 CHAPTER 9

Hülegü’s Letters to the Last Ayyubid Ruler of Syria.
The Construction of a Model

The formation of Hülegü’s ulus, after the fall of Baghdad and the abolition by the Mongols of the Abbasid Caliphate in 658/1260, profoundly altered the geopolitics of the lands east of Egypt. For the first time this part of dār al-islām fell under the rule of a non-Muslim power. The semblance of unity that the Abbasid caliphs had, not without difficulty, maintained across the Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula was definitively broken. The establishment of the Persian Ilkhanate resulted in a clear dividing line between two rival powers: the Ilkhans, whose territories spanned much of the Iranian plateau and Mesopotamia, and the Mamluks, who ruled Syria-Palestine and Egypt as well as controlling the Islamic holy places of the Hijaz.1 For over fifty years, these rival powers fought a merciless ideological war, not without resorting to the use of arms. The Ilkhans launched several major offensives into Syria 1260, 1281, 1299, 1300, 1303 and 1312–13). The first invasion, led by Hülegü, ravaged northern Syria. He briefly captured Damascus, but the Mongol advance was halted at ʿAyn Jālūt in 658/1260 by the Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Quṭuz and his emir Baybars. This long period of conflict was marked by the exchange of embassies and ample diplomatic correspondence between the two rival powers until the negotiations that led to the peace treaty of 1323.2

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1 Since the conquest of Yemen by Saladin’s son Tūrān-Shāh in 569/1174 it had been the Ayyubid sultan’s duty to protect the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This task then fell to Mamluks, who presented themselves as the guarantors of Islam against the Mongol dynasty of Iran.

I will analyse below Hülegü’s “letters” to al-Malik al-Nāṣir Yūsuf, the Ayyubid prince of Damascus and Aleppo. As with all the letters sent by the Ilkhans to Muslim rulers, we have no original documents, but only versions transmitted by historians, which often vary considerably amongst themselves. We have many “copies” of these letters, but it seems as though we are faced with various versions of an (or two) original letter. One immediate and rather difficult problem which faces us regards which of the various transmissions of these documents is closest to the original, and what chronology one might propose for their composition.

The Letters in their Historical Context

On the eve of the Mongol invasion, Bilād al-Shām was divided between three Ayyubid princes. The most important, al-Malik al-Nāṣir, reigned over Damascus and Aleppo. Al-Manṣūr Muḥammad ruled Ḥamā subject to al-Malik al-Nāṣir’s control. The third prince, al-Mughith ʿUmar, had established himself at Karak in Palestine in the same year that al-Malik al-Nāṣir had taken control of Damascus. The Mongol armies first entered dār al-islām in 628/1231 in pursuit of Jalāl al-Dīn Khwārazm-Shāh, but they did not begin to attack Ayyubid territory until 642/1244, after the defeat of the Rūm Saljuqs at Köse Dagh. Most of the region’s rulers displayed considerable political pragmatism in the face of the Mongol threat. Many of them hastened to submit to the Great Khan of Mongolia. This was the approach that al-Malik al-Nāṣir too adopted, even before the Mongols entered Iraq. From early 641/1243–1244, according to al-Juwaynī’s account, the sultans of Anatolia and Bilād al-Shām sent ambassadors to the Mongol representative in Azerbaijan requesting his protection. Then, in 643/1245–6, al-Malik al-Nāṣir sent a trusted emissary to Güyük in Qaraqorum. Finally, in 648/1250, the Ayyubid ruler sent a new mission to Mongolia to convey his submission to Güyük’s successor Möngke. This mission was led by his minister Zayn al-Dīn al-Ḥāfiẓī, who returned to Damascus.

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4 Stephen Humphrey, From Saladin to the Mongols, 334.
5 At this point, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Yūsuf did not as yet control Damascus.
6 Juwaynī, Taʾrīkh-i jahāngushā 11:244; Juwaynī/Boyle 11:508.
7 Reuven Amitai-Preiss, Mongols and Mamluks, 19.