

ATL Skills: Research

Fall of Khwarizm –

The Actions of the Shah

Professor Arshad Islam also outlines the fall of Khwarizm due to the decisions of its ruler 'Ala' al-Din Muhammad Shah in his article "The Mongol Invasions of Central Asia", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 6 (April 2016), p.317:

It is commonly assumed that the Mongols simply overwhelmed Transoxiana and Khurasan by their sheer numbers; this is not true. The Mongols suffered heavy losses in their lengthy siege of Otrar – essentially the doorstep of the region from the Mongols' perspective – and they were outnumbered on several occasions. Given the *casus belli*, the Mongols naturally advanced on Otrar first in September 1219, but were bogged down by the defensive walls and the city only fell after a length siege of six months. However, Chengis simply left a force there (including Chinese siege engineers and Uighur Muslim allies) and took the rest of his forces in the direction of Bukhara. The formation of massive armies that subsequently split at geographical junctures was to form the pattern of Mongol campaigns on a macro-level. In this sense, although a well-fortified city like Otrar could withstand a siege for months, it should be recalled that the cities of Central Asia were not conquered one by one, as several cities and towns were under attack simultaneously. Classical narratives therefore typically focused on particularly notable engagements – as at Otrar and Herat – or on key cities, such as Bukhara and Samarqand.

It would be unfair to state that the Khwarazm Shah had not prepared for war; Juvaini referred to the perception that he had “passed a lifetime in Holy War”, and he had engaged in arduous campaigns against the Kara-Khitai among others whom he considered to be Turkic barbarians menacing the Islamic lands. However, the long-term neglect of defence in the region, originating in the trade-loving inhabitants' dislike of taxes (as when they compelled the Samanids to allow mighty defensive structures to fall into disrepair), meant that the region was not on a footing for a serious war. Nevertheless, the Shah's miscalculation was to

presume that he could shelter in mighty citadels while the savage Mongol hordes (whom he viewed with contempt, as revealed in his missive to Jebe) would swarm over the lands of the Khwarezmid Empire, ineffectually burning some crops and villages, then depart due to lack of supplies; in short, it can be inferred from his actions that the Shah presumed that he and his people could weather the storm behind their walls. He failed to take into account two key features of the Mongol military machine: their advanced system of hunting and foraging (explored above) and traveling with livestock, which meant that their nomadic society was continually producing the resources it needed (meaning that the Mongols had the advantage in lengthy sieges); and the incorporation of subjugated peoples, the most important of whom were the Chinese siege engineers and peripheral Turkic (and often Muslim) collaborators, such as the Uighurs and Kara-Khitai, drafted into Mongol military service. The former could reduce the fortresses with gunpowder and mining techniques, while the latter provided intelligence about the inhabitants of the region and were probably involved in the administration of the region from the initial invasion itself (i.e. as translators and commissariat officials).

References:

see: Khwandamir, *Habibus-Siyar, Tome Three*, trans. and ed. by Thackston, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p.15; al-Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*. trans. by Boyle, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958, pp.81-86, P.98; Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Khan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic Lands, 1251-1259*, Berkeley: California University Press, 1987, p.6 and Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*, trans. by Haining, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 131.