IF THE CAP FITS: Going Mongol in Thirteenth Century Syria

Abstract

Various Near Eastern and European writers of the thirteenth century remarked on the outlandish appearance of the Mongol warriors then rampaging across Eurasia. One aspect of this was their distinctive headdress. From our sources it is clear that Mongol costume could be enjoyed by non-Mongols in the Near East for a variety of purposes; these distinctive hats were described, and how contemporary artists depicted them, will also be discussed.

Introduction

‘…dans le langage du Levant on compte par chapeaux et par têtes’

François René de Chateaubriand, Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem

On their arrival in the Near East, the Mongols certainly made an impression. This was, of course, primarily through their behaviour, which shocked, outraged and terrified observers. The Mosul chronicler Ibn al-Athir saw in their irruption the ‘obituary of Islam’ and the ‘Mongols’, he could not find a suitable comparison for the disaster in history, for the Mongols had outdone the tyrants of legend; perhaps, he suspected, ‘humanity will not see such a calamity, apart from Gog and Magog, until the world comes to an end’. Even so, however, the Mongols were more threatening even than the apocalypse: ‘the Antichrist will spare those who follow him and destroy those who oppose him but these did not spare anyone’. It is no surprise that they could even be viewed as harbingers of the End Times—far from many, of course, their arrival really did mean the end of the world. No less alien, however, was their appearance. The Armenian observer Grigor Akkertiš’s writings that the first Mongols who appeared in the Caucasus were ‘terrible to look at and indescribable’. Nevertheless, he does attempt a description, comparing them to a variety of incongruous animals: they had ‘large heads like a buffalo’s, narrow eyes like a hedges’ snout, noses like a cat’s, projecting snouts like a dog’s, narrow loins like an antelope’s, short legs like a hog’s… with a lion’s strength they have voices more shrill than an eagle… They give birth to children like snakes and eat like wolves’. Apart from these comparisons, Grigor also mentions that they lack beards, ‘appear where least expected’, and live in their own world, of course. He concludes by stating that ‘they do not eat bread at all’. This last was a point noted by Western European accounts of the Mongols, such as those by John of Plano Carpini and John of Joinville, and could be interpreted as being a marker of a primitive, backward society. Even more sober accounts such as these might reveal a certain degree of horror at aspects of the steppe warriors’ appearance. The absence of beards was also noted elsewhere: John of Plano Carpini gives a long and complicated account of the Mongol hairstyle. The point the Franciscan stresses is that ‘in appearance the Tartars are quite different from all other men’.

The complex hairstyle described by John of Plano Carpini indicates that the appearance of the Mongols was in fact carefully crafted, and was seen by them as a marker of identity. These accounts do, however, suggest that some aspects of their appearance were mutable, and affected by their encounters with other peoples— for example, they could acquire their armour from conquered peoples. Nevertheless, it is clear that clothing, and especially headgear, formed another marker of Mongol ‘identity’. The Mongols were far from unique in this, of course. In mediaeval Europe, Jewish faces could differentiate Anglo-Saxon or Irishman from Norman, or Saxon from Wend; headgear would differentiate Jew from Christian. In the Islamic world, of course, people were in theory expected to distinguish themselves from Muslims in their dress, often their headgear, either through form or colour. On the steppe such markers—and especially headgear—seem to have been significant from an early age. In this paper I would like to consider one of these key markers of Mongol identity, the hat, and how it was described and represented in the Near East. Specifically, I wish to examine how, around the time of Hülegü’s invasion of Syria and in its aftermath, non-Mongol individuals or groups used Mongol costume—notably, headgear—for different purposes.

Going Mongol

At the time of Hülegü’s invasion of Syria in 1260-61, he attracted into his service various of the lesser Asian princes in the region. One among them gained especial notoriety—while one prince was forgiven by the Mamluks, or even went over to their side before ‘Ayn Jalāt, al-Sa‘dīd Ḥasan, ruler of Banyas and al-Subayya, was executed immediately after the battle by Sultan Qutuz. He was accused of being too enthusiastic a supporter of the Mongols, which extended to his conduct during the battle, and, allegedly, to his conversion to Christianity. As a sign of his

1 ‘Ingénieurs de Paris à Jérusalem’ (Paris, 1852), p. 271 (n.). This essay grew out of a short section of a longer paper, different versions of which have been given at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the University of Birmingham, the University of Edinburgh and the University of St Andrews. I am grateful for the invaluable assistance and advice provided by many people, notably Reuven Amitai, Robert Bartlett, Carole Hillenbrand, Georgy Kara, Timothy May and Michael Talbot (whose translations from Ottoman Turkish were both invaluable and entertaining).


5 For example, John of Joinville describes at the ‘horrible stench’ emanating from the meat leftover bag of a ‘Khwarazmian’. Vie de saint Louis, p. 242. The Mongol eating practices attracted comment from all observers: John of Plano Carpini notes that they would eat any meat, from ‘dogs, wolves, foxes and horses’, even in extremis, human flesh; they would eat the ear of a mure, and even lice: ‘History of the Mongols’, p. 16. Ibn al-Athir states that ‘they eat all animals, even dogs and pigs and others’. Chronicles of Ibn al-Athir, iii, p. 204.

6 ‘History of the Mongols’, p. 6, cf. William of Rubruck, Itinerarium, in Peter Jackson (trans.), The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck (London, 1990), p. 88. On the immediate Western reaction to the Mongol irruption, including a discussion of the place of eschatological theories, see Peter Jackson, the Mongols and the West (Harlow, 2005), pp. 138-50.

7 See, e.g., Mission of Friar William of Rubruck, pp. 259-60


11 On these events and al-Sa‘dīd Ḥasan, see Reuven Amitai-Petris, Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamlûk-Ikhkânī war, 1260-1261 (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 32, 45.
affiliation, he had worn Mongol clothing, notably a cap. The context for this is provided by the Syrian scholar al-Yūnīnī, who relates that al-Sa’īd Ḥasan had been imprisoned by al-Nāṣir Yūsuf, the leading Ayyūbīd in Syria, in the castle of al-Bīrā, a major crossing point of the Euphrates. When the Mongols passed through, they had released him, and as a sign of great honour, Hūlīgūn himself had presented him with Mongol clothing—a brocade mantle and a hat (qabū ’zarbāf wa sarāqaq)—which from then on he always wore. 12

Mongol costume could also be adopted as a disguise. There are several incidents recorded in the Arabic sources where one group or other dressed as Mongols, specifically including hats, in order to conceal their true identity. The earliest of these are recorded in the Rawd al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir, the extensive official biography of Sultan Baybars by the head of his chancellors (and that of his successors), Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir. The first incident recorded took place in the winter of the year 662 AH, early 1264 CE. Following the defeat of Hūlīgūn’s forces in Syria in 1260, there was a period of cross-border raiding, in which the Ilkhan’s subjects in northern Syria, King Het’um I and Prince Bohemond VI of Antioch, were used. On his return from a visit to Hūlīgūn, Het’um began to assemble a raiding party. This included local Bedouin, and a detachment from the Mongol army in al-Rūm; the king also requested support from Antioch, and the prince sent 150 mounted soldiers. We are told that these ‘all wore Mongol hats in imitation of the Ilkhan’. 13 Stuck in the vicinity of Hārīm because of bad weather, the assembled army was defeated by a Mamluk detachment sent by Baybars. Later in the same year Het’um resumed his efforts to organise a raid into Syria. Reassembling his troops, we are told that he had had made a thousand Tatar mantles and a thousand Mongol hats, clothing his followers with them. 14 While the purpose of the Antiochenes assuming this disguise is unclear—were they disguised in order to ease their journey across possibly hostile territory to their assembly with King Het’um?—the reason for the Armenians’ more extensive use of the disguise later on is provided by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir. He states that the Armenians were dressed like this ‘in order to confuse observers’ into thinking that they were the Mongols. 15 Baybars himself, though he was writing at a later date, did not mention the incident specifically, although, as we have seen, the Ilkhan was utilising the same tactic against his Christian enemies. 16 Thereafter, in 1264, the Ilkhan was again seen to be wearing Tatars and drinking wine in Ramadan, transgressing the laws of Islam—but does not specifically mention headgear: Kittīb al-majmū’ al-mubārik, in C. Čehn (ed.), ‘La Chronique de l’Aïn Ḥājur’, Bulletin des Études Orientales, XVIII (1955-57), p. 175.


While Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir reports that raids were carried out ‘continuously, one after another, and from all directions’, the only place mentioned is Marāzin, to the west of the modern Armenian Catholics’ fortress of Hromkla, on the Euphrates: Rawd al-zāhir, p. 196. On Armenian raids in the 1260s, see Reuven Amitai-Preiss, ‘In the Aftermath of ‘Ayn Ḥājur: The Beginnings of the Mamluk-Illīhan Cold War’, Al-Mustaq: Studia Arabo-Islamică Mediterranea, III (1990), pp. 10-2, and M. Canard: ‘Le royaume d’Armenie-Cilicie et les Mamelsouks jusqu’au traité de 1285’, Revue des études arméniennes, IV (1967), pp. 223-7.


Rawd al-zāhir, p. 417.


13 Rawd al-zāhir, p. 196.

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16 Rawd al-zāhir, p. 417.
counter-productive, at least in this version of events. What is clear, however, is that the king’s intention was certainly not that his force should engage with the Mamluks, as then the cat would be very quickly out of the bag, but rather that locals, perhaps used to passing Mongol raiders, should be confused and raise the alarm, as, in fact, happened.

Shortly afterwards, it seems, the Mamluks sought to make use of the same manoeuvre. Following the capture of the fortress, whose name was ceremonially changed from Qal’at al-Rūm (Hromka) to Qal’at al-Muṣlinikīn, it was repaired and a Mamluk governor was installed. It seems that this has been intended as a forward base for gathering intelligence concerning the Ikkhanate, and there are signs in the sources that this is how it was used. An early example of this is to be found in the year following its capture, 692 AH, 1293 CE. The governor, Ḥāfiz al-Dīn Ayyāb al-ʿUṣṭūrī, requested that the sultan send him thirty Mongol caps, in order to provide a disguise for the spies he was ending out.22

It can be seen that putting on Mongol costume could have a variety of meanings, even contradictory ones – according to context. Mongol costume could be intended to make a statement about the individual wearer, or it could be used as a disguise for a group. Clearly, here, the aim was to exploit the fearsome reputation of the Mongol soldierly. While for Mongol border raiders the disguise was to facilitate their movements behind enemy lines in case of encounters, for the Franks and Armenians the disguise was meant to create rumours that would help blunt the need for actual conflict. They may have put on Mongol hats, but that does not mean that they had become Mongols – as would have been obvious had their forces been challenged, or even, as at Hromka, investigated carefully. The point is, though, that these disguises were intended to work at a distance, much more than at close quarters. The aim was for reasonably distant observers – local villagers or tribesmen – to see the force and make the false identification, as, indeed, happened near Mongol costume, then, must have been singularly distinctive, and from a distance, and generally familiar. The key element, in the accounts of our sources, is the hat.

The Mongol hat

This characteristic Mongol hat must have been well known to all observers in the region: Mamluk, Arab, Frank, Armenian, etc. Not only was it distinctive in form, but it was also given a distinctive non-Arabic name in the Arabic sources: sarrāqīšt, plural sarrāqīštān.23 This name is not explained by the Mamluk historians, either the contemporaries of these events, such as Ibn Abī al-Ẓāhir and al-Ẓāmīnī, or later compilers, writing some time after the end of the Ikkhanate, but who used earlier works, such as Aynī and al-Maqrīzī. One can conclude, it seems, that, like the hat itself, its name was familiar enough to have been understood by the intended readers of these works – primarily, of course, the Mamluk court, but also the wider scholarly community. Its meaning is fairly clear from the sources – it must be some sort of garment – but its root, nevertheless, remains uncertain.

22 Al-ʿAynī, ṭāʾel al-jāmīʿ, iii, pp. 114-15. While not explicitly referring to Mongol hats, another Egyptian historian, ibn al-Dawādīb, is perhaps also referring to this counter-productive subterfuge when he writes that ʿSatan suggested their actions to [the Armenians], and they spread out their hopes in the market place of error: Ḥāfiz al-Dawādīb wa-ṣalmā %= al-ghurab, ed. U. Haarmann, viii (Freiburg, 1971), p. 330. Ibn al-Dawādīb includes a passage from the Qurʾān, from sura al-vii, 48: “But when the two forces came in sight of each other,” – see Abdallah Yusuf Alī (ed. and trans.), The Holy Qurʾān (London, 1975). In the Qurʾān, the one turning to flight is Satan, but in the context of ibn al-Dawādīb’s passage, it is clear that a rather flattering comparison with King Herʿum is implied.

23 The singular form sarrāqīšt is used by al-ʿUṣṭūrī, ii, p. 16 (where the editor, in n. 3, glosses the word as ‘Mongol cap’); by al-Maqrīzī, Sūūd, i, p. 738; and by Ibn Abī al-Ẓāhir in one instance, Rawd al-ẓāhir, p. 196. In the other cases discussed above, the plural form is used: Rawd al-ẓāhir, pp. 193, 417 (glossed in n. 1 as ‘headgear of the Mongols’); 432; Shāhī b. ʿAli, Fudūḍ al-muḥāṣib, p. 27; al-ʿAynī, ṭāʾel al-jāmīʿ, p. 115.

24 Mayer, in his survey of costume in the Mamluk Sultanate, implies that the original meaning of the word was for a Mongol-style hat, but that these lost currency after the early Mamluk period, and when the word reappeared in the later Mamluk period it had become attached to a style of woman’s headdress.25 Reinhart Dozy simply defines the word as ‘un bonnet tatar’ in his Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes; he repeats this in a note in his work on Arab clothing, explaining that this – it being ‘tatar’ rather than Arab – is why he chose not to include a full entry.26 Various other Persian and Turkish dictionaries do include entries for this word, or similar ones.27 Two meanings are consistently given: firstly, a woman’s headdress or veil; secondly, a crest or plume of feathers, again worn on the head.28 Neither of these seem to relate to the hats worn by Mongols or their imitators. The origin of these words is also uncertain. While frequently a Turkish origin is described for words with both meanings, Steingass proposes a derivation from the Persian sarrāqīšt, that is, ‘head-embrace’. In the texts from the Mamluk sultanate it is clear that the sarrāqīšt are specifically associated with the Mongols, rather than any more familiar Turkic groups, and it may well be that a Mongol origin for the word should also be sought.

While distinctive and distinctively Mongol headgear, with a distinctive name, was seen – at least by their contemporaries in the Near East – as being a key part of Mongol identity, the texts do not reveal what this headgear actually looked like. Latin and Armenian literary descriptions of Mongol headgear are not altogether helpful at providing supporting detail on this distinctive, typical Mongol headgear. The Franciscan visitors to the Mongols provide accounts of the Mongols’ facial appearance and their distinctive hairstyle, and they also describe one such of Mongol headdress, the ʿabāt or ṣarqūṭ, also described by Grigor Aknerts.29 The ʿabāt was a complex superstructure made of wood, covered in fine fabric, increasing in width as it grew taller, and topped with a plume of feathers (a sorkūṭ). This was, however, the headdress of married elite women, not the normal headgear, as the sources make clear.30 With regard to the ordinary hats worn by girls and men, however, John of Plano Carpini is more forthcoming: he reports that ‘the caps they [the Tartars] have are different from those of other nations, but I am unable to describe what they are like in such a way as you would understand’.31 William of Rubruck is no more helpful: addressing Louis IX, he merely reminds the king that he has seen the men’s costume for himself, clearly seeing no point in describing them for him.32
To attempt to identify the normal everyday hat of the Mongol soldier, it might seem helpful to turn from the literary to the visual record. The period of Ilkhanid rule in Iran was, paradoxically, one of great cultural efflorescence. Persian emerged from the shadow of Arabic as a literary language, and the Ilkhanid court was a major centre of artistic patronage. Especially famous are the illustrated volumes of works such as the Shihnum, the classic Persian epic, and a great many figures of Mongol appearance are depicted in the illustrations. For their models of rulers and warriors the artists chose the obvious contemporary examples, and the illustrations reflect Mongol, or Ilkhanid style. Indeed, many of these Mongol figures wear headdress – which often distinguishes them from their civilian Persian counterparts. These plentiful Persian miniatures have been examined for what they reveal about Mongol costume, but while the Mongol figures are distinct and while they are frequently hatted, this does not necessarily help us narrow down what these saraijiyit would have looked like. In 1939, Schroeder, examining a variety of artwork from the Ilkhanid period, noted the great variety of styles of headdress worn by Mongol figures, to illustrate this, he reproduced line drawings of well over 100 styles of hats from fourteenth-century Persian miniature paintings: the styles vary greatly.27

This discrepancy, between on the one hand in the literary sources an agreed ‘characteristic’ style and on the other great variety of actual depiction, requires some consideration. The Persian examples come from the later Ilkhanid period, mostly from the fourteenth century. It might be more appropriate to look for representations closer in time to the arrival of the Mongols in the Near East and the onset of the Mamluk Ilkhanid conflict. One work, recently confidently dated to 1260 – the year of Hülegi’s invasion of Syria – survives in the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai. This is an iconostasis beam, and one of the scenes depicted – a combined Nativity and Adoration – has a figure identified as a Mongol. Unusually, the three Magi are distinguished from each other not merely in terms of age but also in appearance: one is conventionally depicted, the second is dressed in a Frankish or Italianate style, and the third Magus, according to Weitzmann, ‘with a drooping mustache, sparse beard, slit eyes, and strange headdress is obviously a Mongol’.28 For Weitzmann this Nativity icon, with a Mongol and a Frank side-by-side, was ‘an expression of the ceremonial hopes of the Pope, St. Louis, and all the Crusaders that an alliance with the Mongols would be a first step toward making Christianity the world religion.’29 Folda dates this icon confidently to 1260, on the basis that it commemorates a Frankish-Mongol alliance, between Bohemond VI of Antioch and Khutulun, identified as the Latin and Mongol Magi (with the ‘Near Eastern’ Magus being King Herod).30 Given the predominantly hostile attitude to the Mongols and the threat of their overlordship among the Franks of southern Outremer in 1260, but also the subsequent attempts at alliance in the decades that followed, a later date might seem more realistic – assuming that the icon does indeed represent a specific alliance, rather than merely Weitzmann’s vague ‘first step’ hypothesis. Indeed, on style grounds it has been suggested it is by a different painter.

Another representation of Mongols, certainly dating from 1260, is to be found in a Gospel Book produced by the Armenian artist T’oros Roslin.31 This was commissioned by the Armenian Catholics, Constantine, and was completed at his headquarters, the fortress of Hromkla. Hromkla was one of the crossing points on the Euphrates used by Hülegi’s forces in the course of their invasion of Syria late in 1259; the relevant image presumably dates from shortly after this encounter. Interestingly, the scene in which the Mongols appear is another depiction of the Adoration of the Magi – the most renowned Gospel account of visitors coming from the East, so perhaps the most likely place to find depictions of these new arrivals. Here, however, the actual Magi are not depicted at all, such as the Shihnum, very unusually, they are represented by a retinue, and this group of men are explicitly labelled as Mongols.32 Nevertheless, both of these images present the Mongols in a familiar Christian religious context is significant: the artists, perhaps, sought to bring these threatening invaders into the Christian context of the Near East. It may be, of course, that these images represent a belief, or hope, that the Mongols were or would prove to be especially sympathetic to Christianity – a reparation that the Mongols seem to have been keen to develop themselves.33

Quite apart from the label in the Gospel Book, in both this and in the Sinai icon the relevant figures are clearly identifiable as Mongols. The key elements enabling identification are the facial appearance and costume of the figures. Sirarpie Der Nersessian refers to how T’oros Roslin ‘has represented the bodyguard with the facial type and costume of the … Mongols’10 Folda, discussing the Sinai Magus, describes how ‘his physiognomy is characterized as Mongol, and he wears a typical Mongol cap’ (elsewhere he refers to it as ‘a characteristic Mongol cap’).35 Mongols do seem always to be shown with hats in visual depictions. From Mount Sinai to Japan, as seen in the ‘Takezaki Suemaga Scroll’, Mongols wear headdress that distinguishes them from those around them. As we’ve seen with the Ilkhanid material, however, these hats did not always uniform. All of the Mongol retinue in T’oros Roslin’s Gospel Book illustrations are wearing hats, of course, but of the same sort: with a folded brim at the front, open at the back where the hat extends as if to protect the back of the neck, and with a tassel of some sort on the crown. These are also close in style to the hat borne by the Mongol Magus in the Sinai icon. Furthermore, these hats are very close in style to those depicted in the famous Chinese imperial portraits of the Great Khans.36

Firmly dated to 1260, to the year of Hülegi’s invading of Syria, and by an artist who certainly would have had the opportunity to see Mongol warriors close to hand for himself, and very recently – can we assume that these hats are in fact representative of the normative Mongol style of the time? Would these hats have been recognised by Louis IX from his encounter on Cyprus? Did the Armenian soldiers seeking to raise the siege of Hromkla in 1292 wear hats similar to those depicted in the Magi’s retinue by an artist working there 32 years previously? Are these hats, in fact, the saraijiyit named in the Arabic histories? Could it be that these hats, uniform in style and comparable to those on the imperial portraits, but contrasting with the varied headdress shown in the Ilkhanid illustrated works, imply that, while the distinct Mongol identity may have become diluted later in Iran, in 1260 Mongols still looked like Mongols? If so, therefore, others could too. Could the hat not instead, of itself a later date, of course, make a Mongol, but it is clear that, in late thirteenth century Syria, dressing as a Mongol – putting on the Tatar cap – could have a variety of symbolic and practical meanings.

33 Sirarpie Der Nersessian, Miniature Painting in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia (2 vols; Washington, 1993), ii, fig. 212.
34 In fact, the relevant label actually states ‘the T’ar’at came today’: while this might have meant unclear, the relationship of the label with these figures makes their identification as Mongols certain. For discussions of this label, see Claude Mutafian, L’Armitage du Levant (Paris 2013), p. 147; Bazael Narsik (ed.), Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem (Oxford, 1980), p. 52.
36 Miniature Painting p. 60.
38 Presumably these are also the same as the ’lightweight summer hats with wide brims; the latter sometimes split at the sides, so the front could be worn as an eye-shade, or the back down to protect the back of the neck’, described as typical of early Mongol costume by Cammann, ‘Mongol Costume’, p. 160.