

## From Power To Persecution: The Fate Of Sultan Alauddin Muhammad

**Primov Mukhiddinjon Omonovich**

Kimyo International University in Tashkent

Associate Professor of the Department of History, PhD

**Qiranova Chehrona Dilshod qizi**

Kimyo International University in Tashkent

Student of the History Department

### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the political activities, personality, military successes, and tragic end of Sultan Alaaddin Muhammad, the last powerful representative of the Khwarazmshah dynasty. Based on historical sources, it is described how he was expelled from his homeland before the Mongol invasion and spent his final days on the island of Ashura. The influence of world instability and historical changes is shown through the Sultan's need for a single horse from a powerful empire. The article illuminates the image of a historical figure from a human and political point of view, and also provides information about the fate of his family members.

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### “If only I had a steed grazing around my tent...”

In his final days, Khwarazmshah Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad ibn Tekish is said to have uttered such a wish. It might seem surprising that a mighty sovereign—whose life was spent in the saddle and who once united four hundred cities under his rule—would one day yearn for a single horse. Yet, that is exactly what happened.

According to historians, this commander, who possessed twice the power of a formidable enemy like Genghis Khan and could summon thousands of cavalymen with a single command, lost everything—his wealth, his crown, and his throne—due to one critical and tragic miscalculation. Fleeing the Mongol onslaught that stormed in like a dark tide, he wandered from fortress to fortress in his final days, ultimately finding refuge on a small island in the Caspian Sea.

Thus, the proud legacy of the glorious Anushteginid dynasty began to sink into the depths of history. Except for the valiant Sultan Jalal al-Din Manguberdi—hailed by medieval chroniclers as the “Tiger of Turan”—no other Khwarazmshah commander was able to stand against the infidel Tatar invaders.

As the reins of power slipped from his hands and the consequences of his past mistakes replayed before his eyes, Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad’s soul, bitter with grief, longed for a single steed. His courtier, Malik Taj al-Din Hasan, fulfilled his desire. The next day, he presented him with a dark-maned samani horse.

We do not know just how overjoyed the Sultan truly was at that moment. But what we do understand is this: for a monarch who had risen to power atop a saddle, the horse was more than a mount—it was a symbol of strength and victory. Perhaps, in the image of the neighing steeds that once thundered across the boundless steppes of Turan, he relived the glory of his triumphs. Maybe, having been stripped of such symbols in his final days, the once-mighty king sought to regain, if only briefly, the dignity and honor of his reign through the gift of a steed.

Whatever the case, the life of Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad ended in this way. In the year 1220 CE, on the island of Abaskun, he bid farewell to this world—and to the samani horse gifted to him by his loyal attendant.

Historians note that, at the height of his power, the royal stables housed between thirty to sixty thousand warhorses, with noble steeds befitting his majestic presence. And yet, in the end, the Sultan mourned the absence of a single horse.

While researching the history of horse breeding in Uzbekistan, one particular episode from the life of Sultan Muhammad drew my attention. As Anvar Suyunov, the press secretary of the Uzbekistan Equestrian and Horse Sports Federation, writes:

“The Sultan’s lamentations revealed another underlying truth—one could sense the breath of a man closely connected to horses, someone deeply knowledgeable in the art of horsemanship and who held it in high esteem.”

Ala al-Din Muhammad Khwarazmshah (full name: Qutb al-Din Muhammad ibn Tekish ibn Ilarslan ibn Anushtegin), a ruler of the Turkic Anushteginid dynasty, governed the Khwarazmian Empire from August 3, 1200 until his death in December 1220. His father was Sultan Tekish, and his mother, Turkan Khatun, was the daughter of Jonkish Khan of the Qangli tribe. In December 1193, Muhammad was appointed governor of Nishapur by his father. In 1198, Caliph al-Nasir sent ceremonial robes and an official diploma (manshur) confirming Tekish and his son Qutb al-Din Muhammad as sultans over Khorasan, Turkestan, and Persian Iraq.

Following Tekish’s death, Muhammad ascended the Khwarazmian throne. He initially adopted his father’s title “Ala al-Din” and later took the name “Sanjar II.” Under his rule, the empire reached its zenith in both territorial expansion and military might. By his time, Khwarazm’s domains extended from the Aral Sea in the north and the Caspian in the west to Iraq and Ghazna in the south, and as far east as the Jety-Su (Seven Rivers) region.

In 1207, after consolidating power in Khorasan and Persian Iraq, Muhammad turned his attention toward Transoxiana. Later, when Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad arrived at Ashura Island, he felt an unexpected joy. Though he had become a fugitive with neither his old realm nor a new dominion, and his health was rapidly deteriorating, some locals in Mazandaran remained loyal to him—bringing food and fulfilling his requests. For his loyal service, one such attendant, Taj al-Din, was eventually honored by Sultan Jalal al-Din and granted the title of “Malik.” He was later appointed ruler of Astrobud and nearby fortresses and lands.

In earlier times, the Sultan had over 30,000 horses under the supervision of Amir Ikhtiyar al-Din, the royal stablemaster. The Sultan used to boast:

“If I wished, I could increase the number of horses under my command to 60,000 without spending a single dinar or dirham. I’d merely need to order the shepherds across the empire to deliver one horse each from the herds grazing royal pastures—and the horses would easily number beyond thirty thousand.”

And now, dear reader, compare those days of grandeur with the Sultan’s last days in exile. What a contrast! What a cruel reminder of life’s impermanence. During his time on the island, even if someone merely brought him food or small supplies, a royal decree would be written in their favor—either conferring a title or granting land as iqta (feudal assignment).

Often, the recipients themselves had to write their own decrees, since no official scribes remained with the Sultan. In truth, these so-called “island decrees” were intended for Jalal al-Din, who later affirmed them upon emerging as a claimant to power. If a petitioner brought along the Sultan’s dagger, handkerchief, or another personal item as proof, Jalal al-Din would kiss the relic before placing his seal on the document.

When Sultan Muhammad died, it was his close servants—Shams al-Din Mahmud ibn Yaloq, a court herald, and Muqarrir al-Din, the chief chamberlain—who performed his last rites. No shroud was available, so Shams al-Din tore his own shirt to wrap the Sultan’s body. He was buried on that very island.

His downfall had many causes, but one spark was the request of Osman ibn Ibrahim – the last Qarakhanid ruler—for help against the Kara-Khitai (during the rebellion led by Malik Sanjar). The Khwarazmian army, led by Sultan Muhammad, clashed with the Kara-Khitai under commander Tayangu on the plains of Elamish. The Khwarazmians emerged victorious, taking control of lands from Mawarannahr to Uzgend.

Muhammad then adopted the title *Iskandar al-Thani* ("Alexander the Second") and introduced a musical ceremony in the royal court known as Nawbah al-Dhul-Qarnayn (Trumpets of the Two-Horned One), in homage to the legendary Zul-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great).

During his reign, the Khwarazmian Empire reached unprecedented heights—both in size and strength. Yet, in his final days, all that power was reduced to a single, borrowed steed and a torn garment for a shroud.

In 1207, after consolidating his authority in Khorasan and Persian Iraq, Muhammad Khwarazmshah turned his attention to Transoxiana. The opportunity came when Usman ibn Ibrahim, the last ruler of the Qarakhanid dynasty, appealed for help in his struggle against the Kara-Khitai (see: *The Rebellion of Malik Sanjar*). Seizing the moment, the Khwarazmshah's army confronted the Kara-Khitai forces, led by Commander Tayangu, on the Elamish steppe.

The Kara-Khitai were defeated in this battle, and lands stretching from Transoxiana to Uzgend came under Khwarazmshah's control. Triumphant, Muhammad adopted the honorary title "Iskandar al-Thani" (Alexander the Second) and introduced a ceremonial musical tradition in his court known as "Nawbah al-Dhul-Qarnayn"—a fanfare played upon the ruler's entrance, in tribute to the legendary Zul-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great).

After shattering the power of the Kara-Khitai and securing his empire's eastern borders, Muhammad Khwarazmshah launched a wide-ranging campaign, conquering Persian Iraq, Mazandaran, Arran, Azerbaijan, Shirvan, Mikran, Mingqishlaq, Kesh, Sijistan, Ghur, Ghazna, and Bamiyan, extending his dominion to the borders of India.

Once he had fully subdued Transoxiana, Muhammad contemplated launching a campaign into China. However, in 1215, upon learning that Genghis Khan had captured Beijing, he sent an embassy to Mongolia, led by Baha al-Din Razi, to gather comprehensive intelligence about this rising power. Thus began an exchange of diplomatic missions between the Khwarazmian Empire and the Mongol court.

In 1218, a massive caravan led by Uhuna, a personal envoy of Genghis Khan, arrived in Otrar. The caravan included over 500 camels, diplomats, and merchants. However, the governor of Otrar, Inalchuq, had the entire group arrested and executed, suspecting them of espionage.

Muhammad Khwarazmshah once again reaffirmed his "Alexander the Second" title and continued the Zul-Qarnayn fanfare in the royal court. With the destruction of the Kara-Khitai and peace on his eastern frontiers, he expanded his realm west and south, reaching the frontiers of India after conquering regions as far as Ghazna and Bamiyan.

The embassy incident in Otrar would soon prove to be fatal for the Khwarazmian Empire.

According to Rashid al-Din, during a consultation with nobles of Mazandaran, the Sultan was advised to seek temporary refuge on the islands of Abeskun, which were located near the mouth of the Gurgan River (present-day Gorgan). Sultan Ala al-Din Muhammad accepted the advice.

It is known that Abeskun was once a maritime port on the southern Caspian coast. According to the identification accepted by Z.M. Bunyatov, based on the research of V.V. Bartold, the Sultan's final refuge may have been Ashur-Ada, an island in that region.

According to L.N. Gumilyov, the island to which Sultan Muhammad Khwarazmshah retreated was, in earlier times, a kind of leper colony, a place of isolation for those suffering from leprosy. This poetic and symbolic interpretation—of a forsaken ruler dying among the outcast—was vividly dramatized in V. G. Yan's historical novel *Genghis Khan*.

By the time Khwarazmshah arrived on the island, he was already suffering severely from pneumonia, and those accompanying him had little hope of his recovery. From the moment he reached Abeskun, he took no further action to resist the advancing Mongols. Instead, he was consumed by despair and regret. He reportedly lamented:

"Of all the lands we once ruled on this earth, not even two ells remain for us to dig our own grave."

While the Mongol detachment under Jebe relentlessly pursued the Sultan, they were unable to locate him. Instead, they turned to seizing the fortress where his treasure and harem had been hidden. According to Rashid al-Din, the news of the harem's capture eventually reached Ala al-Din's followers.

In a meeting with Mazandaran nobles, Khwarazmshah was offered one last piece of advice: to wait for a few days on the islands of Abeskun. He accepted this counsel. Abeskun at the time was a port settlement

located at the mouth of the Gurgan River (present-day Gorgan) along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. According to the identification proposed by V.V. Bartold and later adopted by Z.M. Bunyatov, the Sultan's final refuge may have been Ashur-Ada, one of the small islands in that region.

Gumilyov's claim that this area was once used to quarantine lepers is an evocative metaphor—reflecting the symbolic isolation of a once-mighty ruler reduced to helplessness, forsaken and ill, dying among the forgotten. Yan's artistic depiction in his novel builds on this image to portray a tragic and dramatic end.

Though physically and politically diminished, Sultan Muhammad was not entirely alone. Several locals from Mazandaran provided him with food and essential supplies. According to Shihab al-Din al-Nasawi, the Sultan even requested and was supplied with a horse, perhaps to restore a fragment of dignity in his final days.

Despite having lost his throne, Ala al-Din generously distributed honorary titles and land grants to those who aided him—offering up what remained of his wealth as symbolic rewards. While such gestures carried only token authority at the time, Nasawi notes that Jalal al-Din Manguberdi, the Sultan's son and successor, later confirmed all these royal decrees and upheld his father's symbolic legacies.

Khwarazmshah left behind a large but ill-fated family: multiple wives, concubines, and children. Some of his sons were granted lands during his lifetime. However, after the royal family was captured by the Mongols, many of his young sons were executed, and his daughters and wives were divided among Mongol commanders, as was customary in their conquests. The fate of his eldest daughter remains unknown.

One of Khwarazmshah's relatives, Sayf al-Din Qutuz, would later rise to power and become Sultan of the Mamluks in Egypt (1259–1260)—a reminder that even amid devastation, fragments of royal legacy endured.

Sultan Muhammad Khwarazmshah had an unknown number of wives, concubines, and children. Following the collapse of the Khwarazmian Empire, his family was captured by the Mongols. Among his sons, the youngest—Kyumaqtishah—was executed, while his daughters and wives were distributed among the commanders and sons of Genghis Khan, as was customary during Mongol conquests.

The fate of the Sultan's eldest daughter remains unknown.

One of his paternal cousins, Sayf al-Din Qutuz, would later rise to power as Sultan of the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt, ruling briefly between 1259 and 1260, and playing a decisive role in halting Mongol expansion at the Battle of Ain Jalut.

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