

# “The Representation of the Khwarazmshah Dynasty in Ibn Khaldun’s “Tarikh Ibn Khaldun”

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to examine the representation of the Khwarazmshah Dynasty in Ibn Khaldun’s Tarikh Ibn Khaldun and analyze how the dynasty’s political, social, and cultural aspects were reflected in his historiographical framework. Using a qualitative historical method combined with content analysis, the study explores Ibn Khaldun’s narrative, his evaluation of leadership, and the rise and decline of the dynasty within the broader Islamic historical tradition. The results show that Ibn Khaldun portrayed the Khwarazmshah Dynasty both as a powerful regional authority and as an example of political fragmentation that eventually contributed to its decline. His cyclical theory of the rise and fall of states is evident in the narrative, highlighting issues such as governance, legitimacy, and military challenges. The analysis also reveals that Ibn Khaldun’s description reflects not only historical facts but also his philosophical approach to history, offering lessons on statecraft and social cohesion. In conclusion, Ibn Khaldun’s representation of the Khwarazmshah Dynasty demonstrates the integration of historical events with theoretical reflections. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Islamic historiography and provides new perspectives on how medieval Muslim scholars interpreted political dynamics in Central Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Khwarezm, Mongol Invasion, Islamic Historiography, Central Asia, transformation, governance.*

## Introduction

The Khwarazmshah Dynasty played a crucial role in the political, cultural, and military history of Central Asia during the medieval Islamic period. Emerging as a powerful regional state, the dynasty reached its peak of influence in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, before its dramatic fall under the Mongol invasions. Its legacy, however, continued to shape the historical consciousness of Muslim scholars, who sought to explain both the strengths and weaknesses of the Khwarazmshahs within broader theories of governance and statehood.

Among the scholars who reflected on the Khwarazmshah Dynasty, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) occupies a special position. As one of the most influential historians and sociologists in the Islamic world, Ibn Khaldun’s *Tarikh* (often known as *Kitab al-‘Ibar*) and his theoretical framework in the *Muqaddimah* provide not only a record of past events but also a philosophical interpretation of historical processes. His cyclical theory of the rise and fall of dynasties is particularly relevant to understanding the Khwarazmshah experience, especially regarding questions of political legitimacy, social cohesion (*‘asabiyyah*), and the dynamics of power.

Despite the importance of Ibn Khaldun's historiography, studies on how he represented specific dynasties, such as the Khwarazmshahs, remain limited. Most research tends to focus on his theoretical contributions rather than his narrative descriptions of particular historical states. Examining the representation of the Khwarazmshahs in Ibn Khaldun's work is therefore valuable for two reasons: first, it highlights how Ibn Khaldun interpreted one of the most significant dynasties of Central Asia; and second, it sheds light on the interplay between historical fact and historiographical theory in classical Islamic scholarship.

This study seeks to analyze Ibn Khaldun's representation of the Khwarazmshah Dynasty in his *Tarikh* by investigating how political, social, and cultural aspects were described, and how these fit into his broader cyclical model of dynastic rise and decline. By doing so, the research contributes to a better understanding of Islamic historiography and provides new insights into the ways medieval Muslim scholars conceptualized political power and its transformation.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach based primarily on historical-textual analysis. The main source of the research is Ibn Khaldun's *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* and its famous introduction, the *Muqaddimah*, which are examined as primary historical materials. The methodology consists of the following steps:

1. Textual Analysis – Ibn Khaldun's narratives are carefully examined in their original Arabic version in order to preserve linguistic and contextual accuracy. Key passages are translated into Uzbek and English to facilitate comparative analysis.
2. Comparative Approach – The information provided by Ibn Khaldun is compared with other medieval Muslim historians such as al-Tabari, al-Maqrizi, and Rashid al-Din. This helps to verify the reliability of his accounts and identify possible historiographical differences.
3. Contextualization – Ibn Khaldun's historical descriptions are analyzed within the broader socio-political context of the Islamic world, especially focusing on the Mongol invasion, the Khwarazmian dynasty, and the emergence of the Jochid Ulus (Golden Horde).
4. Historiographical Analysis – The research evaluates Ibn Khaldun not only as a transmitter of historical facts but also as a theorist of history. His methodology, including his concept of *ʿasabiyyah* (social cohesion), is used as an interpretive framework to understand political and social transformations.

Through this methodology, the study seeks to demonstrate both the strengths and the limitations of Ibn Khaldun's work as a primary source for the study of Islamic history.

## Result and Discussion

The Khwarazmshah period was one of the crucial turning points in the history of Central Asia[1], and this dynasty's rule lasted from the beginning of the 12th century until the early 13th century. The formation of the Khwarazmshah state was closely connected

with the weakening and decline of the Samanid and Ghaznavid states. Taking advantage of this political vacuum, a new independent political power – the Khwarazmshah state – emerged in the territory of Khwarazm. The founder of the Khwarazmshah dynasty was Anushtegin. At first, he served under the Seljuks and was appointed governor of the Khwarazm region. Later, his descendants inherited this position and gradually turned into independent rulers. In the 12th century, rulers such as Atsiz ibn Muhammad and Ala al-Din Atsiz made great efforts to strengthen the political independence of Khwarazm and to expand the territory of the state.

The capital of the Khwarazmshahs was initially Gurganj (present-day Urgench), which became one of the major economic, cultural, and trade centers. During the Khwarazmshah rule, trade developed intensively, and commercial ties with Central Asia, Iran, India, and Eastern Europe through the Silk Road were strengthened. In the cities and villages of Khwarazm, handicrafts, agriculture, and animal husbandry flourished[2].

In the 10th century, the city of Gurganj, located on the left bank of the Amu Darya, gained great economic and political importance. The main reason for this was that the city was the final point of caravan routes passing through the deserts to Siberia and southern Russia. The local Mamunid dynasty overthrew the Afrigid dynasty, whose capital was in the city of Kyat (on the right bank of the Amu Darya), in 385/995, and assumed the traditional title of Khwarazmshah for themselves. The rule of the Mamunids was short but productive. Great scholars such as the philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and the litterateur al-Tha'alibi benefited from their patronage. Although Khwarazm was formally dependent on the Samanids, in practice this dependence was hardly felt. However, in 408/1017, Mahmud of Ghazni[3], who had inherited control over Khwarazm from the Samanids, annexed it to his empire, thus bringing the Mamunid rule to an end[4].

According to the account of the eminent historian 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), Anushtegin – the eponymous ancestor of the Khwarazmshah dynasty – was originally a mamlūk (slave) in the service of one of the Seljuk amirs. He was purchased by a member of the Gharchāy lineage, and from this association he came to be known as Anushtegin Gharchāy. Having been raised with proper manners and discipline, he became a respected figure of his time. Anushtegin fathered a son, Muhammad, who, like his father, displayed intelligence and bravery. Educated in literature and the sciences, Muhammad ibn Anushtegin cultivated close ties with Seljuk elites and gained a reputation for effective governance and prudent political conduct.

When Sultan Malikshāh (r. 1072–1092) died and his son Berkyaruq assumed power, he faced opposition from his uncle Arslan Arghun, who seized Khorasan. In 490 AH / 1097 CE, Berkyaruq, together with his brother Sanjar, dispatched an army against Arslan Arghun. On their march, however, news arrived that Arslan Arghun had been killed. Subsequently, Berkyaruq traversed the provinces of Khorasan and Transoxiana, ultimately entrusting the administration of Khorasan to his brother Sanjar.

During Sanjar's governorship of Khorasan, Muhammad ibn Anushtegin retained his position as governor of Khwarazm and enjoyed increasing royal favor. On one occasion,

Khwarazm came under attack from a Turkic chieftain allied with a certain Muhammad ibn Akinji. Muhammad ibn Anushtegin appealed to Sanjar for assistance. With Sanjar's support, the defense of the city was secured, the invading force dispersed, and Muhammad's standing at Sanjar's court grew further. Once order had been restored in Khorasan, the question of Khwarazm's administration was raised. Muhammad ibn Anushtegin was formally invested with authority over the region and was granted the title of Khwarazmshah[5].

His successor, Qutb al-Dīn Muhammad (r. 1097–1127), is described in contemporary sources as a just ruler and a patron of scholars. The celebrated physician al-Jurjānī dedicated his medical compendium, *Zakhirah-yi Khwārazmshāhī*, to this ruler. Nevertheless, Qutb al-Dīn Muhammad remained unable to extricate himself from Seljuk hegemony and died while still under their suzerainty.

He was succeeded by his son, 'Alā' al-Dīn Atsiz (r. 1127–1156), who pursued an assertive and expansionist policy against his rivals. In 1138 he captured Mangyshlaq and the Syr Darya city of Jand, and in the following year took Bukhara. In so doing, Atsiz extended Khwarazm's dominions largely at the expense of the Seljuks. His reign is remembered for vigorous efforts to consolidate Khwarazm into a strong and autonomous state.

Educated in Merv under Sultan Sanjar, Atsiz was not only a capable military commander but also a cultured patron of letters and the arts. He composed poetry in Persian – including *qasīdas* and *rubā'īyyāt* – and memorized numerous verses of renowned poets. Chroniclers emphasize his care for his subjects, his commitment to justice, and his popularity among the populace. Ibn Khaldun notes that Atsiz, having already proven his military acumen under his father, began his independent rule by seizing Mangyshlaq, after which Sultan Sanjar drew him closer into his confidence. Over time, Atsiz's prestige at Sanjar's court grew considerably. Nevertheless, rumors later circulated at Sanjar's court alleging Atsiz's disobedience. In response, Sanjar campaigned against him. The ensuing battle ended in Atsiz's defeat, the death of his son, and heavy casualties among his troops. Khwarazm was temporarily annexed and placed under Sanjar's nephew, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Sulaymānshāh. However, with the support of the Khwarazmian populace, Atsiz soon regained power and reestablished his independent rule[6].

In 536 AH / 1141 CE, Sanjar embarked on a campaign against the Qataghans (Qarluq Turks) of Transoxiana. Some sources allege that Atsiz incited the Qataghans in order to distract the Sultan from Khwarazm; others attribute Sanjar's intervention to an appeal for aid from his nephew, Sulayman ibn Muhammad, Khagan of Kashgar and Turkistan. The campaign ended disastrously: Sanjar's army was defeated, with enormous losses reported, and the Qataghans temporarily occupied Transoxiana, removing it from Muslim dominion. Taking advantage of Sanjar's defeat, Atsiz moved to occupy Khorasan. He seized Sarakhs and then advanced on Merv. Initially, he accepted the intercession of scholars such as Abu Muhammad al-Ziyādī and Ahmad al-Bukhārī, sparing the city from plunder. Yet, when elements of the populace revolted against his soldiers, Atsiz laid siege to Merv. In Rabī' al-

Awwal 536 AH, he captured the city, executed many of its inhabitants, including prominent scholars, and transferred Abu Bakr al-Karmānī to Khwarazm. This sequence of events illustrates both the turbulent relations between the Khwarazmshahs and the Seljuks and the assertive policies of Atsiz, who sought to carve out autonomy for Khwarazm amidst the shifting balance of power in the Islamic East during the 12th century.

Following his campaigns in Merv, Khwarazmshah Atsiz (r. 1127–1156) advanced toward Nishapur in the month of Shawwāl. The city's scholars petitioned him to avoid a massacre similar to that of Merv, and Atsiz granted their request. Nevertheless, he confiscated the property of Sultan Sanjar's loyalists and ordered that the Friday sermon (khuṭbah) be read in his own name, effectively asserting his sovereignty. Although the populace of Nishapur contemplated rebellion, fear of retribution restrained them.

Subsequently, Atsiz dispatched forces against the district of Bihāq, which was besieged for five days before being looted. At this juncture, Sultan Sanjar, weakened and preoccupied with the incursions of the Qataghān (Oghuz) Turks, was unable to respond effectively. In 548/1153, the Oghuz inflicted a decisive defeat on Sanjar, seizing Khorasan and taking the Sultan prisoner. His capture precipitated the disintegration of Seljuk authority in the region, with territories falling under the control of various commanders and ministers[7].

During this period of Seljuk decline, Atsiz consolidated Khwarazm as an autonomous and hereditary state. Exploiting Sanjar's weakness, he extended his authority over Khorasan and parts of Iraq, laying the foundations for Khwarazmshah ascendancy. Atsiz was succeeded by his son Il-Arslān (r. 1156–1172), who formally expressed loyalty to Sultan Sanjar yet, in practice, pursued policies aimed at strengthening Khwarazm's independence. He continued the expansionist policies of his predecessors, capturing Balx, Sabzavār, and Nishapur by 1167. His growing power earned him the honorific title "Tāj al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn, Malik al-Turk wa'l-'Ajam" ("Crown of the World and Religion, King of the Turks and Persians")[8].

Upon Il-Arslān's death, his younger son Sultan-Shāh Maḥmūd ascended the throne under the regency of his mother, Turkan Khatun, while the elder son, 'Alā' al-Dīn Takash, resided in Jand. Refusing to acknowledge his brother's authority, Takash sought military support from the Qara Khitay Khagan, offering wealth and tribute in return. With Khitan forces, Takash advanced on Khwarazm, forcing Sultan-Shāh and his mother to flee to the protection of Mu'ayyad, the governor of Nishapur. Despite Mu'ayyad's military support, Takash defeated them near Khwarazm, executed Mu'ayyad, and pursued his rivals to Dehistan, where Turkan Khatun was captured and killed. Sultan-Shāh continued resistance but was ultimately displaced[9].

Takash further expanded Khwarazmshah power, subjugating Kirmān in 1195 and conducting campaigns against the Ismailis. His relations with the Abbasid Caliphate were strained, culminating in preparations for an expedition against Baghdad in 1200. However, Takash died en route at Shahrīstān, between Nishapur and Khwarazm. His body was transported to Gurganj and interred beside the madrasa he had constructed.[10]

Before his death, Takash had appointed his son Muḥammad II (r. 1200–1220) as governor of Nishapur (1193). Under Muḥammad's reign, the Khwarazmian Empire reached its zenith, both territorially and militarily. At its height, the state stretched from the Aral Sea in the north, to the Caspian in the west, Iraq and Ghazna in the south, and as far as Jetisu in the east. Muhammad II pursued an aggressive expansionist policy, first seeking to secure Herat and the remaining provinces of Khorasan. His campaigns soon targeted the Qarakhanids of Transoxiana, aiming to wrest Samarqand and Bukhara from their control. Since the defeat of Sanjar by the Qara Khitay in 1141, the Khitans had imposed heavy tribute and exactions upon the Muslim rulers of Transoxiana. Discontent with Khitan rule led the amirs of Bukhara and Samarqand to appeal to Muhammad II, offering to transfer their tribute to him in exchange for protection.

Muhammad advanced across the Oxus (Amu Darya), joined forces with the local rulers, and engaged the Qara Khitay in a prolonged series of battles. Despite initial resistance, the Muslims were ultimately defeated, and Khwarazmshah Muhammad was captured. Although rumors spread of his death, he later reemerged to continue his reign, which would culminate in Khwarazm's confrontation with the Mongols in the early 13th century.

Following the consolidation of his rule, Sultan Muhammad II sought to secure his dominion through both military expansion and dynastic arrangements. After his release from temporary captivity by the Qara Khitay — a result of a clever stratagem by his companion Amir Ibn Mas'ud, who posed as the Sultan — Muhammad returned to Khwarazm and strengthened his position by extending control over Rayy, Khorasan, and Mazandaran.

In order to regulate succession and appease rival factions at court, the Sultan divided his territories among his sons:

1. Qutb al-Dīn Uzlaqshah – designated heir, granted Khwarazm, Khorasan, and Mazandaran. His preference over the elder son Jalāl al-Dīn Mangubirdi was influenced by the political weight of Turkan Khatun, Muhammad's mother, who favored lineage ties to her own Qipchaq clan.
2. Jalāl al-Dīn Mangubirdi – assigned Ghazna, Bamiyan, Ghur, Bust, and parts of India. Despite his proven military talents, his authority was undermined by court politics.
3. Ghiyāth al-Dīn Pirshah – entrusted with Kirmān, Qays, and Makrān.
4. Rukn al-Dīn Gurshah – granted Jibāl.

This distribution, while intended to stabilize succession, in fact deepened dynastic rivalries. Court politics were further complicated by figures such as Mu'ayyad al-Mulk Qawām al-Dīn, a former servant who rose to prominence under the Sultan, notably aiding in the conquest of Kirmān and being rewarded with governorship and the honorific title Mu'ayyad al-Mulk. His wealth and loyalty to the Sultan illustrate the permeability of social mobility in the Khwarazmian court, yet his death and the reallocation of his estates to Ghiyāth al-Dīn also signaled the fragility of political favor.

The early 13th century witnessed the rise of the Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan, whose conquests transformed Eurasia. Initially, diplomatic overtures were exchanged:

Genghis Khan's envoys brought gifts and proposed a commercial treaty ensuring safe trade between the two empires. His letter addressed Muhammad II as a "beloved son," which the Sultan perceived as an insult to his sovereignty.

According to contemporary sources such as Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn al-Athīr, the Khwarazmian court mishandled these overtures. Suspicious of espionage, Muhammad's cousin Niālkhān intercepted a caravan of Mongol merchants at Otrar, accusing them of being spies. Their execution and the confiscation of their goods, sanctioned by the Sultan, provoked Genghis Khan. The killing of the Mongol envoys further escalated tensions, providing the immediate *casus belli* for invasion.

In 1219, Genghis Khan launched a massive campaign into Khwarazmian territory. Muhammad II attempted to mobilize defenses by fortifying Bukhara, Samarqand, Termiz, and Jand, and by dispersing his forces among key strongholds. Despite raising substantial revenues — equivalent to several years of taxation — his forces were ill-prepared for the highly mobile and coordinated Mongol army.

The Mongol campaign was marked by extreme brutality. Cities such as Bukhara and Samarqand were besieged and devastated, with mass executions reported. Niālkhān, the instigator of the Otrar incident, was captured and executed in a particularly gruesome manner — molten silver poured into his eyes and ears. Contemporary chroniclers, including Ibn al-Athīr, described the Mongol atrocities as unparalleled in human history, emphasizing the magnitude of destruction: "Since God created mankind, never had such calamity occurred." The Mongol invasion dismantled the political order of the Khwarazmian state. Yet, it also highlighted the fragile balance between Turkic steppe traditions and Persian bureaucratic culture within the Khwarazmian polity. While the military and administrative elite were largely Turkic, Persian remained the dominant language of literature, science, and statecraft. This dual identity contributed both to the dynamism and the internal divisions of the empire.

The fall of the Khwarazmian Empire was not merely the result of Mongol military superiority but also of internal discord, dynastic rivalries, and flawed diplomatic strategies. Sultan Muhammad II's failure to manage relations with the Mongols — particularly the Otrar incident and the execution of envoys — set in motion the catastrophic invasion. The subsequent devastation of Transoxiana and Khorasan represented not only the collapse of a powerful state but also a turning point in the history of Central Asia, ushering in a new era of Mongol hegemony.

## Conclusion

The Mongol invasion of Khwarezm and the subsequent establishment of Jochi's Ulus initiated profound political, economic, and cultural transformations. While the conquest initially brought destruction, it ultimately integrated Khwarezm into a wider Eurasian framework, laying the foundations for the later development of the Golden Horde. The legacy of this transformation is reflected in the enduring influence of Mongol governance and the reshaping of Central Asian history.

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