

# **The World Conqueror's Legacy: A Deep Analysis of Hulagu Khan and the Making of the Ilkhanate**

## **Introduction**

Hulagu Khan was one of the most transformative figures of the 13th century, a paradoxical ruler whose legacy cannot be understood through the simple binary of conqueror versus statesman. He was simultaneously an agent of catastrophic destruction, most notably at Baghdad, and a catalyst for profound political and cultural reconfiguration in the Middle East. He founded a dynasty—the Ilkhanate—that would reunify Persia, patronize an unprecedented flourishing of arts and sciences, and irrevocably alter the geopolitical map of Eurasia.<sup>1</sup> This report will argue that Hulagu's actions, while devastating in their immediate impact, were the violent crucible in which a new political and cultural order for Persia and the wider Middle East was forged. His reign represents a critical juncture where the nomadic Mongol world collided with the ancient sedentary civilizations of Islam, resulting in a synthesis that would define the region for centuries.

The analysis will proceed chronologically through Hulagu's life and campaigns, before turning to a thematic examination of his administration, diplomacy, and legacy. It will rely on a critical reading of primary sources, particularly the Persian court histories of Ata-Malik Juvayni and Rashid al-Din Hamadani, who wrote from within the Ilkhanid system. Their accounts, while invaluable, must be balanced with modern academic scholarship to deconstruct the complex and often contradictory historical memory of Hulagu.<sup>6</sup> By examining the full scope of his career—from his princely upbringing to his final campaigns—a nuanced portrait emerges of a man who was both a product of the Mongol imperial machine and the architect of a unique successor state that would ultimately be absorbed by the very culture it had conquered.

## **Prince of the House of Tolui: Lineage and the Path to Power (c. 1217–1253)**

The trajectory of Hulagu Khan's life was set by his position within the most powerful and influential lineage of the Mongol Empire. His parentage, the political environment of his youth, and the strategic brilliance of his mother created the conditions for his rise and fundamentally

shaped the character of the state he would later found.

## **Illustrious Parentage and the "Sorghaghtani Effect"**

Hulagu was born around 1217 to Tolui, the youngest son of Genghis Khan, and Sorghaghtani Beki, a princess from the Keraite tribe and a devout Nestorian Christian.<sup>2</sup> While Tolui was a formidable warrior in the mold of his father, it was Sorghaghtani who proved to be one of the most astute political figures of the era. After Tolui's death in 1232, she skillfully navigated the treacherous currents of Mongol succession politics, ensuring that all four of her sons—Möngke, Kublai, Hulagu, and Ariq Böke—would rise to become supreme rulers within the empire.<sup>1</sup>

Sorghaghtani's influence on her sons cannot be overstated. Her political philosophy, characterized by religious tolerance and a pragmatic reliance on the expertise of conquered sedentary peoples, became the bedrock of the Toluid branch of the Genghisid dynasty. This approach was a direct inheritance passed to Hulagu. His own court mirrored the environment of his upbringing: his principal and most influential wife, Doqуз Khatun, was a fellow Nestorian Christian, as was his most trusted general, Kitbuqa Noyan.<sup>1</sup> Hulagu's later administration in Persia, which relied heavily on co-opting the skills of local Persian bureaucrats, was a direct application of the principles he learned in his mother's household. She was, in effect, a "shadow architect" of the Ilkhanate's foundational character, repositioning her from merely a mother to a key political ideologue whose influence shaped a major successor state. Hulagu himself, while adhering to the traditional Mongol Tengrism and later showing a preference for Buddhism, was deeply sympathetic to Christianity, reportedly telling the Armenian historian Vardan Arevelc'i that he had been a Christian since birth.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Toluid Revolution and Imperial Mandate**

The death of Genghis Khan in 1227 led to decades of political maneuvering between the descendants of his four sons. The imperial title of Great Khan initially passed to the line of Ögedei. However, by the late 1240s, internal strife and a weakening of the Ögedeid line created a power vacuum. In 1251, a *kuriltai* (a grand assembly of Mongol nobles) elected Hulagu's eldest brother, Möngke, as the new Great Khan. This event, heavily supported by Batu Khan of the Golden Horde, represented a "Toluid Revolution" that shifted the center of imperial power decisively to the house of Tolui.<sup>15</sup>

Möngke's ascension marked the beginning of a new, aggressive phase of Mongol expansion, a policy designed to complete Genghis Khan's mandate of world conquest. In 1252, Möngke held a council to organize this next wave of invasions, assigning his brothers to lead two great armies: Kublai was tasked with the final conquest of the Song Dynasty in China, while Hulagu was given command of the western campaign.<sup>15</sup> Hulagu's selection was a direct consequence of his brother's consolidation of power and a testament to the trust Möngke placed in him.

This close fraternal bond, particularly between Möngke, Kublai, and Hulagu, would define the political alliances of the Mongol world for the next two decades.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1: Key Figures in the World of Hulagu Khan	
Name	
Genghis Khan	
Tolui	
Sorghaghtani Beki	
Möngke Khan	
Kublai Khan	
Ariq Böke	
Doquz Khatun	
Kitbuqa Noyan	
Berke Khan	
Al-Musta'sim	
Nasir al-Din al-Tusi	

## The Mandate of Heaven: Mobilization for the Western Campaign (1253–1256)

The campaign entrusted to Hulagu was an undertaking of immense scale and ambition, reflecting the renewed vigor of the Mongol Empire under Toluid leadership. It was not merely a punitive expedition but a meticulously planned conquest intended to permanently absorb the heartlands of the Islamic world into the Mongol imperium. This endeavor was also a critical political project designed to solidify the legitimacy and power of Möngke's new dynasty. By launching massive campaigns on two fronts, Möngke was demonstrating his adherence to Genghis Khan's legacy and compelling the other branches of the empire to acknowledge his supreme authority. Tasking Hulagu with destroying the Caliphate—a feat no previous Khan had attempted—was a bid for a monumental victory that would cement the Toluids as the true heirs to the Mongol world mandate.

### Campaign Objectives

Hulagu formally departed from the Mongol heartland in 1253, at the head of what was perhaps the largest Mongol army ever assembled.<sup>14</sup> His mandate from Möngke was explicit and sequential, a clear strategic roadmap for the subjugation of Southwest Asia. The objectives were:

1. **The Subjugation of the Lurs:** To secure the southern flank in Iran by bringing the local

Lur tribes under Mongol control.<sup>1</sup>

2. **The Destruction of the Nizari Ismailis:** To eliminate the powerful and secretive Nizari Ismaili state, commonly known as the Assassins, who controlled a network of impregnable mountain fortresses and posed a threat to Mongol authority in Persia.<sup>1</sup>
3. **The Submission of the Abbasid Caliphate:** To force the submission of the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, the symbolic head of Sunni Islam. Failing this, the Caliphate was to be destroyed.<sup>10</sup>
4. **The Conquest of Ayyubid Syria:** To subdue the various Ayyubid principalities based in Damascus and Aleppo, extending Mongol control to the shores of the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>
5. **The Confrontation with the Mamluks:** Finally, to secure the submission or destruction of the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, the last major independent Muslim power in the region.<sup>11</sup>

Möngke's instructions to Hulagu were stark and embodied the traditional Mongol approach to conquest: "treat kindly those who submitted, and utterly destroy those who did not".<sup>10</sup>

## A Traveling City: The Scale of the Mongol Army

To achieve these ambitious goals, Möngke decreed that two-tenths—a full fifth—of the empire's total fighting force be mobilized for Hulagu's army.<sup>10</sup> This order created a massive, multi-ethnic force that was far more than a simple army; it was a "traveling city" on the march.<sup>19</sup> The force included not only Mongol cavalry but also specialized contingents of Chinese siege engineers, whose expertise with catapults and other engines of war was critical, as well as European craftsmen.<sup>16</sup> An advance corps was tasked with preparing the route, clearing roads of obstacles, repairing and building bridges, and ensuring that boats were ready for river crossings.<sup>19</sup>

This immense host, accompanied by families and vast herds of livestock, moved with deliberate slowness. The logistical challenge was enormous, and the army's advance across Central Asia was a carefully managed migration that took years. Hulagu arrived at Transoxiana in 1255 and did not cross the Oxus River into Persia until the beginning of 1256, nearly three years after his departure from Mongolia.<sup>10</sup> This methodical pace ensured the army arrived in the theater of operations at full strength, ready to execute its formidable mandate.

## The Mountain Fortress Falls: The Annihilation of the Nizari Ismailis (1256)

Hulagu's first major military objective was the elimination of the Nizari Ismaili state. This powerful Shi'i sect, known to its enemies as the *Hashshashin* or Assassins, had established a network of over 250 formidable mountain fortresses across Persia and Syria, from which they

had defied the great Seljuq and Khwarezmian empires for over 150 years.<sup>21</sup> Their elimination was a strategic necessity for the Mongols, as the Nizari strongholds threatened their lines of communication and control in Persia. Furthermore, the Nizaris were accused of sending a team of assassins to murder Möngke Khan at his enthronement, providing a direct *casus belli* for Hulagu's campaign.<sup>19</sup>

The methodical destruction of this seemingly invincible state was a calculated act of psychological warfare. By systematically reducing fortresses famed for their impregnability, the Mongols demonstrated that no physical defense could withstand their power. This created a wave of terror that spread throughout the Middle East, serving as a prelude to the campaign against Baghdad and causing many later cities to surrender without a fight.<sup>21</sup>

## The Siege of the Eagle's Nest

The Nizari headquarters was the legendary fortress of Alamut, the "Eagle's Nest," perched on a remote mountain peak and considered impregnable.<sup>21</sup> Hulagu's army, however, brought with it an overwhelming technological advantage in the form of advanced Chinese siege weaponry. The Persian historian Ata-Malik Juvayni, who was present during the campaign as an official in Hulagu's entourage, provides a vivid eyewitness account of the siege of the fortress of Maymun-Diz. He describes the devastating effect of the Mongol trebuchets and large crossbows, known as

*kamāni gāv* ("ox's bow"), which could reportedly fire bolts over two kilometers.<sup>7</sup> Juvayni recounts the terror of the defenders as the fortress walls were battered: "Fear of the quarrels from the crossbows overcame them so that they were in a complete panic... Some who were standing on towers crept in their terror like mice into holes or fled like lizards into the crannies of the rocks".<sup>7</sup>

## Surrender and Annihilation

Faced with this overwhelming force and internal dissension, the last Nizari Imam, Rukn al-Din Khurshah, chose to surrender. He descended from Maymun-Diz in November 1256, hoping to spare his people through submission.<sup>16</sup> Hulagu then compelled Khurshah to send messages ordering the capitulation of all other Nizari strongholds. After some resistance, the commander of Alamut also surrendered in December 1256.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his cooperation, Khurshah's fate was sealed by the Great Khan. He was sent to Mongolia to meet Möngke, who rebuked him for not having dismantled his fortresses sooner and ordered his execution en route back to Persia. Following this, Möngke issued a decree for a general massacre of all Nizari Ismailis. Mongol forces swept through the regions of Quhistan and Rudbar, slaughtering tens of thousands and effectively eliminating the Nizaris as a political and military force in Persia.<sup>18</sup>

A significant casualty of this campaign was the great library of Alamut, a renowned center of Ismaili learning and scholarship. Juvayni records that he was given permission by Hulagu to inspect the library. He saved what he deemed valuable—copies of the Quran, "choice books," and astronomical instruments—but he claims to have burned the collections of "heretical" Ismaili doctrine, including the biography of the sect's founder, Hasan-i Sabbah.<sup>18</sup> With the fall of Alamut, the first objective of Hulagu's campaign was complete. The path to Baghdad was now open.

## **The Caliphate's End: The Siege and Sack of Baghdad (1258)**

The destruction of Baghdad in 1258 was the pivotal event of Hulagu's campaign and a moment of profound trauma for the Islamic world. For five centuries, the city had been the seat of the Abbasid Caliphate, the symbolic center of Sunni Islam, and a global hub of culture, science, and learning.<sup>29</sup> Its fall to the Mongols was not merely a military defeat but a civilizational cataclysm that ended an era. This event violently rebalanced the entire geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, eliminating a declining but symbolically potent authority and creating a power vacuum that was immediately filled by two rising, rival powers: the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Hulagu's nascent Ilkhanate in Persia. This created a new, enduring fault line in the region that would define its politics for the next century.

### **Prelude to the Siege**

After neutralizing the Nizaris, Hulagu turned his attention to his next objective. He sent envoys to the 37th Abbasid Caliph, al-Musta'sim, demanding his submission and military assistance, a standard Mongol prelude to invasion. The Caliph, however, had refused to send troops for the Nizari campaign and responded to Hulagu's demands with what the Mongols perceived as arrogance and defiance.<sup>21</sup> Al-Musta'sim, overconfident in the spiritual authority of his office and the supposed impregnability of his capital, failed to grasp the gravity of the threat. His court was divided, and the city itself had been weakened by recent floods and sectarian strife between its Sunni and Shi'i populations.<sup>30</sup> Enraged by the Caliph's refusal to submit, Hulagu began his advance on Baghdad in November 1257.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Fall of the City of Peace**

The Mongol army, a massive and highly disciplined force, converged on Baghdad from multiple directions. An Abbasid army sent to intercept them was decisively crushed in a battle outside the city walls when Mongol engineers broke dikes and flooded the Abbasid camp,

trapping them.<sup>30</sup> By January 29, 1258, the siege of Baghdad had begun.<sup>30</sup>

The Mongols encircled the city, constructing a palisade and a moat, and brought their formidable siege engines to bear on the walls. The defenders, numbering around 50,000, were no match for the Mongol onslaught.<sup>30</sup> Within days, the eastern walls were breached. As his situation grew desperate, al-Musta'sim made frantic attempts to negotiate, but Hulagu, intent on total victory, rejected all offers.<sup>21</sup>

On February 10, 1258, Caliph al-Musta'sim surrendered the city.<sup>21</sup> Three days later, the sack began. For a full week, the Mongol army was unleashed upon the population. The ensuing massacre was horrific. While precise figures are impossible to verify, estimates of the death toll range from Hulagu's own claim of 200,000 to later Muslim sources that cite figures between 800,000 and two million.<sup>30</sup> Palaces, mosques, hospitals, and the city's architectural marvels were looted and burned.<sup>21</sup> At the behest of Hulagu's Nestorian Christian wife, Doqуз Khatun, the city's Christian inhabitants were spared the slaughter.<sup>12</sup>

On February 20, the carnage was halted. Hulagu, to avoid the Mongol taboo against shedding royal blood on the earth, had al-Musta'sim and his sons wrapped in carpets and trampled to death by horses.<sup>21</sup> With this act, the 508-year-old Abbasid Caliphate was extinguished.<sup>2</sup>

## **The House of Wisdom and the "End of the Golden Age"**

The sack of Baghdad is traditionally seen as the event that brought the Islamic Golden Age to a violent and definitive end.<sup>2</sup> Central to this narrative is the destruction of the city's great libraries, most famously the Bayt al-Hikmah, or House of Wisdom. A powerful, though likely apocryphal, account from survivors claimed that the Tigris River ran black with the ink of countless manuscripts thrown into its waters.<sup>31</sup> The loss of knowledge was immense, and the intellectual vacuum created by the death or flight of scholars, scientists, and poets was profound.<sup>34</sup>

However, modern scholarship has offered a more nuanced reassessment of this narrative. While the destruction was undeniably catastrophic, some historians argue that Baghdad's role as the sole intellectual center of Islam had already been in decline for centuries, with other cities like Cairo, Cordoba, and centers in Persia and Central Asia rising to prominence.<sup>32</sup> The House of Wisdom itself may have been more of a caliphal library and translation center whose peak of activity had passed long before the 13th century.<sup>37</sup> The fall of Baghdad, therefore, was less an abrupt end to an era of intellectual flourishing and more a brutal acceleration of a shift in the cultural centers of the Islamic world. Paradoxically, the Ilkhanid state that Hulagu founded would soon become a major patron of science and art, sponsoring a new "Persian Renaissance" from its capital in Tabriz.<sup>11</sup> Hulagu himself, after the destruction, ordered the city of Baghdad to be rebuilt and its libraries reopened within two years.<sup>10</sup> The sack was a psychological and political cataclysm that ended the symbolic authority of the Caliphate, but it did not extinguish Islamic intellectual life entirely; rather, it violently shifted its geography.

# **The Syrian Gambit and the Mamluk Wall (1259–1260)**

With Baghdad in ruins, Hulagu's campaign continued its westward march, aiming for the subjugation of Ayyubid Syria and the ultimate prize, Mamluk Egypt. The Mongol advance seemed inexorable, but it was in the plains of Palestine that the myth of their invincibility would be shattered. The Mamluk victory at Ain Jalut was not a miracle but the result of a unique convergence of factors: a Mongol leadership crisis, logistical overstretch, superior Mamluk military professionalism, and calculated Crusader neutrality. This "perfect storm" of circumstances created a decisive turning point in world history, permanently halting the Mongol advance to the southwest.

## **The Conquest of Syria**

In the autumn of 1259, Hulagu set out from his new base in Azerbaijan to conquer Syria.<sup>14</sup> His army was once again a multi-ethnic force, bolstered by contingents from his Christian vassals, the Kingdom of Georgia and the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, as well as Frankish troops from the Principality of Antioch.<sup>13</sup> The Mongol wave swept through northern Mesopotamia and into Syria. The city of Aleppo was besieged and, after refusing to surrender, was brutally sacked in January 1260.<sup>16</sup> The news of Aleppo's fate terrorized the region. Damascus, the main Ayyubid capital, surrendered without a fight in March 1260 when the Mongol army under Kitbuqa appeared before its walls.<sup>25</sup> The Mongols then pushed south into Palestine, establishing garrisons as far as Gaza and preparing for the final invasion of Egypt.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Succession Crisis and Mongol Withdrawal**

Just as the conquest of the Levant seemed complete, events far to the east intervened. In the summer of 1260, news reached Hulagu that the Great Khan Möngke had died during his campaign against the Song in China.<sup>21</sup> This triggered a succession crisis in the Mongol heartland. As a grandson of Genghis Khan and a powerful prince of the blood, Hulagu was required to return to participate in the election of a new Great Khan. He was a key supporter of his brother Kublai's claim against their younger brother, Ariq Böke.<sup>21</sup>

Forced to turn his attention to imperial politics, Hulagu withdrew the great bulk of his army from Syria, taking his elite troops with him. He left behind a significantly smaller occupation force, estimated at between 10,000 and 20,000 men, under the command of his most trusted general, the Nestorian Christian Kitbuqa Noyan.<sup>21</sup> This dramatic reduction in Mongol strength presented a critical window of opportunity for their last remaining adversary.

## **The Battle of Ain Jalut**

The Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, led by Sultan Qutuz and his formidable general, Baibars, recognized the chance to strike.<sup>41</sup> The Mamluks were a unique military power, composed of highly trained slave-soldiers (primarily of Turkic Kipchak origin) who were a match for the Mongols in terms of discipline, horsemanship, and archery.<sup>21</sup>

Qutuz assembled his army and marched north from Cairo. In a crucial strategic move, the Mamluks negotiated with the Crusader states on the coast. The Franks of Acre, viewing the Mongols as a greater existential threat than the Mamluks, granted the Egyptian army safe passage through their territory and allowed them to resupply.<sup>10</sup>

On September 3, 1260, the two armies met at Ain Jalut ("Goliath's Spring") in the Jezreel Valley.<sup>42</sup> The Mamluks, with their superior knowledge of the terrain, executed a brilliant tactical plan. Baibars led a vanguard force to engage the Mongols and then staged a feigned retreat, luring Kitbuqa's eager cavalry into a narrow valley.<sup>42</sup> As the Mongols pursued, the main Mamluk army, which Qutuz had hidden in the surrounding hills, sprang the ambush, attacking the Mongols from the flanks.<sup>44</sup> The Mongol army was surrounded and overwhelmed. Kitbuqa fought bravely but was captured and executed.<sup>21</sup>

The Mamluk victory was total and decisive. It was the first time a major Mongol army had been defeated in open battle and prevented from returning to avenge the loss. The battle shattered the aura of Mongol invincibility and permanently halted their expansion into Egypt and North Africa.<sup>41</sup> The Mamluks quickly recaptured all of Syria, establishing themselves as the dominant power in the Islamic heartlands and the ultimate defenders of Islam against both the Mongols and the Crusaders.

## **The Brothers' War: Imperial Fracture and the Berke-Hulagu Conflict (1262–1265)**

The defeat at Ain Jalut was a major setback for Hulagu, but his ability to respond was immediately and permanently crippled by a far greater threat emerging from within the Mongol Empire itself. A bitter civil war erupted between Hulagu's Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde, the Mongol state ruling the Eurasian steppe, led by his cousin Berke Khan. This conflict, the first major war between descendants of Genghis Khan, marked the definitive end of the unified Mongol Empire. It demonstrated that by the 1260s, the distinct regional, religious, and economic interests of the successor khanates had become more powerful than the unifying ideology of a single Mongol imperium. The war was not just a political dispute; it was a clash of emerging identities that made the fragmentation of the empire irreversible.

### **Causes of the War**

The roots of the Berke-Hulagu war were deep and multifaceted, combining personal animosity, religious fervor, and geopolitical rivalry.<sup>46</sup>

- **Religious Outrage:** Berke Khan had converted to Islam in 1252. He was profoundly enraged by Hulagu's sack of Baghdad, the spiritual capital of Sunni Islam, and the execution of the Caliph. The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din quotes Berke as vowing, "He (Hulagu) has sacked all the cities of the Muslims. With the help of Allah I will call him to account for so much innocent blood".<sup>46</sup> This religious grievance drove Berke to forge an alliance with the Mamluks in Egypt, Hulagu's sworn enemies.<sup>1</sup>
- **Territorial and Economic Disputes:** The Golden Horde, as the *ulus* (patrimony) of Genghis Khan's eldest son Jochi, laid claim to the wealthy pasturelands and trade routes of Azerbaijan and the Caucasus. Hulagu, after his conquests, seized these territories for his own Ilkhanate, viewing them as essential for his power base.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Hulagu failed to send Berke the share of the booty from the Persian and Iraqi campaigns to which the Golden Horde was entitled as a participant in the imperial venture.<sup>47</sup>
- **Political Alliances and Personal Animosity:** The conflict was directly linked to the Toluid Civil War (1260-1264) raging in the east. Hulagu supported his brother Kublai for the title of Great Khan, while Berke backed their rival brother, Ariq Böke.<sup>17</sup> This proxy war was exacerbated by a personal blood feud after Hulagu executed several Jochid princes who were serving in his army under suspicious circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

## The War in the Caucasus

The war began in earnest in 1262 and was fought primarily in the Caucasus Mountains, the frontier between the two khanates.<sup>46</sup> Berke initiated hostilities by dispatching his brilliant general, Nogai Khan, to launch a series of raids into Ilkhanate territory.<sup>1</sup>

The most significant engagement of the war was the Battle of the Terek River in the winter of 1262. Hulagu marched north with his main army to confront the invaders. Nogai's forces ambushed Hulagu's army, and in the ensuing battle, the Ilkhanate army was routed. The defeat turned into a catastrophe when thousands of fleeing Mongol soldiers drowned as the frozen Terek River gave way under the weight of their horses.<sup>14</sup> It was a devastating personal defeat for Hulagu.

## Consequences of the Imperial Fracture

The Berke-Hulagu war had profound and lasting consequences. Most immediately, it forced Hulagu to permanently divert the bulk of his military strength to his northern frontier to counter the threat from the Golden Horde.<sup>1</sup> This prevented him from ever mustering the

necessary forces to launch a full-scale invasion of Syria to avenge the defeat at Ain Jalut. The war solidified the alliance between the Golden Horde and the Mamluks, creating a strategic pincer that trapped the Ilkhanate between two powerful and hostile states to its north and south.<sup>47</sup> This geopolitical reality would define the Middle East for the next several decades. Most importantly, the war shattered the illusion of a unified Mongol Empire. The conflict between Berke and Hulagu demonstrated that the successor khanates were now fully independent states pursuing their own interests, willing to wage war on one another and ally with outside powers. The dream of a single, world-spanning Mongol imperium died on the frozen banks of the Terek River.

## The Il-Khan: Conquest and Construction

While Hulagu's military campaigns brought unprecedented destruction, his reign also marked a period of state-building and profound cultural synthesis. In the wake of his conquests, he founded the Ilkhanate, a new political entity that reunified Persia after centuries of fragmentation and laid the administrative groundwork for the later Safavid state and modern Iran.<sup>1</sup> His rule initiated a complex process of blending Mongol nomadic traditions with the ancient sedentary civilization of Persia, a paradox that is most vividly illustrated by his patronage of science, which flourished even as the ashes of Baghdad's libraries were still cooling.

### Founding and Administering the Ilkhanate

Hulagu established his dynasty's center of power in Azerbaijan, a region with rich pasturelands suitable for the Mongol army's herds.<sup>14</sup> His realm, known as the Ilkhanate (from the title

*Il-Khan*, meaning "subordinate khan," signifying nominal allegiance to the Great Khan Kublai in China), encompassed modern-day Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and parts of Turkey, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan.<sup>14</sup>

The early administration of this vast and diverse territory was a hybrid system. It combined the Mongol military hierarchy and the *Yassa* (the traditional Mongol legal code) with the sophisticated and long-established Persian bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>5</sup> Hulagu and his commanders recognized their own inexperience in governing a complex agrarian society and pragmatically co-opted the skills of the local elite. While his early rule was marked by revolts and instability, a more sustainable administration began to take shape after 1262 with the appointment of the capable Persian vizier Shams al-Din Juvayni (the brother of the historian Ata-Malik Juvayni).<sup>20</sup> This policy of employing Persian administrators would become a hallmark of Ilkhanid rule.

Economically, the establishment of the Ilkhanate under the umbrella of the *Pax Mongolica* (Mongol Peace) had a revitalizing effect on trade. The Mongols actively promoted and

secured commerce along the Silk Road, and Hulagu's conquests opened Iran to unprecedented levels of exchange with both China to the east and Europe to the west.<sup>1</sup>

## Religious Policy

In matters of religion, Hulagu adhered to the traditional Mongol policy of pragmatism and tolerance, though his personal inclinations and family ties created a clear hierarchy of favor.<sup>51</sup> His mother, Sorghaghtani Beki, and his chief wife, Doquz Khatun, were devout Nestorian Christians, and as a result, Christian communities throughout the Ilkhanate were granted special protection and privileges.<sup>1</sup> Hulagu himself was likely a follower of Tengrism, the traditional Mongol shamanistic faith, but also showed a strong affinity for Buddhism, a religion he reportedly embraced more fully toward the end of his life.<sup>11</sup> While his campaigns were devastating to Muslim populations and institutions, he did not engage in systematic religious persecution. Indeed, his successors would eventually find it politically necessary to convert to Islam to legitimize their rule over a predominantly Muslim population.<sup>53</sup>

## The Maragheh Observatory: A Renaissance Amidst the Ruins

The most striking paradox of Hulagu's reign is his role as a great patron of science. The same conqueror who oversaw the destruction of Baghdad's centers of learning commissioned the construction of the Maragheh observatory in 1259, one of the most advanced scientific institutions in the world at the time.<sup>20</sup> This patronage was not an act of pure intellectual curiosity but a pragmatic tool of statecraft essential for legitimizing his rule over a sophisticated, ancient civilization. Astronomy and astrology held immense practical and symbolic importance in both Mongol and Persian traditions, being crucial for everything from determining auspicious dates for military campaigns to creating accurate calendars for agriculture and taxation.<sup>48</sup> By patronizing the greatest scholar of the age, Hulagu was appropriating a vital source of legitimacy and demonstrating to his new subjects that he could be a worthy successor to the great Persian kings.

The observatory was built under the directorship of the preeminent Persian polymath, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, whom Hulagu had taken into his service after the fall of the Nizari fortress of Alamut, where al-Tusi had been held.<sup>20</sup> The observatory at Maragheh became a collaborative hub for leading scientists and astronomers from across Eurasia, including Persia, Syria, and even China.<sup>20</sup> It was equipped with a massive library, said to contain some 400,000 volumes, and a collection of cutting-edge astronomical instruments designed by its scholars.<sup>54</sup>

The scientific work conducted at Maragheh was groundbreaking. Its scholars produced the *Zīj-i Ilkhānī* (Ilkhanic Tables), a highly accurate set of astronomical tables that updated Ptolemaic models and was used for centuries.<sup>54</sup> Most famously, al-Tusi developed a mathematical theorem known as the "Tusi-couple," a geometric model that explained the

latitudinal motion of the planets without resorting to Ptolemy's equant. This innovation was a significant departure from classical astronomy and, centuries later, a similar model appeared in the work of Nicolaus Copernicus, suggesting a possible transmission of knowledge from Maragheh to Renaissance Europe.<sup>54</sup> The observatory outlived its founder, remaining active for over 50 years and serving as a model for later institutions, including Ulugh Beg's observatory in Samarkand.<sup>54</sup>

## **Diplomacy Across Worlds: The Quest for a Franco-Mongol Alliance**

In the aftermath of his Syrian campaign and the stalemate with the Mamluks, Hulagu pursued a new strategic objective: a military alliance with the Christian powers of Europe. The concept of a Franco-Mongol alliance was a logical geopolitical move, as the Ilkhanate and the remaining Crusader states shared a powerful common enemy in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt.<sup>13</sup> The Mongols were known to be sympathetic to Christianity, given the influential position of Nestorian Christians like Empress Doqуз Khatun within the Ilkhanid court.<sup>13</sup> However, despite decades of diplomatic exchanges, this often-proposed alliance never came to fruition. Its failure was not due to a lack of shared interest but rather to a fundamental and irreconcilable clash between two incompatible geopolitical worldviews: the Mongol concept of a single, universal empire demanding submission versus the European concept of a multipolar world of sovereign states negotiating as equals.

### **Diplomatic Overtures**

Hulagu dispatched several embassies to Europe with the aim of coordinating military action against the Mamluks. In 1262, he sent a mission via his secretary Rychaldus to "all kings and princes overseas".<sup>1</sup> The most detailed proposal is found in a letter sent to King Louis IX of France. In it, Hulagu offered to conquer Jerusalem and restore it to the Christians for the benefit of the Pope, in exchange for Louis sending a French fleet to attack Egypt from the sea, thereby opening a second front against the Mamluks.<sup>13</sup> This offer was tantalizing to European leaders, who had long been captivated by the legend of Prester John, a mythical Eastern Christian king who, it was hoped, would one day come to the aid of the Crusades.<sup>40</sup>

### **A Clash of Worldviews**

Despite the clear strategic advantages, the alliance was doomed by a fundamental misunderstanding of political reality. Mongol diplomacy was always rooted in the ideology of a universal empire granted by the Eternal Blue Heaven. Their communications, even when

seeking assistance, were framed as demands for submission to the authority of the Great Khan.<sup>40</sup> Hulagu's offer to "give" Jerusalem to the Pope was the act of a superior granting a boon to a subordinate, not a negotiation between peers. His letter to Louis IX, for instance, still insisted on Mongol sovereignty over the lands in question.<sup>13</sup>

This worldview was completely alien to the political framework of 13th-century Europe. European monarchs and the Papacy operated within the concept of Christendom, a system of distinct but spiritually united sovereign states. They sought an alliance of equals against a common foe, not a pact of submission.<sup>13</sup> The Mongols' demands for fealty were seen as arrogance, while the Europeans' failure to submit was likely viewed by the Mongols as inexplicable defiance.

This diplomatic impasse was compounded by deep-seated European mistrust of the "Tartars," stemming from their devastating invasions of Russia and Eastern Europe in the 1240s, as well as the immense logistical difficulties of coordinating a joint military operation across thousands of miles.<sup>13</sup> European rulers were also frequently preoccupied with their own internal conflicts, making it difficult to commit the necessary resources for a distant crusade.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the Franco-Mongol alliance remained a strategic dream, a "what if" of history that failed because its two potential partners inhabited entirely different political universes.

## **Death of a Conqueror, Birth of a Dynasty: Legacy and Historical Memory**

Hulagu Khan died on February 8, 1265, and was buried on Shahi Island in Lake Urmia.<sup>1</sup> His funeral was a stark reminder of his roots in the nomadic steppe traditions; it was the last Mongol imperial burial to feature human sacrifice, with several young women interred alongside him to serve him in the afterlife.<sup>1</sup> He was succeeded by his son Abaqa, who inherited the leadership of a new and powerful dynasty, the Ilkhanate, which would rule Persia for nearly a century.<sup>1</sup> Hulagu's legacy is profoundly complex and contested, shaped by the dualities of his reign as both a ruthless destroyer and a pragmatic state-builder.

The ultimate resolution to the paradox of Hulagu's reign is found not in his personal actions but in the trajectory of the dynasty he founded. The Ilkhanate's eventual conversion to Islam and its deep assimilation of Persian culture represents the final victory of the conquered civilization over its conquerors. Hulagu's act of violent conquest ultimately and ironically led to the creation of a state that would become a new torchbearer for the very Persian-Islamic civilization he had so brutally subjugated. His destructive legacy was the necessary, violent prelude to a period of profound cultural fusion and rebirth.

### **A Dual Historical Memory**

The historical perception of Hulagu is sharply divided, largely along cultural and geographic

lines.

- **The Destroyer:** In Arab and broader Muslim historiography, his name is synonymous with the destruction of Baghdad, the murder of the Caliph, and the symbolic end of the Islamic Golden Age.<sup>31</sup> This perspective, born from the trauma of 1258, emphasizes the catastrophic loss of life, the destruction of cultural heritage, and the shattering of the central institution of Sunni Islam. He is remembered as a pagan scourge, an agent of divine punishment, and a barbarian who laid waste to one of the world's greatest cities.
- **The State-BUILDER:** In Persian history and much of modern scholarship, the view is far more nuanced. While acknowledging the brutality of his conquests, this perspective focuses on his role as the founder of a dynasty that reunified Iran after centuries of political fragmentation under various Turkic and local dynasties.<sup>1</sup> The Ilkhanate provided a century of relative stability, fostered a unique synthesis of Persian and Mongol-Chinese culture, and through its patronage of arts and sciences, sparked what some scholars have termed a "Persian Renaissance".<sup>11</sup> From this viewpoint, Hulagu is the foundational figure of a new political order that paved the way for the later Safavid state and, ultimately, modern Iran.<sup>1</sup>

## The Lens of the Court Historians

Our understanding of Hulagu is overwhelmingly shaped by the great Persian historians who served the Ilkhanid court, primarily Ata-Malik Juvayni and Rashid al-Din Hamadani. Their perspectives are complex, reflecting their positions as members of the conquered elite who rose to high office under the new Mongol dispensation.

- **Ata-Malik Juvayni**, who wrote his *Tarikh-i Jahangushay* (History of the World Conqueror) while in Hulagu's service, presents a conflicted view. He provides candid and harrowing accounts of Mongol atrocities and laments the devastation of his homeland. Yet, he also expresses admiration for the Mongols' military genius, discipline, and religious tolerance, ultimately justifying their conquest as an act of divine will—a necessary, if painful, reality with which the Muslim world had to find a *modus vivendi*.<sup>64</sup>
- **Rashid al-Din Hamadani**, writing a generation later as the vizier to the Muslim Ilkhan Ghazan, had a different objective. In his monumental *Jami' al-Tawarikh* (Compendium of Chronicles), he sought to legitimize Mongol rule by integrating it into a universal, Islamic historical framework. He portrays the conquests of Genghis Khan and Hulagu as a necessary, divinely ordained prelude to the establishment of the stable, prosperous, and properly Islamic state of his own patron, Ghazan Khan.<sup>8</sup> For Rashid al-Din, Hulagu was a crucial, if destructive, instrument in a grand historical process that culminated in the Islamization of the Mongol rulers of Persia.

## Conclusion

Hulagu Khan stands as a figure of immense historical contradictions. He was the architect of one of history's most infamous urban catastrophes at Baghdad, yet his patronage of science at Maragheh was unparalleled in his time. He was a loyal Mongol prince whose actions, particularly the war against his cousin Berke, were instrumental in shattering the unity of the Mongol Empire he was meant to serve. He was a pagan conqueror, steeped in the shamanistic traditions of the steppe, who founded a dynasty that would, within two generations, embrace Islam and become a great patron of Persian-Islamic culture.

Ultimately, Hulagu's historical significance lies in his role as a catalyst. His destructive campaigns were not an end but a violent beginning. They swept away the political landscape of the 13th-century Middle East, clearing away a declining Abbasid Caliphate and a host of smaller regional powers. In the vast vacuum he created, he laid the foundations for a new political and cultural synthesis—the Ilkhanate. This state, born of conquest, would reunify Persia, redefine its relationship with the wider world, and foster a period of extraordinary cultural exchange and artistic brilliance. His legacy is not one of simple destruction or construction, but of violent and transformative creation, the consequences of which shaped the future of Iran and the entire Middle East.

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