

AN EPISODE FROM THE HISTORY OF THE 1299 SYRIAN CAMPAIGN OF THE MONGOL ILKHANATE AND THEIR ALLIES

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ABSTRACT

The history of Armenian-Mongol relations occupies a very important and unique place in the history of Cilician Armenia. Unfortunately, to this day, many events in the history of these relations have not been subjected to meticulous study, and numerous issues have not been properly evaluated. Our present research is dedicated to filling that gap.

It is well known that the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia became a junior ally of the Mongols through the Armenian-Mongol treaty signed in Karakorum in 1254. Together with them, it participated in numerous campaigns against the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, which subsequently earned the Armenian kingdom the Sultanate's enmity.

Keywords: Cilicia, Mongol, Syria, allies, troops, campaign, Ghazan Ilkhan, King of Armenia, Hetum II

Although the Mongol Ilkhanate had weakened considerably by the late 13th century, during the reign of Ghazan Ilkhan (1295–1304), this ruler took several steps toward strengthening the state and achieved certain initial successes. To consolidate his achievements, it was certainly in the interests of the Mongol Ilkhanate to carry out a campaign toward Assyria (Syria) and Palestine to reach the Mediterranean coast—an objective the Mongol Ilkhanate attempted to realize throughout its entire existence.

Naturally, in the implementation of this Mongol plan, a specific role was also assigned to its allies, among whom was the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. In general, the Mongol Ilkhanate's campaigns beginning in 1299 were to have extremely significant importance not only for the Ilkhanate itself but also for the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia and other allies.

As the contemporary researcher S. Der Nersessian testifies, King Hetum II of Cilicia still hoped to defeat the Egyptians with the help of the Mongols². Naturally, in such a scenario, new perspectives would also open up for the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia.

Thus, in 1299, the Mongol Ilkhan Ghazan, finding a favorable opportunity, began the next Syrian campaign. Various medieval chroniclers speak of this campaign, though the most detailed account is provided by Rashid al-Din. According to his testimony, the

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² Der Nersessian 2005: 409.

Mongol army left Tabriz on October 16, 1299, and moved toward Syria³. Naturally, both the peoples of Transcaucasia who were part of the Mongol Ilkhanate and the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia took an active part in the aforementioned campaign.

This is also evidenced by the famous author of Mongol history and contemporary chronicler, Hayton (Hetum the Historian), who participated in all important events from the beginning of the campaign to its end. He testifies that before starting the campaign, Ghazan Ilkhan ordered the Armenian and Georgian kings and other Christians of the Eastern lands to present themselves to him with their troops⁴. In addition to the peoples of Transcaucasia, the army of Cilician Armenia, led by Hetum II, also participated in the 1299 Syrian campaign, which indicates its importance. In the event of this campaign's success, the positions of the Sultanate of Egypt and its allies in the region would weaken, which was extremely important for the Armenian state.

Although medieval chroniclers speak extensively about the mentioned campaign and its details, there are nevertheless highly contradictory and conflicting testimonies in the information they provide. First and foremost, it is interesting to clarify with what number of troops the Mongols and their allies marched toward Syria. We have testimonies from several authors regarding this.

According to the account of Hayton the Historian, the number of Mongol troops during the Syrian campaign was fifty (50) thousand⁵, while the Georgian chronicler puts it at one hundred and thirty (130) thousand⁶.

As we can observe, there is a certain contradiction in the information provided by medieval chroniclers. However, the issue does not end there, as Nerses Palients also speaks of a quantity of one hundred and fifty (150) thousand, further complicating the problem under investigation⁷. It is difficult to give a clear assessment of what caused such conflicting information from medieval chroniclers.

As we have already mentioned, Rashid al-Din—who was appointed to a high position during the reign of Ghazan Ilkhan and was well aware of almost all important developments—also provides quite reliable information regarding these events. In his turn, referring to the 1299 Syrian campaign, he states the number of Mongol troops as eighty (80) thousand⁸.

In fact, Rashid al-Din also provides us with new and contradictory information, further complicating the issue.

Ultimately, comparing the chroniclers' information, the view of eighty (80) thousand put forward by Rashid al-Din can be considered the most acceptable, since the 50,000 mentioned by Hayton the Historian likely refers only to the Mongol troops. Rashid al-Din

³ Rashid al-Din 1946: 182.

⁴ Hayton (Hetum) the Historian 1842: 62.

⁵ Hayton (Hetum) the Historian 1842: 62.

⁶ Georgian Chronicle 1971: 180.

⁷ Minor Chronicles 1956: 183.

⁸ Rashid al-Din 1946: 182.

probably noted the total number of the allies' and the Mongols' troops together. As for the data reported by the Georgian chronicler and Nerses Palients, these should be considered an obvious exaggeration. Unfortunately, no information has been preserved in medieval primary sources regarding the number of the Egyptian Sultanate's armies.

In fact, from the testimonies of the chroniclers, we can clearly record that the Mongol Ilkhanate, together with its allies, attached great importance to the aforementioned campaign and, for that reason, began the expedition with such large-scale forces.

Ultimately, the troops of the Mongol Ilkhanate and their allies entered Syria in 1299 and besieged the strategically important city of Aleppo; however, the allied forces met with fierce resistance there, which forced them to bypass it and capture the city of Hama⁹. Continuing their advance, they also approached the city of Homs, where on December 22, 1299, a second major battle took place between the Mongol forces, the allies, and the troops of the Egyptian Sultanate¹⁰. The chronicler Rashid al-Din, who is one of the reliable authors of that period, notes that the Mamluk army relied on its numerical superiority, but they occupied a tactically incorrect position; consequently, the Mongols and their allies were able to celebrate victory and capture the city of Homs, which was undoubtedly a significant achievement. According to researcher S. Der Nersessian, King Hetum II of Cilicia participated in the Battle of Homs with five thousand warriors¹¹, which, in our view, may be accurate.

Following the capture of Homs, separate detachments of the Mongol Ilkhanate and its allies continued their military successes and, pursuing the enemy, reached as far as Jerusalem and Gaza. M. Ormanian expresses his view on these events, according to which King Hetum II also aided the Mongols with his regiments and reached Jerusalem¹².

Undoubtedly, the capture of Homs and the advance of the Mongol troops brought great enthusiasm among the allies and, conversely, created a state of panic among the Muslim population of Syria. It seemed as though the Holy Land was to pass back into their administration¹³, but one more important circumstance must be noted. Unfortunately, Ghazan Ilkhan, who was one of the wise Mongol leaders of the time, committed a major tactical error. Instead of pursuing and destroying the enemy's troops, he ceased military operations, sufficing himself with putting the enemy to flight; this, in our view, was a mistake, as it provided the enemy with the opportunity to reorganize their forces.

⁹ The Cambridge History of Iran 1977: 387; Mikayelyan 2007: 436; Stewart 2001: 136-140; History of the Armenian People 1976: 764.

¹⁰ Lane-Poole 1901: 296; Muir 1896: 54. Georgian researcher B. Khurtsilava finds that this battle took place on December 23. 2025: 255.

¹¹ Der Nersessian 2005: 409.

¹² Ormanian 2001, column 2059.

¹³ History of the Armenian People 2014: 372.

In 1299, the united army of the Mongols and their allies also captured Damascus, which was an event of major significance. The military forces of Cilician Armenia, led by King Hetum II, also took an active part in the capture of the city, which was undoubtedly to complicate Armenian-Egyptian relations even further in the future. Among contemporary researchers, C. Mutaſian expresses a view regarding the aforementioned events, according to which the Armenian King Hetum II constantly urged Ghazan to fight against the Egyptians¹⁴. Continuing his thought, Mutaſian adds that Hetum II perhaps felt that this was the only hope for his kingdom¹⁵. To what extent the Armenian king was able to influence the Mongol Ilkhan is difficult to state clearly, but one circumstance is plain: Ghazan Ilkhan was very well-disposed toward the Armenians, as evidenced by his subsequent actions.

Thus, by participating in the Ilkhanate's 1299 Syrian campaign, the Armenian King of Cilicia initially reaped significant benefits. Specifically, the Cilician kingdom received from Ghazan Ilkhan those fortresses and territories that the Armenian state had previously conceded to the Sultanate of Egypt. This is also attested by the Arab historian and geographer Abu'l-Fida, who notes that when the Mongols entered Damascus, the Armenians wanted to recover those cities that had been captured by the Muslims earlier and which the Muslims—being weakened—could not defend¹⁶. Continuing his thought, the author notes that in this manner the Armenians regained those cities and took back Hamus, Til Hamdun, Kwayra, Sarvandikar, Noghayr, and other places, and the Armenians also took possession of other castles and cities located south of the Jahan (Pyramus) River¹⁷.

As we can observe, Ghazan Ilkhan highly valued the alliance with the Armenians, and the start of the 1299 Syrian campaign he undertook was quite successful both for the allies and especially for the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia, as the latter expanded their state borders and recovered territories of strategic importance. It is also interesting to note that the conquest of Syria by the Mongols and their allies generated great enthusiasm in Western Europe and the Christian world in general. This is evidenced by the fact that King James II of Aragon sent a letter to the Mongol leader Ghazan, congratulating him on his successes in the Syrian campaign. Furthermore, the King of Aragon even offered military assistance to the Mongol Ilkhan. Although the successes of the allies were obvious, they changed a short time later, which was to become extremely dangerous for the Armenian state of Cilicia as well.

Thus, the events of previous years soon repeated themselves¹⁸, and Ghazan Ilkhan learned that a rebellion had broken out on the eastern borders of his state and

¹⁴ Mutaſian 2001: 456.

¹⁵ Mutaſian 2001: 456.

¹⁶ Arabic Sources 1965: 243-244.

¹⁷ Arabic Sources 1965: 243-244.

¹⁸ Hovhannisyan 2023: 419-426.

hurried back to Tabriz¹⁹. It is not excluded that a certain agreement existed between the enemies of the Mongol Ilkhanate and the Sultanate of Egypt, and for that reason, the same events repeated during this Syrian campaign once again. Naturally, the departure of the Mongol monarch from Syria caused great anxiety for the Armenian King of Cilicia, who realized well that the allies, even with certain Mongol troops, would find it difficult to achieve success in the struggle against the Mamluks and fulfill the task set before them. It is true that the Mongol Ilkhan promised to return the following year and continue the Syrian campaign, but his departure meant the return of Syria to Mamluk jurisdiction—a circumstance that was extremely dangerous for the Armenian kingdom and the other allies.

It is true that in the subsequent years of 1300 and 1303, the Mongol expeditions into Syria were resumed; however, overall, these ended with negative outcomes. The Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia suffered the most from this in the following decades, as it was left entirely alone against a powerful enemy. This is also attested by the prominent researcher René Grousset, who similarly believes that the Armenians, having joined the Mongol Ilkhanate, became more vulnerable than ever²⁰. S. Bornazyan has also addressed this issue, clearly stating that the Ilkhanate's nearly half-century-long struggle to conquer Assyria (Syria) was unsuccessful, and the rule of the Egyptian Sultanate was consolidated in Palestine and Syria²¹.

CONCLUSION

Thus, at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries, Armenian-Mongol cooperation began to yield negative consequences, and the Armenian state fell into a dire situation.

Although the Syrian campaign undertaken in 1299 by the Mongol ruler Ghazan Ilkhan achieved certain initial successes, its ultimate failure dealt a heavy blow to the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Because the Armenian state shared a direct border with Syria, it was destined to receive the first blow from the Mamluks in the following years, while the Mongol Ilkhanate, as an ally, would be unable to help the Armenians. Following the 1299 Syrian campaigns organized by the Mongols, a period of decline began for the Kingdom of Cilicia, along with a search for new allies. This circumstance did not bring significant success to the Armenians; instead, it further aggravated relations between Cilician Armenia and the Egyptian Sultanate, contributing to the future agony and eventual collapse of the Armenian kingdom.

¹⁹ Hayton the Historian 1842: 63; Gadzhimuradov 2025: 8.

²⁰ Grousset 2005: 345.

²¹ Bornazyan 1973: 35.

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