

AZEEM BEG CHUGHTAI

The Fall of Baghdad*

[*Translator's Note:* The fall of Baghdad over seven hundred years ago at the hands of Hulegu Khan is to the Muslim world what the invasion of Constantinople by Sultan Muhammad II is to Christendom. Mothers still tell their children how the caliph, al-Musta'şim, was rolled in carpets and trampled under the hooves of horses. Hulegu Khan remains a bogeyman and his name forever synonymous with "murderer." 'Ażim Bēg Čughtā'i offers a graphic account but appears to have mixed together anecdotes and hearsay with historical sources. Since he has left no bibliography, we cannot tell whether his information is reliable. He is, foremost, a storyteller, and with storytellers the element of fiction can never be too far away.]

It would be proper if the heavens rained tears
of blood on earth
At the destruction of the dominion of
Musta'şim, the Commander of the Faithful.

—SA'DI

OUR STORY begins with the birth of Chengiz Khan in 1155. Chosen Khaqan in 1189, he became lord of all dominions from Kachak to Mongolia. His private appellation was Temujin although he is remembered by his pseudonyms, the Great Khan, the Great Khaqan and the title coined by his victims, "Qahr-e Khuda," the "Wrath of God."

*"Zavāl-e Baghdād," from the author's *Majmū'a Mirzā 'Ażim Bēg Čughtā'i: Dāstān, Ğrāmē, Mażāmīn* (Lahore: Saᅅg-e Mil, 1997), pp. 7–13. All notes have been added by the translator.

Abdul Latif, the famous Muslim historian, writes of his nation of Mongols in these words: “Their men and their women fight in combat. The arrow is their main weapon and meat their staple food. No one is spared in their onslaught. They will not even let the women and children get away.”

Chengiz had no contact with the Islamic world but his kingdom shared a common border with the dominions of Khwarizm Shah. The Muslims invited trouble when one of the Khwarizm’s governors rashly ordered the execution of some Mongol traders and the confiscation of their goods.

Chengiz wanted to establish friendly relations with the Khwarizm Shah. He sent an emissary, demanding to have the governor tried and punished. It was after a denial of justice and the murder of his emissary that the Mongol took to the sword. A million Mongols are said to have marched under his standards on the campaign against the most powerful of the Muslim princes. They swarmed out of the Steppes and swept away everything before them. Khwarizm Shah assembled an army of four hundred thousand to withstand the onslaught.¹ One after another the towns, villages, Casbahs and fortresses were overrun; their populace subjected to rapine and slaughter. Vast tracts of land, once prosperous and beautiful, now lay in ruins. Except for corpses and piles of rubble, nothing remained.

After leveling Khajand and slaughtering the inhabitants of Bokhara, Chengiz marched upon Samarkand. Samarkand was a unique city in the Islamic empire. A London or Paris of its time, it was the capital of old Sogdiana and unrivaled in the entire world for its trade, industry and commerce. The citadel of Samarkand had a perimeter wall of three miles, manned by a garrison of one million. With such a large military presence, it is easy to imagine the immense scale of the town.

Mongol troops besieged the capital. The siege was supported by the mutiny of sixty thousand of its defenders who left the ramparts to join Mongol ranks, but Chengiz showed little sympathy with the turncoats and had them executed. Bereft of hope, the imam and the qazis of the city

¹In his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1993), Edward Gibbon writes that in the first battle the Sultan lost 160,000 soldiers. Astonished by the multitude and valor of the Mongol troops, he withdrew his forces to defend frontier towns, but the Mongols pursued him and besieged the towns. Cf. vol. VI, p. 315.

pleaded for a cessation of hostilities but their pleas were ignored. The city was ravaged and, except for some artisans and other laborers who amounted to fifty thousand, the entire populace was put to the sword. It is said that nine hundred and fifty thousand people perished. If the destruction of a city of a million and the slaughter of nine hundred and fifty thousand of its inhabitants is not the “Wrath of God” then what is?

After Samarkand and Bokhara, Chengiz Khan’s army turned towards Balkh. The inhabitants of Balkh had heard of the fate of Samarkand; fearing for their lives, they decided not to put up a fight. They sent emissaries instead, laden with gifts, to sue for peace. Chengiz Khan took the gifts and seemingly accepted their terms. Then he lured the inhabitants outside the town for a census and they were slaughtered as soon as they had assembled. The town was burnt to the ground.

After Balkh came Khiva’s turn. The population was slaughtered and the banks of the Oxus were breached to flood the town. Not a vestige was left of its existence.

From Khiva, Chengiz proceeded to Nesa. Seventy thousand men, women and children were rounded up, bound, forced to lie down on the ground and then pierced with arrows. Next came Nishapur, which was Banu Tahir’s [The Tahirids] capital. In and around the capital city, seven million forty-seven thousand people were massacred. The city was leveled, its foundations ploughed and, to set an example, its soil was sown with barley.²

From here Chengiz rode towards Herat, inflicting upon it the same fate as its predecessors. The town was annihilated. One million six hundred thousand people were killed. Such was the devastation that when the Mughals of Hindustan reclaimed the town many years later, only forty residents could be assembled in the central mosque.

²Juvainī relates that the Mongols built a tower of skulls in Nishapur. “Flies and wolves feasted on the breasts of *sadrs*; eagles on mountain tops regaled themselves with the flesh of delicate women; vultures banqueted on the throats of houris.” See Ala-ud-Din Ata-Malik Juvainī [‘Alā’u ’d-Dīn ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juvainī], *The History of the World Conqueror*, trans. J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1958), p. 178.

After Herat came Zilla's turn. Zilla was a seat of governance. Hamadan and Dunbawar fell after, their fate equally grim. From here, Chengiz pursued Jalaluddin Khwarizmi to the banks of Indus.³

The Mongol hordes left a trail of scorched earth behind them. The caliph's armies stopped Genghis from entering Arabian Iraq but Transoxiana, Khorasan and Iran lay in ruins, their civilizations turned into deserts, their famed cities in rubble, their roads desolate. Chengiz Khan died on the return journey. Over twenty million people perished in his massacres. This number will suffice for now, although some historians claim that the actual figure is far greater.

Chengiz Khan had close to a hundred sons and grandsons. The well-known ones include: Batu Khan, Mangu Khan, Kublai Khan, Chughtai Khan, Hulegu Khan, and others. Kublai Khan became emperor of Cathay, Batu Khan sat upon his father's throne, and Chughtai Khan became famous for his progeny.

Hulegu Khan was the grandson of Chengiz. He became governor of Iran when al-Musta'sim was the caliph of Baghdad. The Abbasid caliphate was indifferent to the Mongol specter. The intellectuals were distracted by theological disputes and the caliph was sunk in pleasures. The Shi'as had their own axe to grind; the good caliph, in his wisdom, had their neighborhood razed to the ground and put them in chains. It is said that following this atrocity his Shi'a vizier sent for Hulegu.

Hulegu wrote a letter to the caliph, saying, "When I was campaigning in Rudbar, I had asked for your aid but you did not send me a single man. It is high time that you learn some manners lest you wish to lose your sword and scepter."⁴

Hulegu Khan besieged Baghdad with an enormous army. His artillery rained a barrage of rocks and naphtha flame. After a siege of forty

³Jalālu 'd-Dīn repeatedly fought the Mongols as he retreated but at the banks of the Indus, near the present-day town of Attock, he was so overwhelmed by the odds that he spurred his horse into the waves and swam to the other shore. His valor in combat earned him the admiration of Chengiz himself.

⁴Gibbon writes that Musta'sim encountered Hulegu with haughty embassies: "On the divine decree is founded the throne of the sons of Abbas; and their foes shall surely be destroyed in this world and the next. Who is this Hulegu that dares to rise against them? If he is desirous of peace, let him instantly depart from the sacred territory; and perhaps he may obtain from our clemency the pardon of his fault" (vol. VI, p. 320).

days, the city nobles decided to negotiate with Hulegu. Hulegu invited the caliph's courtiers into his camp under the pretext of negotiations and had them killed as soon as they arrived. Now the caliph set out himself with his brother, two sons and close to three thousand men—all grandees of the city, judges, sheikhs, imams and other notable citizens. Hulegu received them graciously and distinguished them with royal favors. After giving assurances to the caliph, he asked if he could take a census of the city and requested the caliph to order all men-at-arms and armed citizens to assemble outside the city gates. They were arrested as soon as they gathered and murdered the next day. The troops were then ordered to sack the city.

In one hall of the royal palace there stood a golden tree. Golden birds sat upon its branches and emeralds were embedded in its golden bark. In another hall, called Aivan-e Firdausi, splendid chandeliers hung from the ceilings. The walls were emblazoned with patterns of rubies and emeralds and their beautiful colors added to the magnificence of the surroundings. Palaces and gardens stretched out for miles on either side of the river and marble stairs descended to the water. There were many harbors and marinas along the river where the naval fleet, galleys and ships of all shapes and sizes lay at anchor. The military warships included tall ships with sails as well as small police petrol boats. Hundreds of pleasure boats, called *zoaks*, lay at anchor along the riverbanks. Every boat was decorated with beautiful streamers which fluttered and their colors, reflected upon the water's surface, brought the entire scene to life.

The central mosque was a beautiful and splendid building.

The public hall, called Qasr-e-Khuld, had an enormous green dome in the center which was close to eight thousand one hundred and twelve feet high. At the tip of the dome there was a statue of a mounted horseman holding a lance.

In short, Baghdad was a bride among cities, a beautiful and sophisticated metropolis where, for five hundred years, the Abbasid caliphate had collected the wealth, culture and luxury of the world. This was the Baghdad that Hulegu destroyed.

Only a master can do justice describing the scenes of destruction. How can one speak of the women and children who came out of their homes, holding the Qur'an in their hands, pleading for their lives, as they were coolly put to the sword. Delicate girls of refined upbringings, who had scarcely even imagined they would ever mingle with the public, were now dragged out of their homes into the streets, raped and left for dead.

Hoard of curiosities, both scientific and industrial, and books that the caliphs had painstakingly collected over the years were lost. Within a few hours, the civilization of Arabia, Persia and Mesopotamia was laid to waste. The rapine and slaughter continued for thirty days. In the narrow streets, the blood flowed ankle-deep. The river Tigris turned red for miles. Palaces, mosques and shrines were torched for the gold of their domes. Patients were slain where they lay, students and teachers were put to the sword. Shrines were desecrated and tombs were dug up. Books were thrown upon bonfires or cast into the river. Thousands of years of knowledge perished forever.

The caliph, along with his sons and his family, was also killed. Only a handful of the Abbasid family escaped with their lives. Baghdad, the cradle of civilization, lay destroyed. Of its population of two million, over three quarters lay dead.⁵

The catastrophe occurred in the middle of the thirteenth century. Arab and Persian historians portray the heartrending tragedy as divine punishment. Ibn-e Taseer writes that the shock waves of the Mongol attack were felt over the entire world and especially the Islamic empire. He says that the world has not seen such a calamity since the dawn of time. Ala'uddin 'Ata-Malik Juvaini was in the service of Hulegu Khan when he compiled *Jehān-Kushā*, an account of Hulegu's conquests. He lamented that Khorasan, which was once a center of knowledge and learning, was plunged into darkness in the aftermath of the onslaught. "Today ... the earth hath been divested of the adornment of the presence of those clad in the gown of science and those decked in the jewels of learning and letters," he wrote in testimony of the destruction.

After destroying Baghdad the barbarians crossed the Euphrates and arrived in Arab Iraq, continuing their massacres wherever they went. When they overran Syria and Palestine, the citizens of Aleppo and Damascus also fell to their sword. At Aleppo, fifty thousand men were butchered and ten thousand women and children were captured and sold

⁵Accounts of casualties vary. The Persian historian Rashīd ad-Dīn estimates eight hundred thousand killed. The Arab chronicler, Maqrīzī, counts two million; see Henry H. Howorth, *History of the Mongols* (London: Longmans, 1876), vol. 3, pp. 126–7. A third source is Hulegu himself. Apparently, he wrote a letter to Louis IX of France, in 1262, saying that more than two hundred thousand were killed in Baghdad. See David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1986), p. 156.

into slavery. The citizens of Harran handed him the city on the condition that he would spare it—he destroyed the citizens instead, killing even infants at the breast. In short, Hulegu destroyed Baghdad and laid waste to the surrounding countries.

Three Muslim poets have reflected upon his trail of destruction. Sa'di's couplet prefaced this essay. He sheds tears of blood.

[Altaf Husain] Hali comments bitterly:

The one blown away by the winds of
conceit
The one washed away by the deluge of
Tartar hordes

Only Iqbal refuses to lament and remarks on the whole episode with a kind of deterministic contempt:

The Tartar march is aught else but the news
That the Ka'ba has found new guardians in
pagan hordes.

Iqbal is lofty. To him, the fall of Baghdad or Delhi carries no importance when the true prize is the Ka'ba. Why the fuss? In his vision, thousands of Baghdads may fall, but Islam and the Ka'ba will remain eternally. The Tartar onslaught is a mere change of guard.

Hulegu used to boast that God had brought him forth to kill Muslims and he intended to march towards Hijaz to level the Ka'ba to the ground. The Tartar invasion had broken the back of the Islamic empire. Its power and political clout were lost and no ruler appeared capable of holding back the deluge. In the end it was the Mamluk sultan of Egypt who put himself between the Ka'ba and the Mongol hordes. At Ayn Jalut [the Spring of Goliath], a great battle was fought in which the "servants of the Ka'ba" turned the tide. The Mamluks pushed them out of Iraq, inflicting defeat after defeat upon them. But the victory came too late. With the fall of Baghdad, the intellectual flowering of Islam was snuffed out forever. □

—Translated and edited by Azhar Abidi