

Berke Khan: An Islamic Leader During The Mongul Dynasty

Mohamad Zaidin Mat@Mohamad, Mohd Faiz Hakimi Mat Idris,
Ahmad Fauzi Hassan, Sofyuddin Yusof, Abdillah Hisham Abdul
Wahab

Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, UniSZA, Gong Badak Campus, 21300 Kuala Nerus,
Terengganu, Malaysia

Corresponding Authors Email: mzaidin@uniswa.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i10/15295> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v12-i10/15295

Published Date: 10 October 2022

Abstract

Studies on Islamic figures in Central Asia are still lacking although the region holds various treasures related to Islamic knowledge, including knowledge on civilizations and the struggle of the Muslims. Hence, this study aims to highlight the biography of an early Islamic figure who came from the Mongol empire named Berke Khan. This qualitative study applied the content analysis design based on several relevant sources. Findings indicate that Berke Khan was an Islamic figure and a pioneer in the history of the development and struggle of Muslims who lived in the Mongol empire.

Introduction

Many historical sources that have elaborated on the Mongol empire and the cause of its weakness only mention about the role of the Baybars and the Mamluk army who had defeated the Mongol army during the war in Ain Jalut, Palestine. However, the truth is far from that. Berke Khan's name should have been extolled alongside the Baybars. In fact, there were many more series of clashes between Berke and Hulagu and between the Kipchaks and Ilkhanate empires that underlie the history of the Islamic struggle in Central Asia.

Brief Biography

His name is Berke Khan bin Jochi bin Genghis Khan, besides several other names such as Barakai and Barakat (Rashid, n.d.). Berke Khan (605H - 665H) (Imran, n.d.) was also called al-Khan, which means King or Sultan, in addition to Abu al-Ma'ali Nasir al-Din (Ibn-Khaldun, 1988) and Hisam al-Din (Bartuld, n.d.), which are two titles used after he embraced Islam.

Historical sources mention that he was born in the Caucasus region (Ramzi, 1908), i.e., when his father Jochi Khan was involved in a Mongol military expedition to attack Islamic cities, such as al-Khawarizmi (Taqush, 2007). He was born into a large family, which is common for a Mongol leader who practices the culture of unlimited polygamy. One of Jochi Khan's famous wives is Surkat Khatun, who gave birth to their eldest son, Orda. Meanwhile, Sultan Khatun, the mother of Berke, gave birth to other important figures in Mongol history besides Berke, namely Batu Khan, Barkjar and Kukatimur (Hasan *et al.*, 2021).

Berke Khan traditionally grew up in a family that practiced idol-worship (*wathaniyyah*). Since he was one of the main figures in the Genghis Khan family, it is not surprising that he was handed important tasks involving diplomatic and military aspects. He originally practiced idolatry but eventually changed his preferences and inclinations when he embraced Islam. His fame was further highlighted due to his position as the ruler of the Golden Horde and eventually became the fifth ruler in the lineage of the Kipchaks empire (Taqush, 2007).

Berke's embracing of Islam began with the Mongol army's capture of the city of Khawarizmi. Strong resistance from the Khawarizmi population led by the Sultan made Mongol domination difficult, and many Mongol soldiers were killed in the war. After they finally managed to capture the city, the Mongol army retaliated by killing all its inhabitants except children, professionals (*ashab al-mihan*) and women, who were all later taken as prisoners. The entire captured city of Khawarizmi was placed under the administration of Jochi Khan, who was the eldest son of Genghis Khan (al-Khalidi, 1404H; al-Fida', n.d.). Ibn Khaldun mentioned that Jochi Khan had married Rasalah bint Sultan Ala 'al-Din, who was a prisoner of war of the Mongol army (Al-Sayyad, 1970).

The religious characteristics exhibited by Rasalah had influenced Berke and his brother Batu. They were both the earliest Mongol figures to defend Islam even though they were yet to embrace Islam (al-Hafiz, 1949). Berke himself was the first Mongol King to embrace Islam. On his return from Karakorum, he met Sheikh Sayf al-Din al-Bakharzi, who had given a thorough and satisfactory explanation of Islam and this influenced him to embrace Islam. He eventually agreed to embrace Islam and began to exhibit Islam's *syiar* (al-Dhahabi, 1985).

The first initiative undertaken by Berke after embracing Islam was to establish relations with Caliph al-Musta'sim Billah of Baghdad (Al-Suyuti, 1965), which then led to the exchange of letters and gifts. The good relations between the two positively manifested itself when Berke opposed Hulagu Khan's intention to attack Baghdad. He asked Batu Khan to intervene and thwart Hulagu's intentions (Al-Sayyad, 1970). Berke and Batu Khan's efforts were successful despite being temporary. After Berke ascended the throne, he worked hard to spread Islam among the Mongols and Kipchaks. He built religious schools and mosques throughout his colony and cordially attended to visiting scholars and fuqaha'. Islamic teachings in his colony were revived, while the consumption of liquor and pork were banned, while the Christian community in Samarkand was punished for its negative attitude towards the Muslim community (Al-Duwaydar, 1998).

Initial Role

One of the early roles Berke played was participating in attacks on Russia and the West. After Genghis Khan took control of Khawarizmi, two Mongol commanders, Jabah and Subtay, entered the region between the Qazwin Sea and the Black Sea as far as Qafjaq and Russia. Their attack was not entirely successful due to some unfavourable circumstances (Rafi', n.d.). After Uktay Khan ascended the throne, he tried to continue this military expedition by preparing an army to attack Russia and the West. Batu Khan was chosen as the leader of a 50,000-strong Mongol army with support from 70,000-strong Turkic tribesman recruited from the captured regions in southern Russia during the start of this expedition (al-Juwayni, 2007).

Some the important Mongol figures who were also involved in this expedition were Berke and Urda. Uktay even issued orders for leaders in all Mongol colonies to send their sons to enroll in the army. It was estimated that the total number of troops involved was 120,000 and divided into four regiments, namely:

- i. First Regiment: Batu and Subtay.
- ii. Second Regiment: Buray and Juwayk had manoeuvred their attack on the inhabitants of Murum, a Russian town conquered by Bulgaria in 552H (1155M). The Mongol army had successfully captured the city sometime between 633 and 634H (1236-1237M) (Denis, 1999).
- iii. Third Regiment: Manku moved towards the Eastern part of the Kipchaks territory.
- iv. Fourth Regiment: Barakah Khan moved towards the North of the Caucasus to conquer most of the Kipchaks region, whose population mainly consisted of the Turkish Bedouin tribe (Lamb, 1962).

The Kipchaks Kingdom

The Kipchaks kingdom was located between the Volga and Don Rivers, and was initially placed under the rule of Jochi Khan. The area was also known as the 'Mongol Kingdom of the Kipchaks' or in Russian, 'Greut Horde', which means Great Tribe. It is also known as the Stone Kingdom (in reference to Batu Khan) or the Berke Khan Kingdom, who had declared Islam as the official religion of the kingdom. However, the tribes occupying this area were better known as the Golden Tribe due to their gold-coloured military tents or in English, the Golden Horde. Berke was the fifth ruler of the Kipchaks kingdom. After Batu's death, the reign was handed over to his two sons, Sartaq Khan and Ulaghchi, who both died at a young age. Berke's reign stretched from 1257 to 1266, which put the Kipchak kingdom at the height of its glory.

Jochi Khan was the first Mongol leader from the Genghis Khan clan to enter the Kipchak region. His admiration for this region had prompted him to make it his administrative centre. Upon his death, his son named Stone had completed the conquest of the Kipchaks and made certain areas of Russia, Jekrs, Bulgaria and eastern Europe, as part of the Kipchaks colony (al-Sallabi, 2009).

During Berke Khan's reign, the Kipchaks colony covered the Artish River in the east to the Bulgarian Volga in the west. It also included areas from Russia and the state of Saqalabah in the north to the Ilkhanin kingdom in Iran and Asia Minor in the south. Thus, it can be said that the rule of the Mongol Kipchaks as of today would have covered some areas of Russia, Ukraine, Siberia and some parts of Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkemenistan. In addition, as they

also controlled part of the Russian colony as far as the Gulf of Finland to the west to enter Poland. Their reign lasted around two and a half centuries, namely from 636-886H (1240-1502M) (Ibn-Khaldun, 1988).

Administrative System

Berke Khan occupied the highest elite position in the Kipchak government, only second to A'zam Khan in Karakorum (Mongolia). The criterion was that those who hold the reins of government must be of Jochi descent; hence, those who replaced Jochi were Batu, Surkaq (Batu's son) and Berke Khan (Martin, 2006).

During Berke's reign, the Kipchak kingdom witnessed changes when it became an independent kingdom and was no longer a colony of the larger Mongol empire. Berke handed over the administration of the Russian region, which became the largest colony of the Kipchaks kingdom, to his aide Ulaji. However, some aspects in this colony did not totally change, such as the laws, constitution and culture practiced, by the people there (Imran, n.d.).

Berke Khan recognized the Rurek family as the rulers of the Kipchak colony in Russia. This ruling family continued to maintain their loyalty to Berke until they secured a special position in Berke Khan's palace when making a visit to the palace. They were allowed to stay there for a long time with their wives and children. In fact, some of them had married Mongols too. It can be said that the Mongol domination of the Russian colony only focused on the external relations aspect and not the internal relations aspect. This is evident in the Russian government's submission to the Mongols and the payment of excise taxes (Al-Ramzi, 1908). This is important as it indicates that they had Berke Khan's approval to stay on and govern their respective areas. Moreover, one of the customary practices performed when welcoming the arrival of Berke Khan's entourage was that these local leaders had to walk a long distance while bowing and spreading luxurious carpets as well as offering trophies filled with gold. Berke Khan had the power to dismiss local leaders and appoint whoever he liked, even reserving the right to declare an attack in the event of an uprising (non-compliance). Local leaders also cannot declare war on each other or against foreign countries without Berke Khan's consent. They also had to accept the presence of Mongol officials who would monitor the situation and ensure local leaders complied with all of Berke Khan's instructions (Fahmi, 1980).

One example of the presence of Mongol officials in the Russian territory is the Russian colony known as Baskaki (Turkish) where these officials were tasked with conducting a population census while ensuring the safety of public roads, smooth movement of merchandise, collecting taxes and assisting local leaders (Al-Ramzi, 1908). In return for their service, Berke Khan granted them immunity as well as military power under their command. Berke Khan also created a new post, namely that of a tax collector, that was implemented and maintained throughout his reign until the end of the 13th century with candidates mainly appointed amongst the Muslim community living in Asia Minor. Berke Khan was seen as trying to shape his kingdom using a religious framework. Thus, not surprisingly, his government was visited by many ulama and fuqaha', and he was appointed to various important positions (Ibn-Kathir, 1988).

Economic System

Since the land controlled by the Mongol government (Kipchaks) was a highland area in southern Russia, agricultural resources were very limited. Thus, the Kipchak government's economy relied on three main resources, namely:

- i. Animal husbandry: The population practiced horse farming, which has a special feature in Mongol culture. Ibn Battutah (1322H) mentioned that this area produced so many horses that it caused the price of horses to fall. Besides horse trading, they are farmed as a source of food as were birds, milk and fish (Martine, 2006).
- ii. Revenue tax: Tax was levied as an additional resource to the government's internal economic sector. Prior to the split of the Mongol kingdom, tax revenue was distributed among all the rulers from the Genghis Khan family (Martin, 2006). However, after the Kipchak government declared independence from the great Mongol empire, the tax revenue meant for the Kipchak government was reserved for Berke Khan and his successors (al-Qalqashandi, 1914).
- iii. Head tax: This tax involved a certain tax rate for female or male slaves that would be paid annually to Berke Khan when he visited Moscow to collect tax revenues. The slaves were usually gathered in an open area to be selected by Berke Khan's officials (al-Ramzi, 1908).

During Berke Khan's reign, the city of Sarai was considered the largest trading centre in the Kipchak colony. The city was first founded by Batu and its development was later completed by Berke. It was the most beautiful city in the Berke era in addition to being the most important trading city that had catered for several markets, including the slave trade market (Martin, 2006).

Trade activities occurred via the exchange of goods, namely silk, spices, gemstones and jewellery from the West, while clothes (textiles) from the East were exchanged for slaves and leather goods as well as products from the north such as quality animal fur and forest timber from Russia. These activities became the attraction for traders and their visits from all corners of the region to Sarai (Al-Maqrizi, 1997). Goods from the Baltic states (Al-Ba'labaki, 2020) and northern Russia were carried across the Estonian city and reached cities such as Rostov and Moscow. From here, it was taken to the Volga River and on to the markets in Sarai. Some of the goods even made it to Cairo, southern Europe, India and China (Bakhit, 2010).

Foreign Relations

- i. Relations with Bulgaria

This relationship began in 640H (1242M) when the Mongol army invaded Bulgaria. No resistance was encountered in order to avoid mass destruction and the Bulgarians agreed to pay *jizyah* to the Kipchaks government.

Although Bulgaria had to pay *jizyah*, the two governments agreed to launch an attack on the Byzantines, which controlled the Bulgarian forts, in addition to freeing Sultan Izz al-Din Kikawus from captivity and punishing the Byzantine rulers for preventing Baybar envoys from meeting with Berke Khan (Ibn al-Bibi, n.d.; Henry, 1880).

ii. Relations with Byzantine

Initially, Berke Khan had good relations with the Byzantines over trade interests between the Kipchaks and the Mamluk empire in Egypt (Bardi, 1992). The Byzantines were controlling the area between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea at that time. To ensure safe communication and trade routes between the Kipchaks and Egypt, Berke and the Baybars made a peace treaty with the Byzantines in 609H (1260M). This situation finally changed when the Byzantine government detained the Baybar envoy and imprisoned Sultan Izz al-Din Kaikawus, who was a Berke ally. Sultan Izz al-Din Kaikawus is said to have sought Berke Khan's help through one of Sultan's aunts who was also Berke's wife (al-'Amri, n.d.).

In 662H (1264M) Berke Khan had sent an army under the command of Nughazi to attack Navia as punishment of the Byzantine ruler as well as to ensure that Sultan Izz al-Din and his son would be released from prison at Ainus (Henry, 1880). The Mongol-Bulgarian army finally succeeded in besieging Ainus.

This victory had enabled Bulgaria to regain the cities that had been captured by the Byzantines, while the Mongols managed to liberate Sultan Izz al-Din. The Byzantine ruler at that time, Michael VIII, fled to the city of Constantinople and subsequently sent a messenger to meet Berke Khan in order to make peace and willingly pay the annual *jizyah* in the form of 300 silk garments (al-Ramzi, 1908).

iii. Relations with Mamluk

After ascending to the throne, Berke Khan sought to change political policies, which would later be continued by his descendants. One of the policies was making peace with the Mamluk government in Egypt. The goal of this relationship was to form a military force (Ashur, 1972) and this materialized when the Baybars managed to defeat the Hulagu army in the war at Ain Jalut (Abdah, 1994).

This victory also created fear among the Crusaders who hoped that the Mongol army would be able to defeat the Mamluk army and this would secure their position in the land of Sham. With the Crusaders being in a precarious and feeble position at that time, they finally decided not to side with either the Mamluks or the Mongols (al-'Ibadi, 1998). The good relationship between these two parties is evident in the marriage between Baybars or Qutuz with the princess of Berke Khan as the name of Berke was also frequently mentioned during prayers in the pulpit after the name of Baybars (Rashid, 1415).

Civil War

After Mongke's death in 1259, the position of the next Great Khan fell to his younger brother, Kubilai. His death signalled the beginning of the end of the Mongol empire. Moreover, Kubilai's youngest brother, Ariq Boke had opposed Kubilai's position as the Great Khan. The territory of Turkistan, controlled by Alughu who was Jagathai's grandson, began to separate from the central kingdom of Karakorum. Berke who led the Kipchak government had taken similar action. Meanwhile, Hulagu, Kubilai's younger brother who had ruled Persia since 1256, was busy with efforts to extend his power into Iraq and the Islamic world.

In 1258, Hulagu destroyed the city of Baghdad and killed Caliph al-Musta'sim. The incident was a great tragedy for the Islamic world. However, that was not enough for Hulagu. He intended to seize control Sham, which was under the rule of the Ayyubid empire and also Egypt, which was under the Mamluk empire. Hulagu's hatred of Islam and its people was influenced by one of his Christian wives and chief commander, Kitbuga, who was incidentally a Nestorian Christian. This inhumane attitude became the main reason for Berke's anger against Hulagu.

Once the city of Baghdad was destroyed, Hulagu and his troops seized control of Sham without any strong resistance. While preparing to continue the attack on Egypt, Mongke, the Great Khan at that time, had died. Hulagu decided to return to the Mongol empire's capital to join the Great Khan selection process and assigned Kitbuqa to face the Mamluk army. Without Hulagu's presence, the Mamluk forces managed to defeat the Mongol forces at Ayn Jalu and liberate the Sham territory. Although this war was crucial in arresting the advance of the Hulagu army, the threat to the Muslim world was still not completely over.

Since 1261 Berke had established diplomatic relations with the Mamluk government in Egypt in preparation to confront Hulagu and his army. The two empires reached an agreement to face the Ilkhanate or Persian Mongols led by Hulagu. This alliance forced Hulagu to divert his attention from Sham and Egypt and go to war against the Berke forces, which occurred at the end of 1262.

At first Hulagu managed to push his cousin's army and drove him north until he reached the Terek River and crossed it. However, there they were shocked by a sudden attack carried out by Nogai, a family member and one of the leaders of the Berke forces. The attack forced Hulagu and his army to back-track across the Terek River again, which was by then frozen due to the winter. However, many of Hulagu's soldiers drowned because the ice sheet on the river had shattered by the impact of their horse's hoofs. Hulagu suffered a defeat in the battle and was forced to return to his own territory.

Hulagu did not have time to pursue his wish to re-invade the Kipchak kingdom as he died in 1265 and was buried in Kaboudi Island located in Lake Urmia (Boyle, 1968). After Hulagu's death, Abaqa inherited Hulagu's throne (al-'Arini, 1986). He harbored a grudge to eliminate Berke. In reminiscent of the events of his great defeat at the hands of Berke in 661H (al-Sayyad, 1970), Abaqa prepared a large army and declared war on Berke. In order to face the Abaqa attack, Berke sent Tughay, one of his commanders, to lead the attack. However, defeat befell Tughay (al-Qalqashandi, 1985). This caused Berke to confront Abaqa himself; however, fate had it that Berke passed away on his way to the battle ground, i.e., in the year 665H (al-Sallabi, 2009).

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that Berke Khan had played a major role in bringing Islamic influence into the Mongol empire. He contributed significantly to the Kipchak empire (Golden Horde) by creating national stability, territorial expansion and introduced an administrative system. Yet the greatest contribution by Berke, as remembered by Islamic history, is Berke's role in collaborating with the Baybars to prevent the advance of the Hulagu army from invading and destroying the Islamic world.

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