Epilogue. The Mongol Empire after Genghis Khan

The past might provide a legitimating model for the current order of a Golden Age by which the present could be judged. During the post-Mongol period, the past had a real presence among the Muslim Turkic tribal groups who shared the Mongolian nomadic life, customs and system of representations. According to Matthew Innes: “Within a social group, shared beliefs about the past were a source of identity: the image of a common past informed Wir-Gefühl,1 and the defining characteristics of that past identified those who were and were not part of ‘us’ in the present.”2 During and after the Mongolian empire, to what extent did those wielding the cultural and political power manipulate the figure of Mongol and Timurid rulers? As we have seen, the pro-Mongol Muslim sources depict Genghis Khan as the tool of God and partly “monotheize” the myths of his origin. Thus the Muslim historians succeed to shape his figure as a respectable founding father of Muslim dynasties. How far could the Mongolian past be reshaped by the needs of the present? When Rashīd al-Dīn writes his Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh, the goal is to preserve Mongol history as a “lieu de mémoire.” But a chronicler can also use the past for interpreting the present. Narrating is not “telling things as they really were” but involves organizing them to adapt a preconceived scheme and to shape the identity of an entire society. Thus those who recorded the past in written form emerge as adaptors and editors of memory,3 but also as authors of “texts of identity” which in turn inform that memory.4 When Mongolia and all the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union rushed to independence, the medieval past was a factor of building a

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3 See for example the study of Charles Melville on a Central Asian manuscript from the seventeenth century which is an abridgment of Rashīd al-Dīn’s Jāmiʿ al-tawārīkh. The author adapts and modifies the text for a later public, see “Genealogy and Exemplarity Rulership in the Tarikh-i Chingiz Khan,” in Living Islamic History. Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand, ed. Y. Suleiman (Edinburgh, 2010), 129–150.
national consciousness. However the national identity had little to do with history. It is much more concerned with the construction of a national mythology.\(^5\)

The fragmentation of the Mongol empire was not the end of an era: Genghiskhanid legitimacy continued to influence rulers in their ideological choices.\(^6\) After the collapse of the Mongol khanates, the Mongol ideology remained vigorous and the charisma of Genghis Khan was still so strong that only his descendants could legally use the sovereign titles: “khan” and “khaghan.”\(^7\) From the Russian steppe to the Tien Shan mountains nomads formed the ruling class. They remained loyal to the customs and traditions of the Mongol empire, to “the Mongol dynastic custom, the ‘yasa of Genghis Khan,’ and to their military lifestyle.”\(^8\) Nevertheless, the Mongol empire left behind a double set of ideologies. In Central Asia, a “pseudo-Genghiskhanid” ruler might size power by military expedients, but he had to justify his rule through the protection of the Shari‘a. These two ideologies conflicted on many points, but nonetheless continued to coexist for centuries in Central Asia and defined ideas of legitimacy. When the Russians conquered the region, both were still alive. Descent from Genghis Khan remained an important political factor, “as was Central Asia’s identity as an Islamic society.”\(^9\)

The final stage of Ilkhanid rule is notoriously chaotic.\(^10\) After Abū Sa‘īd’s death in 1335, his empire fell prey to factional struggles between Genghiskhanid contenders supported by different emirs.\(^11\) But a new Turko-Mongolian conqueror, Timur, rose to power in 1370 near Samarkand and recaptured the western Mongol empire. He founded a state covering Iran and Central Asia, overthrew the power of the Golden Horde, and defeated the Ottoman sultan Bāyāzīd.

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10 For this period of military and political struggle, see Charles Melville, The Fall of Amir Chupan and the Decline of the Ilkhanate, 1327–37. A Decade of discord in Mongol Iran (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999).