The Mongols' Baghdad: Knowledge Transmission through Manuscript Cultures before and after the Conquest – Introduction

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This short essay serves as an introduction to a collection of studies for *Medieval Worlds* 22, entitled *The Mongols' Baghdad: Knowledge Transmission through Manuscript Cultures before and after the Conquest*. The contributions to this volume challenge the long-standing narrative of Baghdad's cultural and intellectual decline following the Mongol conquest of 1258. In this introduction, we provide a brief contextual overview of Baghdad prior to the Mongol arrival, emphasizing its prominent role as the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate and as a major centre of political authority, intellectual activity, and commercial exchange, despite its significant political decline by the 13th century. Although Hülegü's conquest of the city in 1258 was remembered in Arabic historiography as a profound civilizational rupture, this introduction argues that Baghdad, under Ilkhanid rule (1258-1335), underwent a gradual reconfiguration and remarkable recovery of its political, intellectual, and institutional life. We examine some of the documented efforts to reconstruct the city during the Mongol period, the intellectual climate fostered by the Mongols' multi-religious and pluralistic outlook, and how this environment shifted following the conversion to Islam of Ghāzān in 1295. Ultimately, this essay seeks to present the various perspectives offered by our contributors and to establish the historical context that shaped the political, intellectual, and cultural milieu of Baghdad under Mongol rule.

Keywords: Baghdad, Ilkhanate, manuscript cultures, transmission of knowledge, Mongol Empire

As the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate from the late 8th century onward, Baghdad occupied a preeminent position in the pre-modern Islamic world as a centre of political power, Islamic orthodoxies, intellectual activity, and urban sophistication. Founded in 762 CE by the caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754-775), the city was conceived as a purpose-built imperial capital to be symbolically and functionally oriented around the Abbasid court and its bureaucratic, religious,

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and scholarly institutions. Strategically located on the banks of the Tigris River, Baghdad stood at the intersection of major trade and communication routes linking the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean, Iran with the Levant, and the broader Islamic world with Central Asia. This geographical positioning not only facilitated trade but also transformed the city into a cosmopolitan hub for the circulation of people, texts, and ideas. The first two centuries of Abbasid rule in Baghdad later became renowned in historiography for their literary production. Caliphs, prominent scholars, and wealthy merchants all supported the translation of ancient Greek texts into Arabic encompassing a wide array of disciplines including mathematics, astronomy, medicine and philosophy as well as botany and alchemy. Scholarly interest also sparked the study of Syriac texts inspired by Greek works and translations through Pahlavi intermediaries.[1] The prestige and symbolic authority ascribed to Baghdad continued to shape the city's identity long after the political fragmentation of the caliphate.

By the time Mongol forces entered the city in 1258, however, Baghdad had already experienced significant political decline. The waning influence of the Abbasids in the centuries leading up to the Mongol invasion had diminished the city's imperial centrality, even as it retained its symbolic weight within the Islamic world.[2] In Arabic historiography, the fall of Baghdad was remembered not merely as a military conquest, but as a moment of profound civilisational rupture – the violent end of an era marked by the destruction of libraries, institutions, and lives. Hülegü (r. 1260-1265), the grandson of Chinggis Khān and commander of the Mongol army in the region, led the campaign that resulted in the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate after over five centuries of rule.[3]

The conquest of Baghdad must be understood within the broader context of Mongol expansion across Eurasia. In the decades prior to the sack of the city, Mongol forces had already advanced across much of Central Asia, Iran, and the eastern Islamic world. At their zenith, the Mongol Empire formed the largest contiguous land empire in history, extending from Korea to the edges of central Europe. Through conquest and policy, the Mongols created expansive transcontinental networks of trade, diplomacy, and knowledge exchange, integrating regions as distant as China and the Mediterranean into shared economic and cultural systems.[4]

The Mongol expansion into the Iranian plateau began in earnest during the campaigns of 1218-1219, when Chinggis Khān launched a full-scale invasion of the Khwārazmshāh Empire in response to a diplomatic crisis that erupted following the execution of a Mongol trade delegation. This campaign opened a path into eastern Khurasan, initiating the Mongols' long-term military and diplomatic engagement with the Islamic world. Chinggis Khān's generals, Jebe and Subotei, pursued the retreating forces of Muḥammad II Khwārazmshāh (r. 1200-1220) westward, pushing through central Iran and continuing their operations

1 There is extensive literature on the early Abbasid Caliphate and its cultural legacy. For an overview, see, among many others, Ahsan, *Social Life*; Kennedy, *The Early Abbasid Caliphate*. On the translation of Greek scientific texts, see Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*.

2 Biran, Baghdad under Mongol rule.

3 Boyle, Last ʿAbbasid caliph.

4 Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*; Biran, Ilkhanid Baghdad (1258-1335).

into the Caucasus and as far as the Russian steppes. A renewed Mongol offensive under Ögödei Khān, Chinggis Khān's son and successor, began in 1229 and brought the final defeat of Muḥammad II's son and successor Jalāl al-Dīn Mangburnī (d. 1231). This phase of the conquest saw the submission of several major urban and political centres, including Fars, Kerman, and Isfahan, alongside the incorporation of the Christian kingdoms of Georgia and Armenia into the Mongol imperial sphere.[5]

By the early 1240s, the Mongols had consolidated their rule across much of Iran and the South Caucasus, and their military activities extended westward into Anatolia, where they would eventually defeat the Seljuqs of Rūm at the Battle of Köse Dağ in 1243.[6] Despite this sweeping expansion, Baghdad initially escaped direct confrontation during earlier moments of Mongol advance – in 1221, 1238, and again in 1243. Its relative political marginalisation and the Mongols' strategic priorities elsewhere may have temporarily spared the city. However, this reprieve came to an end in the 1250s, when Hülegü, acting on orders from the Great Khān Möngke (r. 1250-1259), led a new campaign into western Iran with the explicit aim of subduing the remaining independent Muslim polities – including the Abbasid Caliphate.[7] This westward push culminated in the siege and sack of Baghdad in 1258, a pivotal moment that marked the formal end of the Abbasid dynasty and initiated a new phase of Mongol rule in the heart of the Islamic world.

As many of the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, despite the trauma of conquest and the extensive destruction wrought in 1258, Baghdad under Mongol-Ilkhanid rule (1258-1335) experienced not a complete cultural collapse but rather a gradual reconfiguration of its political, intellectual, and institutional life. Soon after the city's fall, Hülegü issued orders for its reconstruction and the reopening of its commercial districts, including the restoration of the city's bazaars. By 1260, teaching had resumed in several madrasas, supported by the reactivation and reaffirmation of *waqf* (endowment) structures.[8] The Mongol administration's willingness to uphold and restore these endowments – traditionally linked to religious and educational institutions – played a crucial role in the recovery of scholarly activity in the city. This pragmatic approach to governance, which combined Mongol oversight with the retention and promotion of experienced local and regional bureaucrats, helped ensure administrative continuity. Moreover, the Ilkhanid court fostered intellectual and artistic life by facilitating the mobility of scholars, craftsmen, and administrators across the empire.[9] Projects such as the Marāgha Observatory, led by renowned scholars like Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, exemplified this cross-regional scholarly engagement.

During the early phase of Ilkhanid rule, Iran was governed by non-Muslim Mongol rulers who, consistent with broader imperial practice across Mongol-ruled territories, pursued a policy of religious tolerance as long as the religious leaders and their communities accepted Mongol political supremacy. The Ilkhanate upheld a pluralistic approach to governance,

5 Boyle, Dynastic and political history.

6 Melville, Anatolia under the Mongols.

7 Jackson, *The Mongols*, 125-152.

8 Biran, Baghdad under Mongol rule, 291.

9 Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*.

in which religious leaders – regardless of affiliation – were exempted from taxation and military service in exchange for their symbolic and, at times, administrative support to the ruling elite. This arrangement not only reinforced the Mongols' legitimacy among diverse populations but also allowed for the flourishing of multiple religious traditions within their domains. Christian communities, particularly those associated with the Church of the East, experienced a period of relative protection and institutional expansion. Simultaneously, the Mongol presence facilitated the introduction and limited spread of Buddhism into certain regions of Iran, reflecting the empire's East Asian connections and the cultural heterogeneity of its ruling elite.[10] These developments underscore the Ilkhanate's initial posture as an empire of accommodation, where pragmatic governance and religious pluralism coexisted with the consolidation of imperial authority.

Under the Ilkhans, Baghdad recovered its role as a hub for multicultural exchange, attracting experts from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds who enjoyed high status and remarkable mobility. Religious disputations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims – including intra-Christian and intra-Jewish debates – were recorded in and around the city.[11] The Mongol court's inclusive administrative ethos facilitated collaboration between Muslim and non-Muslim specialists, rooted in a cosmological worldview that prioritised political loyalty over doctrinal conformity. Grounded in the belief in Eternal Heaven (Tengri), Mongol immanentism allowed for religious pluralism, yet this tolerance had boundaries: challenges to imperial authority or ritual order were met with coercion.[12] Within this environment of guarded pluralism, various Islamic traditions – Sunni, Shiʿi, and Sufi – coexisted and competed for influence. Sufi communities, in particular, flourished. Baghdad's *khānqāh*s (Sufi lodges) housed itinerant mystics and students, with new institutions established during the Ilkhanid period. As highlighted by Michal Biran, Sufis like the Kubrawi shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 1317), exemplify this trend. After settling in the city, he taught at multiple venues and secured patronage to found a hospice near Baghdad's western gate.[13]

Over time, the Mongol rulers adopted Islam, culminating in Ilkhān Ghāzān's formal conversion in 1295, a pivotal moment that aligned the Mongol elite with the religious identity of their largely Muslim subjects.[14] However, it also marked a departure from earlier policies of religious pluralism. Non-Muslim communities faced growing restrictions, including the imposition of the poll tax (jizya tax) and the repurposing or destruction of temples and places of worship, though some Christian groups retained status due to the Ilkhanate's foreign relations.[15] By the time Abū Saʿīd died without an heir in 1335, triggering the end of centralised Ilkhanid authority and a phase of political fragmentation and factional conflict. However, recent scholarship has challenged the long-standing narrative of decline and fall of

10 Allsen, Ever closer encounters.

11 Biran, Ilkhanid Baghdad (1258-1335), 198.

12 Brack, Chinggisid pluralism.

13 Biran, Baghdad under Mongol rule, 305-306.

14 Pfeiffer, Double rapprochement; De Nicola, Domestic sphere.

15 Jackson, Faith of the conquered; De Weese, Islamization in the Mongol Empire.

the Ilkhanid dynasty, highlighting the Ilkhanate's crucial role in fostering an interconnected Eurasian order.[16]

During the 14th century, the Mongol elite had become deeply embedded within Islamic society while retaining Chinggisid legitimacy. The Mongol domination of the region saw the emergence of expansive political and cultural relations that facilitated the mobility of artisans, scholars, and religious figures from East Asia to the Mediterranean and beyond. Baghdad, though no longer the imperial capital it once was, remained a key destination for scholars, travellers, and merchants, supported by Mongol-secured routes that facilitated the movement of people and texts. The city continued to be renowned for its high-quality artisanal production – particularly textiles, pearls, and manuscripts.

The Mongol century was, in many respects, a century of writing. Under Ilkhanid rule, Baghdad maintained its long-standing reputation as a centre for papermaking, calligraphy, illumination, and book trading. Prominent Abbasid court calligraphers such as Yaʿqūt al-Mustaʿṣimī, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī, Zakī al-Dīn ibn al-Ḥabīb, and their students continued to reside in the city after the Mongol conquest. There, they sustained the traditions of manuscript production while training a new generation of scribes and visual artists.[17] While innovations such as woodblock printing were beginning to appear in the eastern regions of the Mongol Empire, manuscript production in the Ilkhanate reached a scale that is still difficult to fully grasp. The enormous textual output generated during this period – much of it preserved in libraries and collections across Iran, Europe, and beyond – remains underexplored.[18] It is to this manuscript corpus that future scholarship must increasingly turn in order to reconstruct the intellectual and cultural dynamism of the Ilkhanid era.[19]

Crucially, manuscript culture during this period was not confined to the courtly elite. Texts were commissioned and produced for a variety of audiences and settings, including elite households, educational institutions such as madrasas, Sufi lodges (*khānqāh*s), and an expanding class of private collectors. Patronage networks were extensive and multifaceted. Alongside Mongol khāns and princes, Persian bureaucratic families such as the Juwaynīs, regional rulers, and affluent merchants all played significant roles in supporting literary and scientific production. This cultural efflorescence was not the result of imperial edict alone but stemmed from broader structural shifts in society. The growth of private wealth among the upper classes enabled the emergence of a decentralised and diverse system of patronage that significantly contributed to cultural productivity.[20] Literary and scholarly works were being copied simultaneously across a wide geography – from Samarkand to Konya, and from

16 Melville, End of the Ilkhanate.

17 Biran, Ilkhanid Baghdad (1258-1335), 193.

18 Efforts in trying to map the literary production in Mongol Iran and Central Asia are being done by the team of the NoMansLand Project (FWF) based at the Institute of Iranian Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

19 A proposal in this direction can be seen in De Nicola, Manuscripts and digital technologies.

20 On the network of patronage, for example, around scholars at the observatory in Marāgha, see Yano, Stars in the sky.

Cairo to Delhi – attesting to the emergence of a reconnected and redefined Islamic world under Mongol rule.

Literary and scholarly circles often formed around prominent polymaths who acted as intermediaries between the Mongol elite and local traditions of learning. Figures such as ʿAṭā Malik Juwaynī, Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh, and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī were not only trusted advisers to the Ilkhanid court but also played pivotal roles in the patronage, production, and transmission of texts.[21] These individuals fostered networks of protégés and collaborators, helping to establish manuscript traditions that would influence subsequent generations. In the decades following the conquest, numerous scholars – many of them Persian-speaking and closely associated with families like the Juwaynīs – either settled in or travelled through Baghdad.[22] During this period, Persian began to assert a growing presence, side by side with Arabic, as a literary and intellectual language within the Ilkhanate. Nevertheless, preliminary research on surviving manuscripts from the 13th and 14th centuries reveals that Arabic remained overwhelmingly dominant in terms of textual output. While Persian gained importance, especially in genres such as literature, ethics, and Sufism, Arabic continued to be the primary language for scholarly, scientific, and religious works. The choice of language was often tied to the nature of the text itself: Arabic predominated in theology, jurisprudence, and scientific treatises, whereas Persian was increasingly used for historiography, poetry, and didactic prose. This division suggests, pending further research on the topic, a functional bilingualism shaped by both inherited traditions and the preferences of a Persianised administrative and cultural elite.

Relationships between scholars and Ilkhanid patrons were often precarious, shaped by the volatile nature of court politics and shifting alliances. Intellectuals depended on elite sponsorship, but their positions were frequently imperilled by the rise and fall of powerful figures. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, for example, allegedly managed these shifts with care; when the Mongols arrived, he is said to have aligned himself with the political interests of successive Ilkhanid rulers, becoming a trusted adviser to Hülegü and securing crucial support for his scientific projects. Relationships with the ruling elite, however, shifted quickly. In the 1280s the eventual collapse of influential families such as the Juwaynīs disrupted established scholarly support systems.[23] This fragmentation led to the migration of scholars and protégés, many of whom sought new opportunities in emerging centres of power, including Tabriz, Azerbaijan, and the Mamluk Sultanate. Yet despite the political upheavals and the initial disruptions brought on by the Mongol conquest, Baghdad witnessed a remarkable cultural and intellectual recovery. Within a few decades of the 1258 sack, the city resumed its cultural activity as reflected in the production of manuscripts surviving from the period. The resilience of institutions such as madrasas and Sufi lodges, combined with the patronage of a newly established Persianised elite, allowed Baghdad to regain a prominent role within the Ilkhanate's broader intellectual and cultural networks.

21 Biran, Libraries, books, and transmission of knowledge.

22 See De Nicola, Persian books (in this volume).

23 Biran, Ilkhanid Baghdad (1258-1335), 190.

This volume explores Baghdad's cultural and intellectual recovery under Mongol-Ilkhanid rule, challenging the long-standing assumptions of decline following the 1258 conquest. We argue that, on the contrary, Baghdad remained a centre for manuscript production and scholarly activity throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. The contributions to this volume examine both the continuities and transformations in Baghdad's manuscript culture across the Mongol period. From astronomy and medicine to theology, philosophy, and literature, the essays address a wide array of disciplines, employing approaches that range from codicology and intellectual biography to architectural analysis and legal history to examine manuscript culture and knowledge transmission. The papers collectively offer a multidisciplinary portrait of how the city – often seen as emblematic of cultural collapse following the Mongol conquest of 1258 – remained a vibrant centre of literary, religious, and scientific production well into the 14th century. Moving beyond traditional narratives of rupture, the contributions reframe Baghdad as a site of adaptation, negotiation, and scholarly resilience within the evolving framework of the Ilkhanid Empire.

This issue of *Medieval Worlds* emerges from the international conference "The Mongols' Baghdad: Knowledge Transmission through Manuscript Cultures before and after the Conquest", held in Vienna on 1-3 December 2022.[24] Jointly organised by the FWF-START project "Nomads' Manuscripts Landscape" (Institute of Iranian Studies, Austrian Academy of Sciences) and the "Bibliotheca Arabica" project of the Saxon Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the conference brought together scholars in Islamic intellectual history, codicology, and manuscript studies to examine how Baghdad's manuscript traditions were reshaped under Mongol rule. Through detailed case studies of individual manuscripts, libraries, authors, copyists, and patrons, participants traced the networks linking Baghdad to Shiraz, Tabriz, and Marāgha. The essays that follow build on these insights to re-evaluate the place of Baghdad in the intellectual cartography of the Mongol world.

Bruno De Nicola's opening article sets the stage by examining the production of Persian manuscripts in Mongol Baghdad. His study identifies a significant rise in Persian literary activity under Mongol patronage, especially among the Persianised elites integrated into Baghdad's administrative and cultural life. This Persianisation of Baghdad's manuscript output offers a new understanding of how Ilkhanid cultural policies reshaped the city's linguistic and literary landscape. Stefan Kamola's contribution builds upon this theme of institutional transformation by investigating the reproduction and circulation of Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh*. Kamola argues for the existence of a Baghdad-based scriptorium that may have played a critical role in editing and disseminating the *Collected Histories*, thus underscoring Baghdad's role not only as a copying centre but also as a site of editorial innovation within the Ilkhanid knowledge economy.

The next set of articles focuses on religious and legal scholarship in Mongol Baghdad. Stefanie Brinkmann's study of *Maṣābīḥ al-sunna* reveals the persistence of Sunni hadith traditions through institutional networks like the Mustanṣiriyya madrasa and the Caliphal Mosque. Her analysis of audition certificates points to continued scholarly mobility and oral

24 Löhr, Conference report: The Mongols' Baghdad.

transmission between Baghdad and Mamluk Damascus. Katharina Ivanyi further highlights Baghdad's continued significance as a centre of legal scholarship through her examination of *al-Mukhtār li-l-fatwā*, a Ḥanafī legal text that persisted in Baghdad's scholarly circles well beyond the conquest. These studies complicate the notion of rupture by revealing strong lines of continuity in Sunni legal and hadith traditions. Taro Mimura adds a diachronic dimension by highlighting how Thābit ibn Qurra's descendants preserved and authenticated his scientific legacy by controlling the transmission of his works, particularly through autograph exemplars and manuscript copying.

Ghasem Gharib's contribution brings a different perspective in terms of the impact of the Mongol conquest of Baghdad. He argues that the marginalia in a manuscript from the Marʿashī Library (No. 16388) provide firsthand evidence of, at least, partial destruction of Baghdad's libraries, particularly that of the last Abbasid caliph. However, he also shows that despite the damage, the study of manuscripts continued under Mongol domination. Hadi Joráti's contribution follows examining the composition and early canonisation of the *Tārīkh-i jahāngushā* of ʿAṭā Malik Juwaynī. Through an analysis of textual and paratextual evidence, he identifies inconsistencies and indicators of multiple authorship, arguing that the work most likely reached its final form in Baghdad.

Architecture and material culture are not absent from this intellectual map. Andrew Petersen's analysis of Mongol-era architecture reconsiders the impact of the 1258 sack of Baghdad, reassessing traditional narratives of complete destruction through an analysis of evidence that reflects both cultural disruption and cultural continuity in the city. Meanwhile, Shiva Mihan's contribution focuses on the 13th-century Persian treatise *Kāghaẕ-nāma*, introducing a rare textual witness to Islamic papermaking practices in Mongol Baghdad. As the earliest known Persian work on the subject, this contribution examines the manuscript's content by highlighting mystical elements reflected in the text and evidencing a continuity of traditional Islamic papermaking practices in the city.[25] The volume closes with Nadine Löhr's analysis of 13th- and 14th-century copies of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's *Taḥrīr al-Majisṭī*. By examining marginal notes, she shows how annotation, revision, and cross-referencing to related textual traditions shaped the study of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, and how attentive copyists in the Ilkhanid period preserved these layers of commentary.

The editors' intention is that, together, these articles illustrate how Baghdad remained deeply embedded in the transregional circuits of textual transmission, intellectual production, and manuscript circulation within the Mongol Empire. Through this volume, we would like to invite readers to rethink Baghdad not merely as a conquered city, but as a reconfigured intellectual centre within the Eurasian world forged by Mongol rule. While further research is still needed to unveil different aspects of Baghdad intellectual history under Mongol rule, we hope these contributions serve as a catalyst to encourage more studies on surviving manuscripts from the period.

25 This article will appear in the forthcoming volume 23 of *Medieval Worlds*, to be published in December 2025.

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