

Constructing Identity Through Conquest: The Case of the Mongol Ilkhanate in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

The Mongol Empire ruled the world in the 13th Century, yet their conquest did not necessarily eradicate the culture of the regions they conquered, especially in the Middle East. The Mongol Conquest of the Middle East and the establishment of the Mongol Ilkhanate required a new identity to justify their authority. Rather than forcing their own culture on the conquered Iranians, the Mongols adopted two elements of the Middle East into their own identity: ancient Iranian kingship and Islamic legitimacy. This unique construction of cultural identity gave birth to the very new identity that was the Ilkhanid kingship. The Ilkhanate thus promoted this new identity through literature, art, and architecture. The hybrid nature of the Ilkhanid identity shows how identity in the Middle East was being constructed by the Mongol Ilkhans artificially to justify and maintain their authority in the Middle East, shedding light on how power structures often shape the identity of society and culture through artificial means.

Keywords: Mongol Empire, Ilkhanate, Gazhan Khan, Middle East, Iran, Islam

INTRODUCTION

One politician's speech or a single book could often fundamentally shape the history that followed. Kim Jung Un of North Korea openly announced that South Korea is now deemed a foreign and hostile nation separate from North Korea.¹ Ignoring the shared history, language, and culture, Kim Jung Un cleanly severed the Koreans into two, somehow distinct, nations with one speech. The powerful often weave the narrative for the powerless. Sociologists and historians since the 20th Century have observed how these cultural identities are, in fact, fairly recently invented by various power structures. Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, observed that nationalism and national consciousness came into being with

¹ Joyce Lee and Jack Kim, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Says South Korea Is Foreign, Hostile Country, KCNA Says.", Reuters, 17 October, 2024.
<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-says-south-korea-is-foreign-hostile-country-kcna-says-2024-10-17/>

the advent of the Industrial Revolution and mass media. Anderson saw a nation-state as a social construct, a collective imagination of a people with shared language and culture.²

Were there cases where identities were artificially forged in pre-modern periods as well? The Mongol conquest of Central Asia and the Middle East, especially Iran, is a prime case study of the construction and embodiment of a radically different identity in pre-modern societies. Their conquest of Central Asia and the Middle East was undeniably brutal. Contemporary Middle Eastern authors were dumbfounded by the sheer scale of destruction brought by the Mongol hordes. The 13th-century Arab historian Ibn al-Athir goes as far as to claim that the Mongol invasion was a punishment of God against Muslims.³ But once their conquests halted, their territories consolidated into the state known as the 'Ilkhanate', the Mongols soon adopted the prestige of ancient Iran and the legitimacy of Islam. From barbarous invaders to just rulers of Iran, the Mongol rulers of the Middle East artificially recreated their own identity. This study will explore the history of the Mongol conquest of the Middle East, the adoption of the ancient Iranian model of kingship, Islamic religious legitimacy, and the creation of a new identity as rightful rulers of the Middle East and heirs to its tradition.

MONGOL CONQUESTS OF IRAN

The Middle Eastern areas conquered by the Mongols were later coalesced into one regime known as the Ilkhanate. The founder of the Ilkhanate was Hulegu Khan, a grandson of Chingghis Khan. When his brother Möngke Khan came to power, Hulegu was sent to the Middle East to further the Mongol conquests. Hulegu's expansion in the Middle East reached its zenith in 1258 with the siege of Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate. Despite this ostentatious feat of conquest, Hulegu's westward expansion was checked by the Mamluks of Egypt. In 1260, at the Battle of Ain Jalut in modern-day Israel, Hulegu's army was resoundingly defeated. A civil war also hindered Hulegu's expansion effort in the Middle East. The sudden death of Möngke and the following civil wars among prominent Mongol leaders also distracted Hulegu away from westward expansion. Hulegu's domain in the Middle East was challenged by other Mongol rulers, such as Berke to the North in Russia. And during the Toluid civil war, a war among the sons of Tolui that obviously included himself, Hulegu took the side of Kublai. When Kublai triumphed over his contender, Ariq Boke, and became the Great Khan, Hulegu began styling himself as the "ilkhan", a subordinate to the Great Khan. Hulegu's domain in the Middle East was thus established as the "Ilkhanate".⁴

² Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised. (London: Verso, 2006), 1-10.

³ Ibn Al-Athir, *A Literary History of Persia*, trans. Edward G. Browne. (Cambridge University Press, 1902), Vol. II, 427-431.

⁴ Charles Melville, "The Mongols in Iran" in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353*, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002), 50-51.

The title “ilkhan”, meaning “subordinate khan”, is under much scholarly contention. Although the term “ilkhan” and the suffix “il-” were in use in Central Asia before the Mongol conquests, the traditional narrative is that Hulegu adopted the title of ilkhan around 1260 as he made the Middle East his personal domain within the Mongol empire. The theories behind Hulegu’s adoption of this humble title range from legitimacy to allegiance. Iran was not included in the original territories distributed by Chingghis Khan to his sons, so there could have been an issue with the lack of legitimacy in ruling Iran. The title could also denote Hulegu’s original position within the greater Mongol empire as an agent of his brother and the Great Khan Möngke.⁵ Or perhaps Hulegu was bolstering his allegiance to the new Great Khan Kublai by proclaiming to be his subordinate with the title of “subordinate khan”.

PADISHAH OF ISLAM

Despite their rule over the Muslim-majority Middle East and having many muslims in their court, the early Ilkhans since Hulegu were not muslims. Most Ilkhans were either pagans or Buddhists. Hulegu himself was a devout Buddhist who constructed a Buddhist temple near Lake Van, modern-day Turkey, and many more in Azerbaijan. Several eyewitness accounts ranging from European travelers to courtiers of the Ilkhanate, including Juvayini and Rashid al-Din, report the presence of Buddhist temples and communities in the Ilkhanate. These Ilkhanid benefactions towards Buddhism continued until the reign of Ghazan Khan, who firmly re-established the Ilkhanate as a Muslim dynasty. The early Ilkhanate thus experienced a religious conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, as reported by Juvayni.⁶ This conflict often included the suppression of certain Sufi orders. The most bloody incident was when Hulegu encountered and was perplexed himself in the presence of Qalandars. After learning their philosophy and identities from his trusted advisor, Shi’ia scholar Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, he executed them instantly. The only exception among the early Ilkhans was Teguder Ahmad, son of Huleg. Teguder converted to Islam in mysterious circumstances, hinting that “Teguder's contact with Sufis of the more extreme nature and their influence over him” led to him being the first Mongol ruler in Iran to convert to Islam. Teguder’s legacy was cut short, however. After overthrowing Teguder, Arghun returned to the conventional religious practices with what can be called an “anti-Islamic” platform.⁷

Some scholars attributed this conversion of the Mongols from traditional paganism and Buddhism to Islam to the similarity between the Sufis, Muslim mystics, and the Shamans of traditional Mongol paganism. The Sufi mystics, known as the “dervishes”, were divided into two groups: “the extreme, antinomian Sufis, and the more moderate, 'establishment' mystics. The Extreme Sufis were known for their deviance from the social virtues, evident from their vibrant, bizarre attire, as well as their poor economic status. They also held extreme theological and philosophical views against Shari’a, a body of religious law that forms a part of the Islamic tradition. On the other hand, the Moderate Sufis yielded

⁵ Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*. (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21-22.

⁶ Roxann Prazniak, “Ilkhanid Buddhism: Traces of a Passage in Eurasian History.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 56, no. 3, (2014), 650-663.

⁷ Reuven Amitai-Preiss, “Sufis and Shamans: Some Remarks on the Islamization of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate.” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 42, no. 1, (1999), 30.

themselves to the Shari'a, having more frequent interactions with the political elites. Nonetheless, their distinctions were known to be on a subtle level.⁸ The eccentricities of these dervishes, away from the orthodox practices of Islam, would have provided a smooth transitional path for the Mongol Ilkhans to adopt Islam and create a new identity as ideal Islamic rulers of the Middle East.

Whatever the catalyst behind the Mongol conversion to Islam was, it became clear that Islam became an important element in shaping the new Ilkhanate. And it was Ghazan Khan's conversion to Islam in 1295 that signified the ultimate shift in the Ilkhanate's religious identity. Ghazan Khan's reign is significant to our discussion of the Ilkhanid identity not only because of his conversion, but also because of the array of sources celebrating his reign and conversion. Various individuals purportedly aided Ghazan Khan's conversion, with most of them being Sufi disciples or in close relations with Sufis. One of those individuals includes Sadr al-Din, the son of a Sufi disciple. A political dimension of Ghazan Khan's reason for conversion is also highlighted by Amitai-Preiss. Focusing on Ghazan Khan's lieutenant Nawruz, Amitai-Preiss states that "his motivation appears to have been an amalgam of conviction and political reasons". These theories remain obscure since Ghazan Khan and Sufis were found to have no record of any mystical interactions that potentially engendered his conversion.⁹

The crucial trigger to Ghazan Khan's conversion is also attributed to one general named Nawruz and Ghazan's victory over Ghazan's predecessor, Baidu, in 1295. Their triumph elicited a major shift in the Ilkhanate's political authority from the previous standards of Chinggisid Mongol heritage to the onset of the novel Islamic kingship. This change became evident as Nawruz and his troops expanded the Ilkhanate domain to Khorasan, where the Mongol leaders acknowledged that Islam would be a far more effective ideology for bolstering Mongol sovereignty in and out of the Ilkhanate. As such, Ghazan Khan realized that his conversion would erase the religious barrier the Mongol Ilkhans had with the neighboring muslim states and their own muslim subjects. In Ghazan Khan's later reign after his conversion, Hope states, "Ghazan's public identification with Islam won him enthusiastic praise from almost all of the Persian histories which documented his reign".¹⁰ Such clear glorification by the contemporary authors hints at the artificial and performative nature of the conversion, celebrating it as a triumph of Islam and legitimization of the Mongol rule. No longer were the Mongols rulers because they conquered the world with brute force; the Mongol rule of Iran was now sanctioned by God Almighty.

Followed by Ghazan Khan's reign, the Ilkhanate combined both the Islamic and Mongol heritage as one ideology. Ghazan did not abandon his Mongol heritage after his conversion to Islam, but combined Mongol imperial ideology with the religious foundation of Islam instead to create a centralized and idealized kingship. This new identity was a natural byproduct of the Ilkhanate's new model of kingship: patrimonialism. Defined by the German sociologist Max Weber, Patrimonialism is a form of governance where political power is concentrated on the ruler and his household. In a patrimonial society, power

⁸ *ibid.*, 28-29.

⁹ *ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ Michael Hope, *Power, Politics, and Tradition in the Mongol Empire and the Ilkhanate of Iran*. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 159-160.

stems from the ruler alone, with no other alternative source of political power independent of the ruler.¹¹ Considering the turbulent history of rebellious *noyat* generals and the insecure positions many previous Ilkhans held, the establishment of Ghazan's patrimonial rule seems to be the natural response to the growing discontent among the increasingly uncontrollable *noyat* of the Ilkhanate. Ghazan's patrimonial rule took shape with ruthless policies against any rivals to his authority. He revoked the hereditary estates of prominent nobles, relocated generals to regions they were not familiar with, and even purged the disloyal *noyat* throughout the empire, effectively removing any potential threat to his power. In finances, Ghazan expanded his private estates to the scale of entire provinces as he rose to power, ensuring tax revenue from these regions would be concentrated in his treasury.¹²

The patrimonial rule of Ghazan and his conversion to Islam constructed the Ilkhanid ideology that embodied both Islam and Mongol heritage of the empire. Ideologically, Ghazan's patrimonial efforts sought to use both Islamic and Chingghisid heritage to promote and legitimize the power of the Ilkhan. Ghazan firmly believed that "the Ilkhan throne was a hereditary right, reserved for his bloodline, which had been chosen by Heaven/God to rule the world as a private patrimony". Found in numerous accounts of Rashid al-Din, his stubborn adherence to this dual nature of rightful inheritance was explicit. This new tendency evoked a new conflict with both the generals of the Ilkhanate and his ally, Nawruz. A conspiracy soon unfolded, where Nawruz was accused of plotting against Gazhan in alliance with the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, Lajin. Nawruz and his followers were soon executed in 1297.¹³ Upon Nawruz's conspiracy against the Ilkhan, Rashid al-Din asserted that "he had surrendered to 'wicked temptations and carnal desires' which had caused him to 'rebel against his patron' and to 'spread evil and chaos' throughout Khurāsān. Indeed, Nawrūz's betrayal of his rightful sovereign was no less a crime than a sin in Ghazan's view, which was reflected in Rashīd's comment that Nawrūz 'feared the end' ('āz 'āghibat mī-tarsam'), in language suggesting that his actions would affect his position in the next life as much as this one". The framing of Nawruz as a spiritually evil rebel against Gazhan frames Gazhan as a legitimate and rightful ruler, thus reflecting Rashid al-Din's personal loyalty to the Ilkhan in his writing. This chapter of Ilkhanate history in Rashid al-Din's writing is a window into the contemporary Ilkhanate court's process of legitimizing the Ilkhan as a divinely ordained ruler.¹⁴ The rebels indeed instigated rather unnecessary raucousness in the Ilkhanate from Gazhan Khan's perspective. However, these uprisings cannot be solely blamed on Nawruz and the *noyat* party, despite the thorough villainization in Rashid al-Din's works. Gazhan Khan's obsession with patrimonial rule is an undeniable fact. Even so, his legacy in completely shifting the Mongol identity cannot be overlooked. Gazhan's conversion led to the blend of Islamic and Mongol culture rather than the abandonment of one or the other. This transition refashioned the Ilkhanate into a Perso-Islamic sultanate. The establishment not only rewrote the meaning of being an Ilkhan, but also influenced the projected image of the Ilkhanate to outsiders. Gazhan's conversion redefined what it meant to rule the Ilkhanate. Instead of being an outsider ruling over the Middle East, Ghazan Khan

¹¹ "Patrimonialism." *Oxford Reference*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/othel/authority.20110803100310690>.

¹² Hope, 164-171

¹³ *ibid.*, 161-164, 200

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 166-167; Rashid al-Din Fadlallah Hamadani. *Jami'u't-Tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles*. trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, (Harvard University Press, 1998), 633-640.

became the forerunner of Muslim Ilkhans—embracing new Islamic culture as well as his own Mongolian ideology.

Resulting from the biases of the historians who composed their works under Ghazan Khan's patronage, their accounts offer conflicting explanations of the true factors that led to his conversion; still, these historians share a common theme: a chain reaction to the expansion of the Ilkhanate in 1295. After Gazhan Khan's triumph against Baidu, the expansion of the domain led to dissent within the Ilkhanate, deriving from the conflict among different religious beliefs. As stated above, Hope posited that his conversion was a strategic decision, eliciting control over the vast majority of the Muslim portion of the Ilkhanate, especially Ordu. Additionally, as found in accounts of multiple contemporary historians, including Rashid al Din and Banakati, Nawruz was once again a determining factor in Gazhan Khan's conversion. The most well-known account is from Rashid al Din, yet his biased narrative is reflected through his overemphasis on Gazhan Khan's genuine religious motivations, while only slightly acknowledging Nawruz's role. In contrast, Banakati presents the more impartial version of Gazhan's adaptation. When accounting for his conversion, Banakati posits, "Nauruz...have told Ghazan that he had heard from the ulama and from astrologers that a great king would come to revive Islam around the year 690, and that Ghazan must be the man", persuading him with the benefits coming from the conversion. Banakati also adds, "if [Gazhan] converted, all Muslims would come to his support". Convinced by Nawruz's words, Gazhan Khan was persuaded to adopt Islam. Showing his devotion, he underwent the fast of Ramadan as well as maintaining hospitable relations with Muslim spiritual leaders. These different perspectives allow us to perceive a fuller account of Gazhan Khan's conversion.¹⁵

Gazhan also adopted the Persian title of "Padshah-i Islam", meaning "Great King of Islam". The Ilkhan was not simply going after the ostentatious sound of the title. Rather, this implication was a symbol of a broader shift in his self-representation following his conversion to Islam. Derived from Persian, *Padshah* signifies the great king or the emperor holding supreme authority in Persia. This historical adaptation encapsulates Gazhan Khan's new perspective in viewing the world: a blend of both Islam and Mongol identity (Melville, 1990). The fateful conversion of the Ilkhans to Islam under Ghazan Khan in 1295 and the following construction of a new identity in the Ilkhanate exemplifies another aspect of the artificial nature of how social identity is made.

IRAN-ZAMIN

Despite the savage destruction and loss of life throughout Iran and Central Asia brought upon by the Mongols, the Mongol Ilkhanate eventually combined the Mongol imperial ideology and traditional Persian model of kingship that produced a new, unique ideology of the Ilkhans and that of the "Iran-zamin". From nomadic, pagan invaders to the Islamic and legitimate rulers of Iran, the Mongol Ilkhans fashioned themselves a new identity in the Middle East. The term Iran-zamin means "Land of Iran" in Persian. Iran-zamin is not simply a physical or geographic region of Iran. It refers back to the

¹⁵ Charles Melville, "Padshah-i Islam: The Conversion of Sultan Mahmud Ghazan Khan." *Pembroke Papers*, no. 1, (1990), 159-161.

ancient idea of Iran as an imperial state. Melville emphasized the centuries of disunity and political struggle in Iran before the arrival of the Mongols. Iran enjoyed a rich tradition of kingship far before the advent of Islam. The Sasanian Empire, from the 3rd to the 7th Century CE, firmly established the notion of “*Iranshahr*”, the domain of Iran. Since the collapse of the Sasanian Empire, various local and foreign dynasties vied for supremacy in Iran, with no single power uniting the region. The ancient idea of Iran as a coherent cultural grouping or a state ceased to exist politically by the 12th Century. Only a few poets and writers recounted the ancient heritage of Iranian kingship and the Iranian state.¹⁶ In an ironic twist of history, it was the foreign Mongols who united all of the Iranian plateau. Their complete rule over Iran would lead to the development of *iran-zamin* as a consolidated political and social identity of Iran, created by none other than the Mongol conquerors.

LITERATURE AND IDENTITY

Research for the creation of identity in the Ilkhanate is indebted to the rich description left behind by the Persian courtiers under the auspices of the Mongol “*ilkhans*”, the hereditary rulers of the Ilkhanate. Members of the Ilkhanate’s court such as Rashid al-Din and Ata-Malik Juvayni composed histories of the Mongol empire from the unification of the Mongol tribes by Chingghis Khan to the conquest of the Middle East by his descendants. Their language, although raw and gruesome when it comes to describing the destruction of cities and mass murder at the hands of the Mongols, glorifies the Mongol rulers with almost hagiographical esteem. Within their portrayal of the Mongol *ilkhans*, these courtiers would borrow from previous Persian epic poetry of ancient kings and heroes to “localize” the foreign Mongol rulers as rightful conquerors.

Literature thus played a powerful role in forging new identities and justifying conquest for the Mongol Ilkhanate. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said interpreted imperialism that unconsciously appeared in the literature of the British Empire, when Britain was an empire that rivalled the Mongols. Said argued that literature became a powerful tool of justification for imperialism among these modern British authors: “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them”.¹⁷ This power of literature was not unnoticed by the courtier-historians of the Ilkhanate. With ancient Persian epic poetry and Islamic heritage at their disposal, these historians constructed a unique narrative of the Mongol rule and conquests that formed the new identity of power in the Ilkhanate.

Iranian historians in the Ilkhanate court wrote the history of the Mongols in conjunction with the wider world history, but especially within the context of Iranian history. They were writing a new history of the Mongols, where the Mongols were not foreign invaders to Iran but rather legitimate successors to the Iranian kingship and its heritage. In doing so, the Ilkhanate incorporated their Mongol ancestors into the wider mythos of legendary Persian kings and heroes. Written by the Persian poet Ferdowsi around 1000

¹⁶ Charles Melville, “Concepts of Government and State Formation in Mongol Iran.” *Iran after the Mongols*, ed. Susan Babaie, (I.B. Tauris: 2019), 36-38.

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. (Vintage Books: 1994), xiii.

CE, *Shahnameh*, “Book of Kings” in Persian, recounts the deeds and battles of mythical Iranian kings and heroes of a bygone era. So central to the Persian cultural consciousness, the *Shahnameh* proved to be the prime source material used by the Ilkhanate’s historians to legitimize the Mongol rule in the Middle East. Juvayni himself often quoted the poetic lines of the *Shahnameh* in his *History of the World Conqueror*. When Chingghis Khan is attacking the great Transoxanian city of Samarkand, he quotes lines from the *Shahnameh* as an analogy to the conqueror’s aura that rendered his enemies impotent.¹⁸

Thus, Ilkhanid authors were selecting motifs to portray the Mongol Ilkhans from their available traditions of ancient Iran and Islamic faith. Rashid al-Din was the poetic genius when it came to creating an artificial image of the Ilkhans and thus, their new identity as both the rulers of Iran and Islam. As a courtier of Ghazan Khan, Rashid al-Din Hamadani composed numerous epic histories of the Mongol Empire and the exploits of the Mongol Khans. But among his works, the *Blessed History of Ghazan* stands out as a prominent example of how Ilkhanid authors created a new identity for the Ilkhans through literature. Rashid al-Din was composing his *Blessed History* during the time when ancient epic poetry and chronicles by previous Islamic authors were being remade with new illustrations, most of them commissioned by the Mongol elite. With the ancient Iranian epic *Shahnameh*, al-Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings*, and al-Biruni’s *Chronology of Ancient Nations* being remade right around the time he composed his own history in the late 13th Century, Rashid al-Din’s *Blessed History* was written in a milieu of actual history and ancient epics of both Islamic and Iranian traditions, while not obscuring Ghazan’s Mongol identity. The *Blessed History* combines these three elements without fail. To do so, Rashid al-Din combines three elements of legitimacy available to him: the Islamic motif from Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, Ghazan’s lineage as a Mongol Khan, and the ancient Iranian kingship going back to the Sasanian times. All three of these elements are neatly organized into one episode of the *Blessed History*, during Ghazan’s excursion in Iraq. Rashid al-Din records that, in 1301, upon crossing the Euphrates, Ghazan visited the shrine to the martyrs of the Battle of Siffin, where Imam Ali had supposedly fought his rivals. And when Ghazan went on an antelope hunt near Siffin, his miraculous hunting skill is compared to that of a Sasanian king, Bahram V.¹⁹ Although we cannot verify whether Ghazan was actually a crack shot or not, Rashid al-Din’s intentions are clear. This episode of Ghazan at Siffin shows the reader how Ghazan embodies all three elements of his ideal Ilkhan: Islamic piety, Mongol martial skills, and the royal aura of ancient Iran.

VISUAL ART

Beyond literature and royal titles, the new identity of the Mongols in the Middle East is also reflected in the physical representation of the Ilkhans and the Ilkhanate through their art and architecture. The Mongol Ilkhans were generous patrons of art within their realm. The Ilkhans’ patronage of art and architecture

¹⁸ ‘Ala al-Din ‘Ata Malik Juvayni, *The History of the World-Conqueror*. trans. John Andrew Boyle, vol. 1, (Harvard University Press: 1958), 119.

¹⁹ Stefan T. Kamola, *Making Mongol History: Rashid al-Din and the Jami' al-Tawarikh*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 59- 60, 78-82, 130.

was another method in which they justified and promoted their identity as new, rightful rulers across the Middle East. As mentioned above, the court of the Ilkhans produced masterful literature and chronicles in keeping with ancient Iranian and Islamic traditions to legitimize their rule. What made Ilkhanid literature stand out, however, is not the words but their beautiful illustrations. In keeping with an appreciation of ancient Iranian literature, the Mongol Ilkhans would also commission their own *Shahnameh*. The so-called *Great Mongol Shahnameh* is a richly illustrated copy of the *Shahnameh* with new artistic motifs brought from the wider cultural sphere that was the Mongol Empire. Commissioned and illustrated in the late Ilkhanate period, around the 1330s, the *Great Mongol Shahnameh* boasts 280 large folios and 190 illustrations. Here, the ancient Iranian heroes and kings are anachronistically depicted with Mongol-era armor and clothing.²⁰ The Ilkhanid artists of the *Great Mongol Shahnameh* were deliberately connecting the ancient Iranian heritage of their territory and the martial aspects of their Mongol rulers, forging a combined hybrid identity that the Ilkhans sought throughout their rule.

Monumental architecture was another artificial means for the Ilkhans to boast their authority. And Takht-e Soleyman, the Throne of Solomon, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stands as a physical attestation to the hybrid identity of the Ilkhanate. The site was originally a sacred place during the Sasanian era, where a Zoroastrian fire temple once stood. The Ilkhans would build their own palace at Takht-e Soleyman, reinvigorating the ancient ground plan.²¹ The ancient ruins of the old site were rebuilt as a summer palace with a completely new style under the Ilkhanate. The archaeological excavation at Takht-e Soleyman yielded thousands of decorative tiles with vibrant colors and motifs from both ancient Iranian and Chinese art. Some tiles would feature ancient Iranian kings from the *Shahnameh*, while those inspired by Chinese art depict dragons and phoenixes in Chinese style.²² The deliberate choice of the previous Sasanian temple site as a summer palace and its incorporation of ancient Iranian and Chinese motifs are physically remaining embodiments of the Ilkhanate's effort to forge a new identity of rulership in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

The Ilkhanate did not last long. Ruling much of Iran, Iraq, and the Caucasus for less than 100 years, the Mongol state was soon fragmented by Mongol warlords. Despite this short tenure, the Ilkhanate is still a crucial page of the history of identity in the Middle East. In conjunction with Said's comparative study of imperialism and literary culture, the Mongol Ilkhanate saw the construction of a new identity where ancient Iranian kingship and Islamic legitimacy were tied to the Mongol conquerors to justify and even glorify the Mongol rulers. The Ilkhans and their courtiers thus created a new mirage of identity inside the Middle East, combining motifs from both the old and new. And even in post-mortem, this multifaceted identity of the Ilkhans left an ideological legacy to the Islamic world, especially the Timurid dynasty that

²⁰ Stefano Carboni and Qamar Adamjee. "The Art of the Book in the Ilkhanid Period." The Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/khan2/hd_khan2.htm.

²¹ "Takht-e Soleyman." UNESCO World Heritage Centre, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1077/>. Accessed 19 Aug. 2025.

²² Tokomo Masuya, "Archaeological Sources: The Ilkhanate." *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire. Vol. 2*, ed. Michael Biran and Hodong Kim (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 1315-1316.

ruled Iran after the disintegration of the Ilkhanate. Upon exchanging insulting letters with the Yongle Emperor of Ming China, the Timurid emir Shah Rukh recalled Ghazan Khan and his conversion to Islam. Ghazan, to Shah Rukh, embodied both Islamic religious legitimacy and the military prestige of the previous Mongol Empire. Shah Rukh thus claimed that he was a *mujaddid*, the restorer of the faith in Islamic tradition. Just as Ghazan was a righteous Islamic ruler of Mongol heritage, he too was both a restorer of the Islamic faith and a Mongol conqueror,²³ and therefore superior to the Yongle Emperor. Immature playground insults between two mighty empires aside, Shah Rukh's recall of Ghazan attests to the long-lasting legacy of the Ilkhanate and the identity they have created.

If there's another legacy that the Ilkhanate left behind for us in the 21st Century, it is the sobering fact that identities can be artificially constructed by those in power. Writers, rulers, and artists alike all contributed to creating new identities and perceptions of the world to justify their rule or cement their place in the world. The Mongol Ilkhanate, in order to justify their rule over the Middle East, cross-bred their lineage as nomadic conquerors with the Islamic faith and ancient Iranian kingship. The Mongol rulers were thus able to maintain their nomadic, steppe identity while inserting themselves into the Islamic milieu of their new Muslim subjects in Iran. The physical monuments of their rule, most notably Takht-e Soleyman, embodied this new and pluralistic identity of the Ilkhans and their vast territories. The richly decorated tiles of Takht-e Soleyman, with paintings of ancient Iranian kings and Chinese dragons on them, show the vast array of motifs the artists of the Ilkhanate could work with. The Mongol Ilkhans thus encapsulate how political power can reshape or forge a new identity.

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²³ Jonathan Brack, "Theologies of Auspicious Kingship: The Islamization of Chinggisid Sacral Kingship in the Islamic World." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 60, no. 4, (2018), 1143–71.

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