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# Historiography and the Production of Knowledge: The Mongol Period

**Abstract:** *This essay participates in the postcolonial critique of hegemonic knowledge formations, focusing on the textuality and the narrative quality of historical accounts on the Mongol period in Iran (1216–1335). Modern historical narratives by well-known but non-professional Iranian historians, all of which are regarded as state of the art in Iranian school and university education, are selected for investigation. Large parts of these texts' content can only be accepted as plausible if one reads them as adopting not only Mongol history, but modern Iranian national(ist) historiography: As constructions of historical meaning they retrospectively employ fictions of coherence to forge a usable past that fits and supports an overall nationalist political paradigm.*

## 1 Introduction

Whenever historical knowledge is conveyed through written narratives, textuality plays an important part in its diffusion. Historical knowledge, then, must be regarded as a specific linguistic entity (Rüsen, “Geschichtsschreibung als Theorieproblem” 31) since the “presentation of a ‘usable past’ [...] is first and foremost a construct of language” (Scott Meisami 12). Moreover, a historical event appears as one of many elements in a narrative, whose author – the historian – has chosen which events to integrate into his or her text. Therefore, his or her writing does not treat immediate reality but “its interpreter’s relation to it” (Stock 80):

Narrative requires narration; and this activity is not just a recounting of events but a recounting informed by a certain kind of superior knowledge. [...] The narrator [...] picks out the most important events, traces the casual and motivational connections among them, and gives us an organized, coherent account. (Carr 59)

Although these attitudes and theories regarding historical texts have been part of the academic paradigm in historiography for some decades, many students of history still use historical narratives to retrieve ‘facts.’ Thus, however, they did and do not sufficiently take into account that historians of the past did not simply put events they themselves experienced or were told

about by others in a chronological order to enlighten their contemporaries and generations to come. Instead, these authors of historical narratives carefully as well as specifically chose the events they wanted to become part of their accounts and fit them into their tale. Iranian scholars establishing a 'national historiography' under Reza Shah Pahlavi (gov. 1925–1941) in the 1930s as well as their students and successors up to the present, for example, did not and still do not consider historiographical writings of the past a literary genre, but regard it as a source from which historical 'facts' can be deduced.

In this article, I will show how Iranian scholars writing about the Mongol era (1216–1335) employed historiographies from the Mongol period to produce historical knowledge. They specifically gave meaning to a part of Iran's 'national history' that is still considered by Iranians at home and abroad to have been largely disastrous and traumatic. To let the selected exemplary texts speak for themselves, I will refrain from commenting upon the authors' presentations of a 'usable past.' Subsequently, the narrative strands demonstrating the way Iranian scholars give meaning to the Mongol period in Iran will be analyzed in regard to the theoretical frame established.

For the conquered peoples, the Mongol invasions in Central and Western Asia of 1219–1224 and 1256–1258, proved to be experiences of contingency that left contemporary observers, later historians, and even present-day commentators stunned. Since it is a basic principle that human experience of temporal change provokes confusion, such experiences must be integrated into a concept of temporal order and established meaning. The confusion brought about by the breach or rupture of such a conquest must be mended by historiography, which fills historical contingency with significance and meaning (Rüsen, "Einleitung" 51–52). Undoubtedly, the Mongolian conquests brought about war, destruction, starvation, disease, and displacement, and they temporarily ended the rule of Islam in the Eastern part of the then Muslim World. It was under Mongol rule that we witness an "impressive creative outburst of historical writing" (Daniel), if not the actual beginning of historical narrative in the Persian language. Imperial Mongol rule thus served as a stimulus to historiographical production in Persian on a large scale (Melville).

This essay pursues the question whether it is at all plausible that the contemporary as well as the more modern 'trauma', both Muslim and Western

sources talk about, was actually experienced as a reaction to these violent incidents, or whether this alleged ‘trauma’ might be part of a metanarrative of modern historiography that has been employed as an interpretive instrument for decidedly ideological reasons. According to Jeffrey Alexander, a cultural trauma only occurs, when members of a collectivity are convinced that they have been subjected to “a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Thus, a cultural trauma is constructed as such by a society’s carrier groups, whose members allege a fundamental threat to their self-image, claiming “emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution” (Alexander 11). To convince a wider audience of their collective trauma, the carrier group has to “engage in successful meaning work” (11). In the case of Iran, modern authors of historical narratives, whom we may call a carrier group, consider the Mongol invasions a trauma or a genocide and call for recognition of the pain suffered by their ancestors and – due to the Iranian collective memory – themselves.

To give meaning to an event of temporal change that might also be considered ‘traumatic,’ historians often provide metanarratives that reinterpret historical incidents. They might, for example, resort to the “triumph-over-alien-forces” schematic narrative template, according to which an unsuspecting people is conquered by a brutal alien force that the culturally superior former victims finally triumph over (see Wertsch 51, 57–58). More often than not, such metanarratives, developed by nations that establish their identity on victimization, are characterized by self-auratization and mythmaking. Hence, an experience of (repeated) defeat, loss, and humiliation is at the basis of an arsenal of phantasmal reinterpretations, i.e. counterproposals and the transformation of defeat into spiritual or moral elevation (A. Assmann 70).

In the texts on the Mongol period in Iran under review, such reinterpretations, including fictions of coherence, are manifold. Fictions of coherence that are incorporated in these historical narratives serve as constructions of identity and self-assurance. Therefore, they cannot be simply exposed as ‘fabrications,’ but have to be recognized as constructs that instill often contingent historical events with meaning (J. Assmann 7–8). As the texts presented in the ensuing section of this essay show, modern Iranian historical

narratives about the Mongol period – regardless of whether they were written during the Pahlavi era or in the Islamic Republic – are assigned the task of giving meaning to this epoch of Iranian ‘national’ history. They must integrate this era into the “linear time of the nation” (Özkırımlı 208–09) and comply with the needs of society regarding the construction of meaning. This article presents and analyzes modern historical narratives on the Mongol period written by well-known Iranian authors. Significantly, their academic training often lacks history as a field of study. We must therefore regard them as enthusiasts or pastime historians. Yet, the majority of their historical narratives were written and published as textbooks to be taught at schools and universities where they have a large impact on public historical consciousness. They are regarded as state of the art as far as scholarly texts on the Mongol era are concerned. Yet, as will be shown, large parts of their content can only be accepted as plausible if one reads them as a contribution to the history of meaning that leaves room for fictions of coherence.

## 2 Modern Iranian Historical Narratives: Mongol History and its Meaning

In what follows, parts of the historical narratives on the Mongol period in Iran will be presented in relation to the theoretical framework established above. The subjects selected represent some of the major narrative strands like the repercussions of the first Mongolian invasions for ‘Iran,’<sup>1</sup> and the Islamization and Iranization of the Mongol dynasty of the Ilkhanids (1256–1335). Both repercussions are closely connected to the way in which the Mongol era in ‘Iran’ is made to fit into a historical narrative which supports ‘national history and Iranian identity.’ Remarkably, although the political and social circumstances underwent enormous changes from the Pahlavi monarchy to the Islamic Republic, these premises have not altered.

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1 As a political entity, Iran had not existed since the defeat of the Sasanians (224–651 AC) by the conquering Arabs. Only through Mongol rule was a political unity called ‘Iran’ established again.

## 2.1 The First Mongolian Invasions in Iran (1219–1224) and its Consequences

In the historical narratives written in Iran between 1933 and 2011, the consequences of the Mongolian invasions in Iran are usually described as disastrous. Overall, according to Eqbal, the Mongol conquests were carried out so rapidly and relentlessly that they resembled a celestial rather than a historical event (*Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 100). He compares the invasions with a natural catastrophe like a tempest, torrent, or flood (*Tarikh-e mofassal-e* vol. 2, 445, 569). In their wake, so the dominant narrative configuration goes, the mass killings, lootings, and complete destruction of the lands were catastrophic. Even more devastating was the damage these invasions did to the Islamic civilization and the degradation they imposed upon the Arabic and Persian sciences (Eqbal, *Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 100, see also 106–08). The victory of a wild nomadic people, who did not have the morality of the sedentary nation at its command, shook the foundations of the conquered society to the core and led to its decline, Safa explains (77). Still, the same author continues, the intellectual deterioration in Iran must be regarded as the most fatal and dangerous result of the Mongol conquest: mostly poor and weak individuals survived, whereas most of the rulers were slain, families of grandees vanished, and the centers of knowledge and morality were ruined. The thread connecting Mongolian Iran with its past was torn, and Iranian civilization, including its literature, wholly decayed (Safa 78, 83, 302–03). Caused by the ferocity of the Mongol attack, Iranians lost most of their national skills as well as their racial thought. Therefore, they proclaimed religious war against the Mongols rather than fighting a national or racial combat (Safa 83–84). Although those one hundred years of Mongol invasions and rule did indeed constitute a historical rupture, Djafariyan argues, there still existed a strong connection with the pre-Mongol past. This was due to the cultural and religious steadfastness of the Islamic world at that time, which was a lot stronger than its political persistence (15).

According to Panahi, it was the Mongols' custom to order massacres and complete destruction of each village or town whose inhabitants had put up resistance. These crimes were used as an effective means of propaganda to strengthen the Mongols and demoralize their victims (39). According to

Dastgheib, the invasion was a coordinated felony. Because Genghis Khan had promised his troops that they would conquer the world, there existed an interrelation between the foundation of the Mongol empire and a divine and mystical power, including human sacrifice, he states. This, Dastgheib concludes, could be seen as an analogy to the ideology and politics of Hitler's Germany. At the end of the day, Genghis Khan's machinery of war and his sacred imperial routine served the purpose of "conquer[ing] the world at the expense of its annihilation" (14–15). Rather than withdrawing after their attack, the Mongols spread out their belongings on the burnt land and held a lavish banquet on the hill of corpses. They bled the people white and corrupted Iranian culture and society (Dastgheib 49, 141–42, see also 34).

Yet, according to some, Mongol rule also had its positive effects: The Mongols united the lands they had conquered under central rule, established security on the routes, stimulated and promoted trade relations, and set up political relationships between Asia and Europe. They took care of the exchange between scholars of different provenance, disseminated the Persian language and Islam in East Asia, and appointed Iranian viziers and advisers in non-Islamic lands as well as to the administration of China (Eqbal, *Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 109; Djafariyan 37). Consequently, it was during the Mongol era that political and economic connections of Iran were revived for the first time after the Arab invasions and the fall of the Iranian Sasanians (224–651) (Djafariyan 124). As stated by Mortazavi, even if the Mongol conquests were characterized by bloodshed, destruction, and subsequent stagnancy, later historians had clouded the positive effects of Mongol rule with a curtain of fanaticism, prejudice, and animosity (xv). The state of affairs in Iran after the capture of the Abbasid capital of Baghdad in 1258, he continues, consequently raised the question whether historical tradition had not given us a one-sided account of events. Clearly, the historians' averseness and bias were not founded on their witnessing of the events. Rather, their interpretation of occurrences has to be ascribed to the shock felt by the Sunnite community evoked by the fall of Baghdad and the slaughter of the last Abbasid caliph. In fact, Mortazavi claims, the Ilkhanids supported freedom of thought, prohibited national and religious fanaticism, and established some of the most significant centers of learning (xv–xxiii).

As a metanarrative, the ‘triumph-over-alien-forces’ template is widely referred to in the texts under consideration: According to Eqbal, whenever two peoples collide, a time of massive conflict arises between their natural talents and lifestyles. Eventually, the people prevailed whose administrative skills and political experience were more advanced and whose civilization and customs were more entrenched, particularly, if this people possessed literature, legends, and myths as powerful means of connecting them with their forebears (*Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 81–82). Therefore, he continues, the ancient civilizations of Iran and China soon took revenge against the conquerors and encumbered the Mongol rulers with their own languages, religions, and the basic principles of administration and government (*Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 2, 449). In fact, Bayani contends, the combat between the Mongolian conquerors and the Iranian conquered was a battle between two dissimilar belief systems and cultures. Whereas the victorious Mongols tried to impose their rule onto Iran, the defeated Iranians carefully and cleverly planned to liberate their “historical identity and their beliefs” (*Din* vol. 1, vii–viii). Gradually and cautiously, they took authority into their own hands to purge their own customs, their culture, and civilization of an alien influence (Bayani, *Hasht* 223). Capable Iranian men slowly tamed the ‘Mongolian dragon’ and put him on the path of scientific progress and scholarship, as schools were founded, trade and economy were encouraged, and fanaticism and heresy were prohibited (Mortazavi xvi). According to Dadfar, the Iranians thus were the eventual victors. It did not take long before the ‘wild’ Mongols and their leaders were affected by Irano-Islamic culture and succumbed to its appeal. Eagerly, Iranians tried to safeguard their identity and to subjugate their aggressor. In this way, he says, they penetrated the centers of Mongolian power and distributed their language and script in the Mongol realm. Owing to its superior culture and civilization, a people that seemed to be conquered, ultimately transformed its defeat into triumph (81–82).

## 2.2 Defeating the Enemy: The Islamization and Iranization of the Ilkhanids (1256–1335)

Another massive Mongol invasion took place in 1256. One of its aims was to make the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad submit to the Mongols. After the

caliph refused to subdue, Baghdad was conquered and the caliph slain by the Mongols and their allies in 1258. The Mongolian victors then consolidated their reign as 'Ilkhanids' (i.e. subordinate khans in regard to the great khan) permanently on the Iranian plateau, the Caucasus and Mesopotamia.

According to Bayani, Iranians in the service of the Mongols pursued a common aim: They sought to revive their nation and culture by reigning in the foreign element and defeating its government (*Din* vol. 2, xi). In the clash of cultures, that is the combat between conquered and conquerors, Mongol and Iranian principles, she states, these Iranian government officials, viziers, and advisors played a vital role. Whereas the Ilkhanids sought to strengthen their power and to be accepted by their subjects, the Iranian people tried to restore their national and cultural existence. Since the Mongols did not themselves administrate the state, their Iranian government officials eagerly worked toward the people's goal and began their clandestine war against the foreign element (Bayani, *Din* vol. 2, xi; see also Mortazavi 85). The weapons they used were administration and religion. Since Islam was tightly connected to Iran's national culture, the people turned to religion as their sheet anchor to defend their national existence when in the wake of the Mongol invasions they witnessed the annihilation of their nationality and culture (Bayani, *Din* vol. 1, vii):

There began a merciless and clandestine war at whose end tradition and culture shone again under its banner. The Iranians triumphed, they finally governed themselves. [...] Amongst our legends we hold the myth of a bird called phoenix, which, although it is burned by old age and weakness, rises anew from the ashes and never dies. (Bayani, *Din* vol. 1, 356–57)

The crucial turning point in the history of Ilkhanid rule, as the authors quoted here agree, came with Ghazan Khan's (gov. 1295–1304) conversion to Islam. He was convinced by one of his emirs that by embracing Islam he would become the permanent ruler of Iran. Muslims would be liberated from the ignominy of having to live under the reign of unbelievers, and God would grant him assistance and victory in his wars. Finally, the Muslim and Iranian principles had prevailed in the contest between Iranians and Mongols, Eqbal concludes. The Ilkhanids not only converted to Islam but also embraced its Shiite creed, the predominant religion amongst Iranians, under Ghazan's rule (*Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 257). Due to his reforms, his legislative acts and his building activities, Ghazan Khan, according to Eqbal,

has to be considered one of the greatest sovereigns of the Orient. Even if he could not be compared with the Achemenid (558–330 BC) rulers Cyrus the Great (gov. 558–530 BC) or Dareios I. (gov. 522–486 BC), and the elevated rulers of the Sasanians, due to his governance and administration, Ghazan Khan had to be regarded as one of the most eminent sovereigns of Iran and the greatest ruler of the Ilkhanids (Eqbal, *Tarikh-e mofassal-ev* vol. 2 512). Together with his Muslim emirs, Safa observes, Ghazan Khan breathed new life into Iranian Islam, rescued it from doom, and saved it from the predominance of other religions that were spreading in Iran. He regards this ruler's conversion to Islam as the starting point of a great change in the history of the Ilkhanids, and considers the khan himself to be an Islamic, or rather an Iranian ruler (Safa 130). According to Mortazavi, the accession of this khan, and especially his conversion, are a turning point in Iranian history. From then on, the Ilkhanid reign allegedly took over an entirely Iranian and Islamic manner. Regarding its importance and the intensity of its human and social aims, this epoch was unique and admirable (Mortazavi 86). Similarly, Mortazavi goes on, Ghazan Khan ensured Iran's social autonomy and initiated its religious freedom – both initiatives counting among the most prestigious deeds in the life of the Iranian people during the Islamic era. After seven hundred years, it was under Ghazan Khan's rule that the basic requirements for the creation of “a large geographic and religious unity, a united and independent Iran” were met (Mortazavi 87). His reign took over Iranian principles and his political style and strategies were shaped by conformity, not force. Thus, as Mortazavi determines, the coincidental agreement of Ghazan Khan's policy with the historical nature of the Iranian people brought together those social and political foundations that encouraged national unity and the naissance of a great state (172–73). Ghazan Khan, he says, cleared away humiliation's dark cloud that foreign rulers had spread over the Iranians' way of thinking, without ever considering their wellbeing. Accordingly, the significant changes brought about during the Ilkhanid period were no coincidence. On the contrary, these changes were considered a stage in the natural and inevitable development of Iranian history. During the reigns of Ghazan Khan and his successor Öljeitü (gov. 1304–1316), the foundations for the historical and socio-political advance were laid down. In this context, the Ilkhanid rulers' true motives for embracing Islam were completely irrelevant (Mortazavi 173–74).

Bayani argues that, when the Iranian element succeeded in leading the sixth Ilkhan to Islam, the struggle between the Iranian and the foreign elements ended. In this line of argument, the Iranian element subsequently brought down its adversary forever and, using religion as its weapon, resurrected Iranian nationality and culture (*Din* vol. 2, 435). This was the moment, Bayani goes on to explain, when conquerors and conquered changed places (436). Since Ghazan Khan strengthened his rule and instructed successful reforms, he could end relations with the center of the Mongol empire in Beijing (465). His most important achievement, however, was that he was able to protect Iran's unity from Herat to the Euphrates (471). Öljeitü for his part visited the Taq-e Kesra, that is the ruins of the ancient palace of the Sasanians near Baghdad, thereby proving that Iranian culture had again reached its zenith while Ilkhanid rule had also hit its peak (480–81).

### 3 Analysis

Most of the historical narratives presented above describe the Mongol invasions and rule in Iran as a dramatic event and a traumatic rupture. Congruently, they agree on the main components for the construction of cultural trauma: the pain of the Iranian victims, the liability of the Mongol aggressors, and the ideational consequences their conquests had for the further advance of Iranian civilization. Yet, how profound this rupture had really been, is a matter of discussion. While one author claims that the “thread of the bond” between pre-Mongolian and Mongolian Iran had been torn (Safa 303), others disagree. They maintain that despite increasing moral corruption under the Mongols, the idea of Iran nonetheless persisted. Accordingly, the link between the people of both epochs is claimed to have been maintained and no detachment of their cultural relations occurred because the cultural and religious steadfastness of the Islamic world is seen as stronger than its political constancy (Eqbal, *Tarikh-e moghul* vol. 1, 81–82; Djafariyan 15).

Although the Mongol invasions are described as exceedingly vicious, not least to explain their victory, it still seems to be more plausible to the mentioned authors to depict the Mongol era in terms of resurrecting Iranian-ness. This narrative of the Iranian phoenix rising from the ashes is another version of the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative. It succeeds mainly in

consequence of another form of construction of meaning or reinterpretation of history: helped by their superior (Islamic-)Iranian culture and civilization, Iranians had overcome the Mongols; they had tamed the Mongolian dragon and transformed their defeat into victory. Thus, a military defeat is reinterpreted as a mental victory ascribed to the supposed religious and cultural superiority of the original victims. In view of the definition of historiography as a “science of self-understanding” (Lorenz 410), modern Iranian historiography’s task is to integrate the Mongol era into a national historical narrative coming into existence about 800 years later and to give meaning to this era in the context of this particular history that is to be told ‘from its beginnings to the present day.’ For that reason, the historical narrative does not concentrate on the immediate coming to terms with contingent events and the possibly resulting traumas. Instead, historical narrative gives meaning to these events retrospectively by using fictions of coherence. Despite the changing social and political circumstances, the accounts under review advance the concept of an eternal, indestructible Iranianness. The reinterpretation of events confirms this fiction of coherence to declare Iranianness as the true victor that defeated the Mongols and all other invaders. Accordingly, these narratives corroborate the self-awareness of the present day’s Iranian nation, offer it security, and open a future perspective. In this context, their comparison of the consequences of the Mongol invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the extinction of European Jewry in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe fits well into the narrative: Using this analogy, an explanation is offered for the Mongol conquest of Iran – their brutality, their military equipment, and psychological warfare made resistance pointless. According to this fiction of coherence, the ‘Iranian people’ at that time became victims like the European Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who had no possibility to defend themselves in the face of an unprecedented onslaught.

Ghazan Khan, it is said, was one of the greatest rulers of the Orient; apart from being a Muslim, he also was an Iranian ruler. In this way Ilkhanid rule was transformed into an Iranian reign. This fiction of coherence on the Islamization and Iranization of the Ilkhanid ruler, who supposedly ended a period of humiliation and initiated a new era in Iranian history, is supported by contemporary narrative sources describing the rule of the Ilkhanids as “another cycle of Iranian kingship, brought to a peak with the reign of the philosopher king and just ruler, Ghazan Khan” (Melville 140, 142). There is

obviously a great proximity of myth and history in these narratives. In the context of the construction of meaning as it is discussed here, this new era is identified with the victory of the ‘Iranian element,’ and the reestablishment of an Iranian nation state – which, in fact, was only instituted under Reza Shah Pahlavi in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“Consistency in the use of reason” is essential for the plausibility of narratives and requires the “principle of mutual recognition of dissimilarities” (Rüsen, “Einleitung” 29). As indicated above, modern historical narratives of the Mongol period are largely affected by reinterpretations and fictions of coherence, which have to be ascribed to socio-political conditions and associated nationalist and religious ideologies, respectively. On closer examination, therefore, they often lack plausibility and do not comply with standards of scholarly analysis such as confirmability, rationality, and the reflection of the individual scholar’s own viewpoint. Only on the assumption that these narratives should be understood in the context of a relativistic history of meaning that, instead of deconstructing these fictions of coherence, recognizes them as plausible, it is at all possible to appreciate large portions of their content. In doing so, the consequences of this construction of the past need to be closely linked to the Iranian authors and their surrounding society. At the same time, it is necessary to generate awareness for the fact that historical realities are always constructs established by the historical creation of meaning and that they thereby produce a coherence of continuity (Straub 85–87, 128). That is to say, history itself is the product of a culture or society with its own semantic paradigms (J. Assmann vii, 13). The relativist approach of the history of meaning becomes necessary because of the diversity of historical thought in an inter- as well as intracultural perspective that the historical narratives point to. The polyphony and contingency of historical actions thus cannot be suppressed by a monophonic narrative.

Modern Iranian authors studying Mongol history are assigned the task of giving meaning to history. They need to integrate this era into the “linear time of the nation” (Özkırımlı 208–09) and to comply with the requirements of their society regarding the construction of meaning. Similarly, their historical narratives have to be regarded as a *culturally embedded form of knowledge production*. In the view of those producing this kind of knowledge as well as for teachers and students both at the university level and

at school, this is methodically established, reliable, and truthful scholarly knowledge. It fits well into the overall nationalist paradigm pursued since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and established in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, a strong Shiite narrative strand has been added to the metanarrative while other narrative strands like the emphasis on Persian literature as part of ‘Iranian identity,’ for example, were allowed to remain.

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