

Mongols and Mamluks

The Mamluk–Īlkhānid War,
1260–1281

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Introduction

The Mongols conquered the land and there came to them
From Egypt a Turk, who sacrificed his life.
In Syria he destroyed and scattered them.
To everything there is a pest of its own kind.

Abū Shāma (d. 1267)¹

For sixty years, commencing in AD 1260, the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria were involved in a more or less constant struggle with the Īlkhānid Mongols of Persia. During this period, the Mongols made several concerted efforts to invade Syria: in AD 1260, 1281, 1299, 1300, 1303 and 1312. With one exception, all the Mongol expeditions were failures. Even the one Mongol victory on the field, at Wādī al-Khaznadār in AD 1299, did not lead to the permanent Mongol occupation of Syria and the ultimate defeat of the Mamluks, as the Mongols evacuated Syria after an occupation lasting only a few months. Between these major campaigns, the war generally continued in a form which in modern parlance might be described as a “cold war”: raids over both sides of the border, diplomatic maneuvers, espionage and other types of subterfuge, propaganda and ideological posturing, psychological warfare, use of satellite states, and attempts to build large-scale alliances against the enemy. Here, as in the major battles, the Mamluks usually maintained the upper hand. Yet, in spite of a conspicuous lack of success on the part of the Mongols, they continued to pursue their goals of conquering Syria and subjecting the Mamluks, until their efforts began to peter out towards the end of the second decade of the fourteenth century. It was only then that the Mongols initiated negotiations which led to a formal conclusion of a peace agreement in AD 1323.

The study of this conflict is essential to understanding both the Mamluk and Īlkhānid states. The early history of the Mamluk Sultanate is inextricably bound up with the Mongols. As will be seen, the establishment of the Sultanate was indirectly influenced by the early Mongol invasions of the Islamic world

¹ *Dhayl ‘alā al-rawḍatayn* (Cairo, 1947), 208.

2 Introduction

and the steppe region north of the Black Sea. The Mongols were the Mamluks' greatest concern in the realm of foreign relations during the formative first decades of the Mamluk Sultanate. This was not only because the Īlkhānid Mongols were its greatest enemies, but also because the Mongols of the Golden Horde were its most important allies, not the least because it was from the territory of the latter that the vast majority of young mamluks were imported to the Sultanate.² It is thus impossible to understand the development of the Sultanate without first analyzing the nature of the relationship with the Mongols. The Īlkhānids, on the other hand, may have had more pressing matters on their minds than their conflict with the Mamluks, yet over the years it still remained a major concern, to which they repeatedly returned. If nothing else, an analysis of their failure to defeat the Mamluks should lead to a greater understanding of the Īlkhāns and their army.

Both the Mamluks and Mongols were military elites of Eurasian Steppe origin who ruled over large sedentary Muslim populations, and based their armies on disciplined masses of mounted archers. Yet fundamental differences existed between the two groups. First, the Mongols continued to maintain a tribal and pastoral nomadic way of life, whereas the Mamluks, born as pagans, had been plucked out of the nomadic environment, converted to Islam and functioned as an urban military caste. While the Mamluks were Muslims, the Mongols entered the Islamic world holding a mixture of Shamanistic, Buddhist and Eastern Christian beliefs. The Mamluk sultans saw themselves as defenders of Islam and the Muslims, and portrayed themselves as such, whereas the early Īlkhāns blithely killed the Caliph, destroyed mosques and sought alliances with local and Western Christians against the Muslims. Even with the eventual conversion of the Mongols to Islam, towards the end of the thirteenth century, the religious dimension of the conflict did not completely disappear.

The purpose of this study is to present a political and military history of the Mamluk–Īlkhānid war from the first clash, at the battle of ʿAyn Jālūt in AD 1260, until the second battle of Homs in 1281. The plethora of evidence and the lack of space precluded dealing in a single volume with the entire war to 1320 and its subsequent resolution. It is my hope that in the future I will be able to publish further studies which will deal with Mamluk–Īlkhānid relations from 1281 to the demise of the Īlkhānid state in the 1330s.

Previous scholarship

For all the interest and importance of the Īlkhānid–Mamluk war, it has until now only been partially studied. The general works on Mamluk history in European languages – most noteworthy being those by G. Weil,³ P.M. Holt⁴

² These comments are based on the remarks in D. Ayalon, "The Great Yāsa of Chingiz Khān. A Re-examination," Pt. C1, *SI* 36 (1972):117. See n. 13 below.

³ G. Weil, *Geschichte des Abbasidenchalifats in Egypten* (Stuttgart, 1860–2), vol. 1.

⁴ P.M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517* (London, 1986).

and R. Irwin⁵ – usually mention the war only in passing, perhaps discussing at length one of the battles or certain other aspects. The same can be said of the surveys of Īlkhānid history, such as those works by A.C.M. D’Ohsson,⁶ J.A. Boyle,⁷ B. Spuler⁸ and D.O. Morgan.⁹ The standard narrative histories of the Crusades – by R. Grousset,¹⁰ S. Runciman¹¹ and J. Prawer¹² – discuss the Mongols only in as far as they are relevant to their central subject. This does not mean that these works are without value. They provide a historical framework in which to view the Mamluk–Īlkhānid war, and offer much information and many insights into the conflict itself. They do not, however, fill the need for a detailed study on the subject.

There are several specialized studies which have proved invaluable for this work. D. Ayalon, in a series of articles on the *yasa*, or Mongol law code,¹³ discussed some of the salient features of the conflict, while analyzing possible Mongol influence, including the *yasa*, on the Mamluks. Many of Ayalon’s other studies supplied important relevant information. P. Jackson has given us two lengthy studies,¹⁴ which provide a clearer understanding of some of the important aspects of the early stages of the war. J.M. Smith, Jr.’s article on ‘Ayn Jālūt¹⁵ is actually a wide-ranging study of the tactical and strategic sides of the war, among which he discusses Mongol logistical problems. D.O. Morgan¹⁶ has also written on this latter topic. A.P. Martinez¹⁷ has published a long and detailed study of the Īlkhānid army and the transformations it may have undergone. Finally, P. Thorau’s recent biography of Baybars¹⁸ has been extremely helpful, both in providing much useful background information and discussing Mongol–Mamluk relations. A preliminary study of the Īlkhānid–Mamluk war is F.H. ‘Ashūr’s *al-‘Alāqāt al-siyāsiyya bayna al-mamālīk wa’l-mughūl fī al-dawla al-mamlūkiyya al-ūlā* (“The Political Relations between the Mamluks and the Mongols during the First Mamluk Dynasty”).¹⁹ Other studies will be mentioned in the course of this work.

⁵ R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382* (London, 1986).

⁶ A.C.M. D’Ohsson, *Histoire des Mongols* (rpt., Tientsin, China, 1940, of The Hague, 1834), vol. 3.

⁷ J.A. Boyle, “Dynastic and Political History of the Īl-Khāns,” in *CHTr*, 5:303–421.

⁸ B. Spuler, *Die Mongolen in Iran* (4th ed., Leiden, 1985).

⁹ D.O. Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford, 1986), 145–74.

¹⁰ R. Grousset, *Histoire des croisades* (Paris, 1934–6), vol. 3.

¹¹ S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (rpt., Harmondsworth, 1971), vol. 3.

¹² J. Prawer, *Histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem*, tr. J. Nahon (Paris, 1970), vol. 2.

¹³ Besides the part mentioned in n. 2 above, see *SI* 33 (1971):97–140; 34 (1971):151–80; 38 (1973):107–56.

¹⁴ P. Jackson, “The Dissolution of the Mongol Empire,” *CAJ* 32 (1978):186–244; *idem*, “The Crisis in the Holy Land in 1260,” *English Historical Review* 95 (1980):481–513.

¹⁵ J.M. Smith Jr., “‘Ayn Jālūt: Mamlūk Success or Mongol Failure?,” *HJAS* 44 (1984):307–45.

¹⁶ D.O. Morgan, “The Mongols in Syria, 1260–1300,” in P.W. Edbury (ed.), *Crusade and Settlement* (Cardiff, 1985), 231–5.

¹⁷ “Some Notes on the Īl-Xānid Army,” *AEMA* 6 (1986 [1988]):129–242.

¹⁸ P. Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I. von Ägypten* (Wiesbaden, 1987); trans. by P.M. Holt as *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1992). In the present work I have referred to the English translation.

¹⁹ Cairo, 1976. This work, although useful, is basically a compilation of Arabic sources.

Although I have at times disagreed with some of the points raised by several of these scholars, they are responsible for shedding much light on the conflict and helping to clarify my own thinking.

Sources²⁰

This study is based primarily on contemporary or near-contemporary sources composed in the Mamluk (in Arabic) and Īlkhānid realms (in Persian, Armenian and – to a much smaller extent – Syriac and Arabic). Both Mamluk and Īlkhānid sources have been analyzed elsewhere,²¹ and therefore a lengthy discussion here would be superfluous. The following survey will be limited to remarks outlining the way in which the present study was conducted.

First and foremost, there are three contemporary biographies of the Sultan Baybars, by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir (d. 692/1292), his nephew Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī (d. 730/1330), and Ibn Shaddād al-Ḥalabī (d. 684/1285). These works are rich in information relating to the conflict with the Mongols, but they are not without their problems. Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, a high government official, was essentially an official biographer of his employer. Shāfiʿ’ s work is more independent, but much of the time it is merely a compendium of his uncle’s work. Ibn Shaddād, also a high official, is much less explicitly panegyric than Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, and his work contains much unique information. Unfortunately, only the later part of his work is extant. This is partially compensated for by the extracts from his work found in later chronicles. Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir and Shāfiʿ both wrote biographies of Qalawun, which were also of some use.

Mamluk chroniclers can be divided into several groups. First there are those writers who could be described essentially as late Ayyūbid historians who continued to write into the Mamluk period: Ibn al-ʿAmīd (d. 672/1273), Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267), and Ibn Waṣīl (d. 697/1298). The work of the last mentioned writer, who concluded his chronicle in AH 660 (1261–2), was continued by his kinsman, Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥīm up to AH 695 (1295–6). Next, there are two Mamluk writers who in their youths lived through the period dealt with in this study, but who wrote their works only at a later date: Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 725/1325) and al-Yūnīnī (d. 726/1326). These two authors relate information from earlier writers (those mentioned above), eye-witness reports, and their own youthful experiences of the conflict with the Mongols. Al-Yūnīnī was one of the earliest of what could be called the Syrian school of

²⁰ Full bibliographic references to sources mentioned below are found in the Bibliography.

²¹ For the Mamluk sources, see C. Cahen, *La Syrie du nord* (Paris, 1940), 68–93; D.P. Little, *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography* (Wiesbaden, 1970); U. Haarmann, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit* (Freiburg, 1970); P.M. Holt, “Three Biographies of al-Zāhir Baybars,” in D.O. Morgan (ed.), *Medieval Historical Writing in the Christian and Islamic Worlds* (London, 1982), 19–29. For the pro-Mongol sources, see Spuler, *Iran*, 3–15; D.O. Morgan, “Persian Historians and the Mongols,” in Morgan, *Medieval Historical Writing*, 109–24; *idem*, *Mongols*, 5–27; M. Weiers (ed.), *Die Mongolen: Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur* (Darmstadt, 1986), 3–28; T.S.R. Boase (ed.), *The Cilician Kingdom of Armenia* (Edinburgh, 1978), 187–8.

fourteenth-century historians, a group which includes al-Jazarī (d. 739/1338), al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339), al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), al-Kutubī (d. 764/1363), and Ibn Kathīr (d. 775/1373). I used extensively only the last three of these works. While repeating much of the evidence found in al-Yūnīnī's work, all three add interesting information. Most of the relevant parts of al-Jazarī's work have been lost,²² while the one manuscript of al-Birzālī²³ remained inaccessible to me. This is unfortunate, since these are both seminal works and had a direct influence on the rest of the Syrian historians, including al-Yūnīnī. The inaccessibility of these two manuscripts was partially mitigated by the extensive citation of these works, often by name, by both Syrian and other writers.²⁴

Two other later chroniclers deserve mention: al-Nuwayrī (d. 732/1332) and Ibn al-Furāt (d. 807/1405). For his annals relating to Baybars's reign, al-Nuwayrī relies heavily on Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's biography. In a separate volume of his work, *Nihāyat al-arab*, he also provides a treatise on the Mongols, which contains important information. Ibn al-Furāt was one of the main sources of this study. Although he is a relatively late writer, he cites extensively, often naming his sources, both earlier writers and eyewitnesses. One of his most important sources was Shāfi' b. 'Alī's no longer extant *Nazm al-sulūk*, which appears to have been a vast repository of information on the events during the early Mamluk Sultanate. Ibn al-Furāt also cited at length lost portions of *Nuzhat al-anām*, written by his younger contemporary Ibn Duqmaq (d. 809/1406).

The importance of Ibn al-Furāt's work is clearly seen when compared to *Kitāb al-sulūk* of al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442). The latter work has long been a mainstay of modern research in Mamluk and Crusader history, due to a large extent to both M.E. Quatremère's pioneering translation and M.M. Ziyāda's excellent edition. However, a systematic comparison between the two works for twenty-two years of annals (AH 658–80), shows that, for this period at least, al-Maqrīzī's work is virtually a precis of Ibn al-Furāt's vast chronicle.²⁵ This in itself would not be a bad thing, but al-Maqrīzī often did his work in a haphazard manner, distorting the meaning of his source. This phenomenon will be seen to occur several times in this study.

Among the other Mamluk authors repeatedly cited are the early fourteenth-century writers, Ibn al-Dawādārī and Qirtay al-Khaznadārī, and the mid-fifteenth-century al-'Aynī (d. 855/1451) and Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 874/1470).

²² I am grateful to Prof. U. Haarmann, who kindly sent me a microfilm of those extant folios of Jazarī, *Ḥawāḍith al-zamān*, MS. Gotha 1560, which are relevant to this study.

²³ *Al-Muqtaṣā li'l-ta'rikh al-shaykh shihāb al-dīn abī shāma*, MS. Topkapı Sarayı, Ahmet III 2951.

²⁴ Little, *Introduction*, 46–64; Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 94–116.

²⁵ The possibility of a common source cannot be discounted, although none has come to light. Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-arab*, MS. Leiden Univ. Or. 2m, is not the common source, because the material therein is arranged somewhat differently in both works and is less detailed than in Ibn al-Furāt's chronicle. See the comments in R. Amitai-Preiss, "In the Aftermath of 'Ayn Jālūt: The Beginnings of the Mamlūk–İlkhanid Cold War," *al-Masāq* 3 (1990):12–13; *idem*, "'Ayn Jālūt Revisited," *Tārīḥ* 2 (1991):129–30.

The former two writers were useful sources, but both (especially Qirtay), suffer from a credibility gap, as will be seen below. Professor Little,²⁶ basing his study on research conducted on annals from a later period, has drawn attention to the importance of al-ʿAynī's work. Without detracting from this view, in the period covered in this study al-ʿAynī generally cited known sources, especially Baybars al-Manṣūrī's *Zubdat al-fikra*. This, however, is at times an advantage, for it helps us to reconstruct lost passages of this latter work. Ibn Taghrī Birdī is important for his citation of passages from the lost parts of Ibn Shaddād's biography and the unavailable work of al-Jazarī.

This is not an exhaustive survey of all the Mamluk chronicles which have been used, but only of the most significant ones. Additional annalistic works are cited on occasion, and provide important details. Besides the biographies and annalistic sources, extremely useful works include Ibn Shaddād al-Ḥalabī's historical geography *al-Aʿlāq al-khaṭīra*, the relevant sections of the encyclopedias by al-ʿUmarī (d. 749/1349) and al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), and the biographical dictionaries of Ibn al-Ṣuqāʿī (d. 726/1326) and al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363).

It is not uncommon for a piece of information which appears in one Mamluk source to be copied more or less exactly in several others. If every appearance of a particular detail or story were to be faithfully recorded, the result might be an unwieldy list of authorities. Thus, in the notes I have usually given what seems to me to be the original source for a story and two or three additional sources which transmit it. These are generally arranged in rough chronological order; to emphasize the dependence of a particular writer on another, I use the word "whence." In the case of Ibn al-Furāt's chronicle, most of which – at least for the part relevant to this study – is still only in manuscript form, I have always given the parallel (and generally shorter) passage in al-Maqrīzī's *Sulūk*. This is because of the wide availability of the edition of the latter, and the extensive use which it hitherto has enjoyed.

The pro-Mongol sources are divided into three groups. First are the Persian sources, the most important being Rashīd al-Dīn (d. 718/1318). This writer served as a wazīr to the Īlkhāns, and it is clear that his work is not unaffected by his desire to please his employers. A second source is Waṣṣāf (fl. 698–723/1299–1323), also employed by the Mongols, albeit in a more modest capacity. Waṣṣāf provides some information on the war with the Mamluks, but it generally seems of a somewhat exaggerated or even fictional nature. This author's convoluted style makes the use of this work difficult at best. Other Persian sources of importance are Ibn Bībī (fl. 681/1283), for events in Seljuq Rūm (Anatolia), and Juwaynī (d. 681/1283), for background.

The second group of pro-Mongol sources comprises the Armenian authors. These works have been consulted either in English and French translations from Armenian, or in the Old French originals of certain works. The sources

²⁶ Little, *Introduction*, 80–7.

are especially important for the discussion of the role of Lesser Armenia. On occasion, however, they provide information on wider matters. The third group consists of two non-Persian sources from inside the Īlkhānid Empire: Bar Hebraeus (d. AD 1286) and the Arabic work questionably attributed to Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (d. 723/1323).²⁷ The former, a Jacobite prelate, originally wrote his chronicle in Syriac (which was read here in translation), and later prepared a condensed version in Arabic. Finally, additional details have been provided from Frankish (i.e. European Christian) sources.

As a final note, I should mention that most of the information at our disposal on the Mamluk–Īlkhānid conflict is derived from the pro-Mamluk Arabic sources. It is true that the corpus of Mamluk historical works is much larger than its pro-Mongol counterpart, and this might be one reason for this phenomenon, but I would suggest that other explanations are involved. I will return to this point in chapters 5 and 10.

²⁷ See F. Rosenthal, "Ibn al-Fuwaṭī," *EI*² 3:769.