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The Making of a Sufi: al-Nuwayrī´s Account of the Origin of Genghis Khan

Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʻAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), an administrator and historian in the reign of the Bahri Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (r. 693–94/1293–94, 698–708/1299–1309, 709–41/1310–41), authored the monumental encyclopedia and history entitled *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab* between the years 714/1314 and 731/1330.[1] The fifth book of al-Nuwayrī´s gigantic work contains his dynastic histories, including a significant section on the history of the Mongols.[2] Reuven Amitai noted that this section on the Mongols has been largely overlooked by historians, describing it as *"terra incognita* for virtually all scholars of the Mongol Empire in general."[3] Amitai selects six episodes in al-Nuwayrī´s history of the Mongols to evaluate, comparing them briefly with other source materials. Among the six episodes is the account of the rise of Genghis Khan.

Al-Nuwayrī introduces his section on the Mongols by stating that he has gleaned his information from multiple sources, two of which are written histories: al-Nasawī´s (d. 638/1241) *Sīrat al-Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dīn Mankubirtī*[4] and Ibn al-Athīr´s (d. 630/1233) *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*.[5] In addition to these, he claims to have compiled other information "which was transmitted to us by their envoys who arrived at our rulers´ court from their direction, and others who came from their land."[6] Amitai notes that the account of Genghis Khan´s rise to prominence is not found in either of the written sources and therefore appears to have been an

[1]M. Chapoutot-Remadi, "Al-Nuwayrī," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 8:158.

[2]Volume 27 of the edition contains the dynastic history of the Mongols and is the source for this article. See Aḥmad ibn ʻAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab,* vol. 27, ed. Saʻīd ʻĀshūr (Cairo, 1975), 300–420.

[3]Reuven Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī as a Historian of the Mongols," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950–1800),* ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2001), 25.

[4]See al-Nasawī, *Histoire du Sultan Djelal ed-Din Mankobirti, prince du Kharezm,* ed. Octave V. Houdas (Paris, 1891–95).

[5]See Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh,* ed. ʻUmar ʻAbd al-Salīm Tadmurī (Beirut, 1997).

[6]Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyah,* 27:300; cf. translation in Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 27, and Chapoutot-Remadi, "Al-Nuwayrī," 159.

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addition of al-Nuwayrī.[7] Amitai has correctly evaluated this passage as apocryphal; however, he appears to have misinterpreted the historiographical intent of the episode. He has read the account as an attempt to describe Genghis Khan's Mongolian nomadic origins. This, however, does not seem to be the paradigm within which al-Nuwayrī is working. On the contrary, as will be shown below, this episode is apocryphal in the sense that it projects a fourteenth-century image of a Sufi ascetic upon the figure of Genghis Khan. It is from this perspective that al-Nuwayrī's account of the origin and rise of Genghis Khan is important, for it provides an example of Mamluk historiography concerning the history of the Mongols.

Al-Nuwayrī relates that Genghis Khan, early in his life, asked a Jew why Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad had attained such an exalted station and great fame. The Jew replied by saying that they loved God and had consecrated themselves to him, and thus God granted them their exalted positions. Genghis Khan asked the Jew, "And if I love God and consecrate myself to him, will God give this to me?" The Jew said, "Yes, and I must also tell you that our books state that you will have a dynasty." So Genghis Khan left his work, which al-Nuwayrī says was a blacksmith, *ḥaddād,* for according to "their language" the *nisbah* Timurchi refers to the blacksmith,[8] and practiced asceticism, *tazahhada*. He withdrew from his people and his tribe and sought refuge in the mountain where he would eat those things which were permissible, *mubāḥāt*.

As a result of his ascetic practices, Genghis Khan's fame spread abroad. Groups from his tribe would go out to visit him but he would not speak with them. He would indicate to them to clap their hands. They would then say, "O God, O God, he is good" *(yā Allāh yā Allāh yakhshidir)*. They would continue this clapping and chanting while Genghis Khan danced.

Al-Nuwayrī closes this episode of Genghis Khan's life by mentioning that this practice was his routine with those who visited him. Even though he engaged in these practices, Genghis Khan is said to have not held to a particular religion or to have embraced a particular faith. Instead of affiliating with a religion, he devoted himself solely to the love of God *(maḥabbat Allāh)*. He dwelt in this state of isolation from his society as long as God desired for him to remain so.

The above episode presents multiple challenges for the interpreter. Amitai perceives that al-Nuwayrī's addition of this episode is intended to portray the Turkish and shamanistic roots of Genghis Khan. He states that this passage "appears to reflect several motifs in early Mongolian imperial history and culture."[9] While

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[7]Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 27.

[8]وقد اختلف في نسبة جنكزخان الى التمرجى فقال قوم إنه كان حدادا والتمرجى بلغتهم هو الحداد (Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyah*, 27:301).

[9]Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 28.

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some of the elements of the account could be understood in this manner, the preponderance of evidence indicates that al-Nuwayrī′s objective is not to write the story of the rise of Genghis Khan according to ″Mongolian imperial history and culture″ but instead to strike him in the mold of a Sufi ascetic who manifests an honest spiritual desire for God in spite of his non-Islamic heritage. By doing so, al-Nuwayrī may be offering nominal religious justification for the success of Genghis Khan and the Mongols. This episode, therefore, must be interpreted in light of the Sufi terminology and themes evident within the account.

From the outset, al-Nuwayrī attempts to formulate the rise of Genghis Khan according to traditional motifs as indicated in his conversation with the Jew. The fact that Genghis Khan is made to ask about the success of Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad establishes a foundation for the religious tropes that pervade the episode. Firstly, the importance of these figures within the Islamic tradition, they being the primary figures of their respective religious traditions of which Islam is the culmination, is undeniable. By placing the names of the primary figures of this monotheistic continuum on the lips of Genghis Khan, al-Nuwayrī attests to Genghis Khan′s awareness of these men and his recognition of their superiority in the history of mankind. Amitai understands the reference to these religious figures as ″an expression of the equanimity which the Mongols showed to different religions, what some scholars have called ′religious tolerance.′″[10] It is more likely, however, that the presence of these men in the account is an attempt to affiliate Genghis Khan with these men and to present him as a sympathetic, if not enthusiastic, seeker of the divine sanction enjoyed by these leaders. In fact, this reading of the encounter is confirmed later by his question to the Jew, ″And if I love God and consecrate myself to him, will God give this [exalted station] to me?″

Moreover, the fact that Genghis Khan′s discussant is a Jew and not a Christian or Muslim, and that this Jew mentions that his book refers to Genghis Khan and his future success, is most obviously an allusion to the Muslim claim that there are references to Muḥammad in the previous scriptures. In this regard, Amitai has adroitly assessed the text, ″we may have here an echo of Muslim claims that the Jews had in their bible passages referring to the appearance of the prophet Muḥammad.″[11] Later, Amitai implies that the reference to the future success of Genghis Khan as the leader of an empire is ″an echo of the heavenly mandate to rule the world which Chingiss Khan and his descendants claimed.″[12] Yet this text should not be read as a justification of Mongol power in the sense of validating belief in the heavenly mandate, but as an explanation to a Muslim community of

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid, 28–29.

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the reasons for the rise of these infidels.[13] Thus, these statements are not intended to reflect Mongol imperial ideology but to explain the great success of the Mongols to the Muslim community. Additionally, the inclusion of divine sanction upon the progenitor of the Mongol empire may reflect an indictment by al-Nuwayrī of his masters, the Mamluks. By stating that Genghis Khan enjoyed a degree of heavenly approval, our author may be implying that the rise of the Mongols is a divine judgment upon the decadence of the current Mamluk ruling elite. In any case, it is clear that from the beginning of this episode al-Nuwayrī´s intention is to portray Genghis Khan in terms that would be understandable to his Muslim audience. His interest in the major figures of the monotheistic tradition is inserted to indicate a seminal affinity for Islam and its history.

After establishing this religio-ideological connection between Genghis Khan and the Islamic tradition, al-Nuwayrī proceeds to describe Genghis Khan´s pursuit of God and those blessings that have been prophesied for him in manifestly Sufi terminology. He states that Genghis Khan practiced asceticism, *tazahhada,* utilizing a term that by the fourteenth century was employed with its technical meaning for the practice of Sufi orders.[14] As evidence of his ascetic pursuits, Genghis Khan withdrew from society and dwelt in the mountains. Once again, the insertion of this act conjures up a Sufi motif of the denial of the world with its concomitant isolation from society. In addition, al-Nuwayrī states that Genghis Khan ate food that was permissible according to Islamic law *(mubāḥāt)*.[15] By attributing to Genghis Khan foods that were acceptable, al-Nuwayrī affirms that Genghis Khan, though not a Muslim in the truest sense of the term, lived according to the strictures of Islamic law and thus did not defile himself by eating forbidden foods.

Al-Nuwayrī then relates one of the more interesting aspects of this episode. He states that Genghis Khan´s fame spread abroad and that people from his tribe would travel to the mountains to visit him. When they arrived, Genghis Khan would not speak to them, *fa-lā yukallimuhum*. Instead he would indicate to them to clap their hands together and to chant, ″O God, O God, he is good,″ *wa-yushīru*

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[13]The justification of foreign domination over Muslim lands was not uncommon in the literary productions of the Mamluk period as indicated by Ibn al-Nafīs' *Al-Risālah al-Kāmilīyah*. See Remke Kruk, "History and Apocalypse: Ibn al-Nafīs' Justification of Mamluk Rule," *Der Islam* 72, no. 2 (1995): 324–37.

[14]For a medieval discussion of the terms *zuhd* and *taṣawwuf* and their use as both general terms referring to asceticism in the early period of Islam and in connection to organized Sufi orders in the medieval period, see Ibn al-Jawzī's *Kitāb Ṣifat al-Ṣafwah* (Hyderabad, 1968), 1:4.

[15]For discussions on foods that are permissible and forbidden and the variations within the different sects of Islam, see M. Rodinson, "Ghidhā'," *EI*^{2}, 2:1057–72, and C. Pellat, "Ḥayawān," *EI*^{2}, 3:304–9.

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ilayhim an yuṣaffiqū bi-akuffihim wa-yaqūlū: yā Allāh yā Allāh yakhshidir.[16] Al-Nuwayrī says that his visitors would perform this act for him while he danced, *fa-yaf'alūna dhalika wa-yuwaqqa'ūna lahu wa-huwa yarquṣu.*[17] It seems clear that al-Nuwayrī is describing a Sufi *dhikr* and projecting this form of spiritual devotion back onto Genghis Khan. The assembly of a crowd clapping their hands and chanting while Genghis Khan danced is certainly indicative of Sufi practice and, contrary to Amitai, should not be interpreted as ″some type of shamanistic ritual.″[18] Amitai states, ″it is known that Chinggis Khan himself had acted in a shamanist capacity early in his career, although apparently not in such a demonstrative capacity.″[19] Here, Amitai notes the unusual nature of this episode when compared to the traditional view of Genghis Khan′s early shamanistic tendencies but fails to recognize that this episode is not intended to be descriptive of Genghis Khan′s shamanism but of fourteenth-century Sufism.

When the text is interpreted according to a proper understanding of al-Nuwayrī′s historiography, other unusual aspects of the text become clearer. This is the case with the *dhikr* that is chanted by the tribal members.[20] The repetition of the phrase *yā Allāh* presents no interpretative challenges. However, the ensuing phrase is of particular interest. Amitai interprets this phrase by editing the text and claiming that the word *yakhshī* should be read *bakhshī*, a reference to a Buddhist lama.[21] He includes a transliteration of the root of this word in his footnotes but dismisses it as incorrect.[22] He implies that since the term *bakhshī* is used among later pro-Mongolian sources its inclusion in the text indicates that al-Nuwayrī was drawing his information from later sources.[23] However, he does not address the significance or meaning of the *d-r* which follows *yakhshī*. By failing to recognize al-Nuwayrī′s objectives in this episode, Amitai has confused the meaning of this phrase.

The phrase *y-kh-sh-y-d-r* must be read as a Turkish phrase meaning, ″he is good.″[24] The phrase cannot be read correctly in Arabic without the addition of an *alif* as a seat for the *tanwīn fatḥah* after the *d-r*, which would make the word *darr* function grammatically in the accusative, *mansūb*. This addition would allow for

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[16]The Arabic text reads: يشير إليهم أن يصفقوا بأكفهم، ويقولوا: يا الله يا الله يخشى در (al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyah,* 27:302).

[17]The Arabic text reads: فيفعلون ذلك ويوقعون له وهو يرقص (ibid.).

[18]Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 28.

[19] Ibid.

[20]The Arabic text reads: يا الله يا الله يخشى در (al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyah,* 27:302).

[21]On the meaning of the term *bakhshī,* see P. Jackson, "Bakšī," *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* 3:535–36.

[22]See Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 28, n. 20.

[23]Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 29; Jackson, "Bakšī," 3:535–36.

[24]See Sir James W. Redhouse, *A Turkish-English Lexicon,* 2199.

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the possible reading of *yakhshá darran,* meaning ″he fears bounty.″[25] While this reading could support the thematic emphasis upon asceticism, it does not incorporate the true sense of the phrase as is contained by rendering it in Turkish. In addition, a Turkish reading would seem to indicate that the phrase is used in reference to God in contrast to Amitai′s edition of the text which places the focus upon Genghis Khan as the *bakhshī.* As a result, when read as a Turkish phrase, it carries a clear and obvious meaning and does not need to be edited away. It also functions extremely well in the general tenor of the passage by maintaining the connections to Sufi terminology and practice. Thus, when taken as a whole, this *dhikr* must be interpreted as al-Nuwayrī′s utilization of a Sufi ritual to describe the spiritual pursuits of Genghis Khan and as having no relation to Buddhist lamas or authentic shamanistic practices.

According to al-Nuwayrī, the *dhikr* in which Genghis Khan participated was his normal practice when people came to visit him. He describes it as part of ″his habit,″ *da'bahu,* and ″his manner,″ *ṭarīqatahu*. It is noteworthy that al-Nuwayrī reinforces the term *da'b* with a synonym, a practice common in Arabic literature, which could also be interpreted in a technical sense meaning a Sufi order, *ṭarīqah.*[26] He follows this by stating that Genghis Khan did not espouse a particular religion, *diyānah,* nor did he embrace a certain faith, *millah,* but rather he devoted himself solely to the love of God, *bal mujarrada maḥabbat Allāh*. He closes this episode in Genghis Khan′s life with the statement that he dwelt in this state as long as God desired for him to remain there.

This last section is carefully constructed by al-Nuwayrī. The passage would appear to have conjured up in the mind of a fourteenth-century reader the concrete images of traditional Sufi practices. The implication of course would be that one may draw the connection between these practices and Genghis Khan being a proto-Muslim, as Amitai has said, ″a sort of Chingissid hanifism.″[27] By emphasizing that Genghis Khan was not an adherent to any formal religion, al-Nuwayrī refutes any such interpretation from his readers that his practices indicate he was a Muslim. Yet at the same time, he does not disparage Genghis Khan for his faith. On the contrary, he commends him as a genuine seeker of God who had devoted himself to loving God in the manner in which he knew how. Sufi asceticism seems to have offered al-Nuwayrī the most logical template from which to construct such an image of the great Mongol ruler.

The fact that this incident in the life of Genghis Khan has not yet been located

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[25]The term *darr* literally means "milk" though by extension it carries the connotation of "wealth," "beneficence," "bounty," etc. See Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon,* 3:863.

[26]See E. Geoffroy, "Ṭarīḳa," *EI*^{2}, 10:243–46.

[27]Amitai, "Al-Nuwayrī," 29.

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in other sources and that it therefore may very well have been a construct of al-Nuwayrī´s literary mind should not lead one to demean his *Nihāyah* as an historical source. Al-Nuwayrī himself states that his work is not solely a work of history but it also a literary work: ″our work is not based on history only; it is a book of *adab*.″[28] As a result, the inclusion of fictional accounts such as the above account of the early life of Genghis Khan should be understood as one component of al-Nuwayrī´s work. In this case, the lack of information for the rise of one of the great conquerors of the world lies as a *tabula rasa* for an inquisitive mind and prolific writer of the stature of al-Nuwayrī. Therefore, accounts of this nature must be studied not for their value as accurate history nor as a description of the apocryphal histories of those Mongols with whom al-Nuwayrī came in contact, but as a reflection of the historiography of the author and of the current status of affairs in fourteenth-century Cairo. This apparently fictional account can consequently be interpreted as a medieval template for the rise of a world conqueror. In other words, al-Nuwayrī´s account seems to indicate that truly epic figures in world history, such as Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad, have all attained that position by virtue of a seminal form of submission and devotion to God demonstrated by a period of seclusion from the rest of civilization, a form of purging in preparation for the task at hand.

In addition, a thorough evaluation of this passage must consider its use as justification for the growing strength of and constant opposition of the Mongols on the borders of the Mamluk empire. Al-Nuwayrī´s history could be read as an attempt to justify the rise of an infidel army which has taken Baghdad, removed the caliph, and remains an ever-present threat to the existence of the Islamic world. An apocalyptic reading of this section could easily accommodate the religious aspects of Genghis Khan´s early life by revealing a degree of divine sanction upon the leader which could, at the very least, offer a theological justification for this growing threat. Other texts of Mamluk Egypt, such as Ibn Nafīs´ *Al-Risālah al-Kāmilīyah,* appear also to use apocalyptic motifs to justify the rise and eventual fall of the Mamluk sultanate. This passage, therefore, may be the initial piece in al-Nuwayrī´s attempt to describe the Mongols as tools in the hand of God for correcting the failures of the current leaders of the Islamic empire. As an influential administrator in the Mamluk sultanate, al-Nuwayrī may not have felt capable of directly confronting the Mamluk regime. While as a religious scholar intimately connected with both the ulama and the Sufis, he may be explaining the reasons for the rise of the Mongols and the ultimate fall of the Mamluks.[29]

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[28]Chapoutot-Remadi, "Al-Nuwayrī," 159.

[29]M. Chapoutot-Remadi described al-Nuwayrī as being "acquainted with Ṣūfī *shaykhs*." These connections may have influenced his fictionalization of Genghis Khan's origins. M. Chapoutot-

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The above analysis of this passage in al-Nuwayrī´s history of the Mongols has revealed that our author has not attempted to present an accurate account of the rise of Genghis Khan but has attempted to create out of the great leader a man who, from his earliest years, had spiritual desires and pursuits. For an Egyptian writer in fourteenth-century Cairo who was most definitely familiar with and quite possibly directly affiliated with Sufi practices, the most logical model for expressing these character traits seems to have been that of a Sufi mystic. Amitai is correct in viewing this section as important for historians of the Mongol empire. Yet, it does not appear to be beneficial as a projection of Mongol imperial ideology but rather as an expression of how the Mongols were viewed by the Mamluk Sultanate and, quite possibly, of how a powerful insider within the Mamluk administration may have utilized a work of history as an indictment of his patrons.

Remadi, "Al-Nuwayrī," 158.

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