period they did not receive regular payments but were expected to pay taxes. Gradually, and certainly after Ghazan's reign, Mongol tribes had control over large swathes of agricultural land, from which they enjoyed at least some of its produce, while most of them remained nomads.

The imperial guard (*keshig*), numbering approximately 10 000 men (more under Ghazan), functioned as the ruler's security unit, protecting him day and night in shifts of four guarding units. It took care of his household's needs and well-being, its members serving, among other things, as envoys, cup-bearers, scribes, tax collectors, and investigators. The *keshig* also served as his elite forces and private police. The four leaders of the guarding units enjoyed considerable political influence

along with their military command. By the end of the Il-Khanate the vizier often appeared as equivalent to these four commanders, supplementing them and approving the ruler's edicts and letters. Although he did not have a guard unit under his command, the vizier was able to lead military campaigns. The *keshig* was also the nursery of both the Il-Khanate's civil and military elites, and a major channel of acculturation, as sons and brothers of leading commanders, subject rulers and officials, Mongols and non-Mongols alike, grew up there together.

The *keshig*'s members were favorite marriage partners of the royal family, and often held hereditary posts, although their personal connections with the rulers made them highly vulnerable to purges and court intrigues. Each ruler had his own *keshig*, and in times of political instability several *keshigs* existed simultaneously. Commanders and viziers often also had their own smaller guard units. The institution continued to function even in post-Mongol Iran, and its members manned the Il-Khanid administration side by side with the local, mostly Persian, bureaucracy.

Il-Khanid administration was composite: the regions of the royal summer and winter pastures and the northern steppe belt (Khurasan to Anatolia) were ruled directly, while its southern territories and eastern and western peripheries were indirectly administered, mainly by local dynasties (e.g., the Seljuks of Rum, the Kara-Khitai of Kirman, the Salghurids of Faris, the Shabankara'is, the Atabegs of Yazd, the Kartids of Herat, the kings of Georgia and Armenia, and the rulers of Gilan and Mazandaran), supervised by Mongol appointees (*darughachi* or *shihna*). Some of the local dynasties were gradually eliminated, especially during Öljeitü's reign, their territories transferred to direct Il-Khanid rule. Even in the directly administered realm, however, specific territories were allocated as appanages of the royal family, including its

women and sometimes also members residing outside Iran, as well as to certain commanders and officials.

Direct Il-Khanid administration also had a dual character. The Mongols frequently appointed two people, often one local and one foreigner, to the same office. This was true in the central administration, where there were usually two heads of the civil administration, often called vizier or *sahib al-diwan* or *musharif al-mamalik* (inspector of the kingdoms); in the provincial administration, where supervisors (*darughachi* or *shihna*) functioned side by side with the deputies (*na'ib* or *hakim*) as the provinces' governors; and in the field of law, where Mongol *yarghuchis* (judges) were employed side by side with Muslim *qadis*, thus retaining the importance of both Yasa (Jasaq, the law ascribed to Chinggis Khan) and Sharia (Muslim law). While some leading Persian families with a long tradition of administrative service retained their position under the Mongols – the notable example is the Juwaynis – many “newcomers,” among them Jews, Christians, migrant Muslims, and a significant number of Mongols, chosen for their skills and loyalty, also staffed the administration. This double bureaucracy, often marred by corruption, was certainly an economic burden.

The economy of Il-Khanid Iran is still a debated issue. Iranian national histories paint the whole period as a time of decline, caused by the devastating initial invasion, combined with capricious Mongol taxation. Recent research, mainly by Lane and Aigle, suggests a more nuanced picture, regionally and otherwise. First, while the 1220s invasion was indeed devastating, it involved mainly Khurasan, leaving southern and western Iran intact. Hülegü's campaign, while detrimental to Iraq and al-Jazira, hardly hurt other parts of the future Il-Khanate. Provinces that remained border areas, vulnerable to repeated invasions by Mongols or Mamluks, such as

Khurasan or al-Jazira, never fully recovered, but Azerbaijan, southern Iran, and even Baghdad flourished under Mongol rule. The sources suggest that the state's income from agriculture drastically declined in comparison to the situation under the Seljuqs, even after Ghazan's reforms. This can be explained by the fact that not all revenues reached the central treasury, and by the increase in the importance of both trade and pastoralism to the empire's economy. The Il-Khans actively promoted international trade. Maritime trade with China and India was particularly robust, and was closely connected with the continental trade, where Tabriz especially became a center of East–West commerce, transferring goods to Italy, Byzantium, Syria, and Samarkand even in times of conflict, and hosting a considerable community of Italian traders. The *tamgha* (commercial tax) must have been a significant source of revenue, as was the nomads' tax (*qobchur*), paid mainly in animals, but we do not have specific data for either. The cultural and intellectual splendor that characterized the Il-Khanate strongly suggests a flourishing economy.

## CULTURE

Even the greatest critics of the Mongols admit that the Il-Khanid period was a time of phenomenal creativity for Iranian culture, in the arts, sciences, and historiography. While Iranians today typically ascribe this to the Persians, who were able to flourish despite Mongol wreckage, recent scholarship has shown that the Il-Khans contributed much to this efflorescence from the very beginning of their regime, both directly – as patrons, investors, and consumers – and indirectly, by promoting Eurasian integration and cross-cultural contacts, notably with Yuan China. Fields that fitted with the Mongols' taste, norms, and interests, such as astronomy, medicine, geography, historiography,

music, and painting, therefore especially thrived. Two of the greatest achievements of the era were the composition of the first world history and the huge advance in manuscript illumination. Rashid al-Din's *Compendium of Chronicles*, commissioned by Ghazan and Öljeitü, included not only a detailed history of the Mongols from the pre-Chinggisid period to the reign of Kubilai's successor, Temür Öljeitü (r.1307–1311), but also sections dedicated to the annals of China, India, the Muslim world, the Jews, and the Franks, written with the help of informants from the respective realms. The Il-Khanate was a formative period in the development of Persian painting, especially manuscript illumination. It witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of illustrations, subject matter, artistic output, and patronage, and absorbed motifs and techniques mainly from China, but also from Buddhist and Christian painting. The most famous illustrated works include Rashid al-Din's history and the Persian epic, the *Shahnameh*. In both the heroes of the past – be they Iranian, Muslim, or Chinese – were depicted in Mongol dress, thereby both legitimizing the conquering Mongols and assisting their acculturation. The Mongols also left a distinct mark on the Iranian landscape, building the Maragha observatory under Hülegü, Abaqa's palace at Takht-i Sulayman in northern Iran, constructed on the site of the Sasanid palace and luxuriously decorated with citations from the *Shahnameh*, a mausoleum and new quarter at Tabriz under Ghazan, and the city of Sultaniyya under Öljeitü, as well as patronizing a host of mosques, mausoleums, and Sufi lodges in their Muslim period. Sufi activity and literature also prospered under the Il-Khans, from Hülegü onward, and many enjoyed the court's patronage. Apart from the centers at Azerbaijan, regional centers of cultural production flourished notably at Baghdad, Shiraz, and Anatolia.

Apart from these products of cultural vitality, a demographic change that augmented the role of the Turco-Mongolians in the Iranian population, and a couple of functioning imperial institutions, the Il-Khanate's main legacy was the revival of the notion of Iran as a distinct political entity within the Muslim world for the first time since the Arab conquest of the 7th century. In this respect, it can be claimed that the Il-Khanate laid the foundation for the Safavids and for the modern nation-state of Iran.

SEE ALSO: Abbasid Caliphate; China, imperial: 6. Yuan dynasty period, 1279–1368; Egypt: 4. Late medieval (including Syria: Ayyubid, Mamluk); Golden Horde Khanate; Islam and empire; Mongol Empire, Great; Nomads; Ottoman Empire; Safavid Empire; Timurid Empire

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