

Some remarks on the deaths of Mongol Khans

“Deathbed scenes” and supernatural incidents

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Introduction

The death of a medieval ruler was always an event of political and sometimes of religious importance and furthermore often a turning point in the history of a ruling dynasty or empire.¹ It is a matter of fact that it depends on the point of view of the author of a source (or the ambitions of his patron) how and what to write about the circumstances of the death of an emperor, and the way this event is described and at least evaluated – even morally.² Therefore the circumstances of the deaths of members of the ruling class were written down or kept secret by vested interests, or sometimes even embellished or manipulated by editors and later on in the historical tradition.

When describing a ruler's death there is in every culture a specific rhetoric of death or dying and meaning.³ Thus similar elements and events can be found in

¹ This paper is work in progress and reflects the current state of my research – further research is necessary.

² “Dying and death themselves were political acts, with many surviving records being apparently constructed to match certain ideals rather than to mirror reality.” Cited after: Tagungsbericht, Death at Court, 12.07.2010–14.07.2010, Greifswald, in *H-Soz-u-Kult*, 17. 11. 2010, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=3380>> [28. 02. 2011]. For death in medieval European society see: A. Patschovsky, „Tod Im Mittelalter. Eine Einführung,” in A. Borst, ed., *Der Tod im Mittelalter*. Konstanz 1993, 9–23; H. M. Schaller, „Der Kaiser stirbt,” in A. Borst, ed., *Der Tod im Mittelalter*, Konstanz 1993, 59–75. *Ibid.*, 60: “Wir wissen natürlich nicht, ob sich das Sterben unserer Kaiser und Könige jeweils genauso abgespielt hat, wie uns die Quellen erzählen. Der eine Chronist kann die Vorgänge aus politischen Gründen feindselig-verzerrt dargestellt haben, beim anderen erscheint das Sterben des Helden – im Interesse des Thronfolgers und der Dynastie – hagiographisch verklärt.” N. Ohler, *Sterben und Tod im Mittelalter*. München 1990, 51–77; P. Ariès, *Geschichte des Todes*. 10. Aufl. München 2002.

³ “[...] a certain rhetoric of death or dying was applied in the accounts of a ruler's death in every culture, often referring to his character in life rather than the immediate cir-

the sources although they have different cultural backgrounds. To exemplify this, this paper will concentrate on the following three phenomena which were often connected with the deaths of rulers in history, in our case the deaths of Mongol Khans.

(1) The "deathbed scene" in which we find the last orders of an emperor as a legitimating act of succession and therefore also a political statement.

(2) The appearance of supernatural elements as omens of an approaching death. Here, the ruler is thought to be in close connection with nature and spirits. This includes the fact that, according to the sources, the rulers themselves and/or people generally might know about the time of forthcoming death in advance.⁴

(3) The modalities of death as the final moral evaluation of the reign of an emperor - in plain English, a good life will lead to a peaceful end; an immoral life will cause mortal agony.

(1) "Deathbed scenes"

In descriptions referring to the final hours in the life of an emperor, especially when the sources are dealing with his (supposed) last will, the character of the dying ruler becomes manifest (e.g., in the last words he utters), and questions of succession are stressed. If we speak about the deaths of the Mongol Khans, first we have to deal with Genghis Khan who died in August 1227.⁵ What do the sources say, or better: what do they want us to know, about the last things the Khan did, knowing that he would die? The death of the "founder of the Mongolian *imperia*" is handed down to us in different and even contradictory ways. It seems as if the circumstances of Genghis' last hours were not known or at least of no interest to the missionaries of the Western legations. The Christian monk John of Plano Carpini (ca. 1180-1252), who travelled to Mongolia about 1245, tells us

cumstances of his death; a comprehensive comparison of these literary strategies would probably provide new insights into cultural differences." Cited after: Tagungsbericht, *Death at Court*.

⁴ In traditional belief, European kings knew about their death in advance. E.g. Schaller, *Der Kaiser stirbt*, 62. Sources listed in: *Ibid.*, 71., n. 13.

⁵ Cf. P. Pelliot, *Notes sur Marco Polo I*, Paris 1959, 305-330; E. Haerisch, „Die letzten Feldzüge Cinggis Khan's und sein Tod. Nach der ostasiatischen Überlieferung," *Asia Maior* 9 (1933), 503-551; D. C. Wright, "The Death of Chinggis Khan in Mongolian, Chinese, Persian, and European Sources," in Á. Berta, ed., *Historical and linguistic interaction between Inner-Asia and Europe*, Proceedings of the 39th PIAC, Szeged, Hungary, June 16-21, 1996), Szeged 1997, 425-433; Yu. I. Drobyshev, "Funeral and memorial rituals of the medieval Mongols and their underlying worldview," *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 45:1 (2006), 65-92; B.-O. Bold, "Death and burial of Chinggis Khan," *Central Asian Survey* 19:1 (2000), 95-115. J. Steiner, "'Empfange und Du wirst einen Sohn gebären, welcher der Herrscher über die Erde werden wird...'" Vorstellungen über Geburt und Tod Tschinggis Khans," *Chronica* 7-8 (2007-2008), 227-232.

for example that Genghis Khan enacted several laws, and after this he was struck by lightning.⁶

In the so-called *Secret History*, which is the contemporary Mongolian account of the rise of Genghis Khan, it is told that the Khan was hurt in a riding accident, but nevertheless he wanted to take his revenge for a treachery – even, as it is quoted, if he should die.⁷ His state of health grew worse, but he kept his promise and annihilated the Tangut people. After this action, he died.⁸ In contrast to this, the Persian historian Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318) records the command of Genghis Khan to vanquish the enemy. He writes that Genghis Khan's illness grew worse, the Khan knew that he was going to die and thus gave his last orders, namely, that the enemy must not know about his death, but when they surrendered, all should be killed. After this command Genghis Khan died "by reason of that condition which no mortal can escape".⁹

Descriptions of dying emperors often focus on "deathbed scenes" in which the ruler gives advice and admonitions to his sons or heirs and in which he arranges his succession.¹⁰ Therefore the dying and death of a ruler were also political acts and of political interest.¹¹ Armenian chronicles relate Genghis Khan's deathbed scene in detail, with a focus on these matters of royal advice and legacy. The Armenian Hayton of Corycus (1245–1316), whose work is rather pro-Mongol, wrote of Genghis Khan's death about 80 years after the event. His records indicate that Genghis became ill "by the will of God" and the doctors were not able to cure him. For this reason, Genghis met his twelve sons and admonished them that they should always be unanimous. He told them that one arrow can be broken easily, but if they should stay together – like a bunch of arrows – no one would be able to besiege them, just as no one, not even the strongest man, is able to break a bunch of arrows. This story is one that recurs in the *Secret History*, it is not origi-

⁶ J. Gießauf, *Die Mongolengeschichte des Johannes von Piano Carpine*. Einführung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar. Graz 1995, chap. V, 19, 98; see also: C. de Bridia, "The Tartar Relation". Edited, with introduction, translation, and commentary, by G. D. Painter, in Skelton, Marston and Painter, eds., *The Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation*. New Haven CT and London 1965, § 16, 67.

⁷ M. Taube, ed., *Die Geheime Geschichte der Mongolen*. Aus dem Mongolischen übertragen und kommentiert. München 1989, § 265, 198.

⁸ Taube, *Geheime Geschichte* § 268, 200. See also F. E. A. Krause, *Chingis Han. Die Geschichte seines Lebens nach den chinesischen Reichsannalen*. (= Heidelberger Akten der von-Portheim-Stiftung 2). Heidelberg 1922, fol. 22a-b, 40.

⁹ J. A. Boyle, ed., *Rashīd al-Dīn, The Successors of Genghis Khan*. Translated from the Persian of Rashīd al-Dīn. New York–London 1971, 29.

¹⁰ Cf. the deaths of European emperors, based on a Christian background. E.g. Charles the Great, d. 814 (*Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni*); Louis IX, d. 1270 (Jean de Joinville, *Vie de Saint Loius*). Further comparison analysis might be valuable.

¹¹ It is obvious that "Before eventual death, most nobles would have made provision for their inheritance, both political and material, by drafting a will. Dying and death itself were political acts, with many surviving records being apparently constructed to match certain ideals rather than to mirror reality." Cited after: Tagungsbericht, *Death at Court*.

nal to Genghis Khan.¹² The dying emperor then passed on many other good examples and laws, and named his son Ögedei – said to be the “wisest” and “best” of his sons – Khan. After he had done all this, he died in peace.¹³

According to the *Secret History*, on the other hand, the decision to translate the empire to the third son of Genghis, Ögedei, happened a long time before Genghis Khan’s death. One of Genghis Khan’s wives had urged him to think of an heir before he went on a military campaign. In this narration, which is very detailed, Genghis Khan seemed to be in favor of his oldest son Jochi, but his other sons didn’t agree with this decision. Tschagatai even named his brother Jochi “a bastard of the Merkit” (because Jochi was born some time after Genghis Khan’s wife Börte had been kidnapped by the Merkit) and they started to quarrel. Some speeches were made and then the situation calmed down. Finally Genghis Khan decided that Ögedei should be his heir.¹⁴

The literary compilation of wise words, succession plan and “deathbed scene” of Genghis Khan is also delivered in the *History of Armenia* by the Armenian Kirakos of Gandzak (ca. 1200–1271) who wrote this opus between 1241 and 1265. Kirakos mentions that Genghis summoned his troops and his three sons and told them – while dying – “the entire truth” about their characters. After that he ordered his people to prostrate themselves in front of their favorite: “They approached the youngest [*sic*], whose name was Ögedei-Khan (Hok’ta) and bowed to the ground before him. His father placed the crown on his head and then died.”¹⁵

Also in the *History of the World Conqueror*, which was written in the middle of the thirteenth century by the Persian historian and official of the Ilkhans, Juvaini

¹² In the *Secret History* this parable is narrated by female ancestors of Genghis, namely Alan Qo’a (Taube, *Geheime Geschichte*, § 19, 8) and Genghis Khan’s mother, Ho’elün, in order to convince her sons to be unanimous (*Ibid.*, § 76, 25).

¹³ W. Baum, ed., *Hethum von Korykos. Geschichte der Mongolen*. Übersetzt von R. Senoner. Klagenfurt; Wien 2006, 51; John Mandeville, who was copying in his work parts of Hayton, relates the same story: Ch. Buggisch, ed., *Reisen des Ritters John Mandeville. Vom Heiligen Land ins ferne Asien 1322–1356*. Lenningen 2004, 227.; Rashid al-Din recorded that only two of Genghis Khan’s sons, namely Ögedei and Tolui, were at the scene, while Juvaini counts six of them. Cf. J. A. Boyle, ed., *Ala ad-Din `Ata Malik Juvaini, Genghis Khan. The History of the World Conqueror*. Translated from the text of Mizra Muhammad Qazvini by J. A. Boyle with a new introduction and bibliography by D. A. Morgan. Manchester 1997 (henceforth: Boyle, *Juvaini*), 180.

¹⁴ Taube, *Geheime Geschichte*, § 254., 183–190.

¹⁵ Kirakos cited after: Kirakos Ganjakets’i’s *History of the Armenians*. Translated from Classical Armenian by R. Bedrosian. Online: <<http://rbedrosian.com/kg8.htm>> [28. 02. 2011]; For the Latin text and the French translation see: S. Dörper, ed. *Die Geschichte der Mongolen des Hethum von Korykos (1307) in der Rückübersetzung durch Jean de Long, Traitez des estas et des conditions de quatorze royaumes de Aise (1351)*. Kritische Edition mit parallelem Abdruck des lateinischen Manuskriptes Wrocław, Bibliotheka Uniwersytecka R 262. Frankfurt am Main et al. 1998 (= Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe XIII: Französische Sprache und Kultur), 248; On the death of Genghis Khan see also: Jean-Paul Roux, *Histoire de L’Empire Mongol*. Paris 1993, 234.

(1226–1283), the matter of succession is stressed. Juvainī states that Genghis Khan, after he had purged a whole region “of the evilness of his enemies”, was overcome by an incurable disease arising from the insalubrity of the climate.¹⁶ This source again records that Genghis sent for his sons, knowing of his approaching death, and told them, “The severity of my illness is greater than can be cured by treatment, and, of a truth, one of you must defend the throne and the power of the State and raise up the pedestal which has received so strong foundation.”¹⁷ He told them the parable of a snake with many heads, to demonstrate the necessity of one leader, whom they should obey after his death.¹⁸ To quote Genghis Khan in the account of Juvainī again,

“But if there is no leader among you, to whose counsel the other brothers, and sons, and helpmeets, and companions submit themselves and to whose command they yield obedience, then your case will be like unto that of the snake of many heads. One night, when it was bitterly cold, the heads desired to creep into a hole in order to ward off the chill. But as each head entered the hole another head would oppose it; and in this way they all perished. But another snake, which had but one head and a long tail, entered the hole and found room for this tail and all his limbs and members, which were preserved from the fury of cold.”¹⁹

Then he wished that Ögedei should be his heir. “All Ögetei’s brothers obeyed his commandment and made a statement in writing. Chingiz-Khan’s illness grew worse, and it being impossible to remove him from where he was he passed away.”²⁰

This scene, in which Ögedei is acknowledged to be Genghis Khan’s heir, is crucial in the question of succession within the Genghisid family. The claims to rule made by different branches of the family would eventually lead to the decline of the Mongol Empire.

It is very interesting that the same act of a “deathbed scene”, where questions of succession are solved by a dying Khan and therefore the future of the empire is saved, is also told about Kubilai Khan²¹ by the Persian historian and official of the Ilkhans, Wassāf (fl. 1299–1323). He wrote his history (*The Allocation of Cities and*

¹⁶ Boyle, *Juvainī*, 180. See also Taube, *Geheime Geschichte*, § 266. Cf. Boyle, *Juvainī* (p. 181 note 7), who notes that according to Rashid al-Dīn this interview took place in spring 1227, whereas Genghis died in August, and only Ögedei and Tolui were present.

¹⁷ Boyle, *Juvainī*, 180f.

¹⁸ The fables of the arrows and the snake with many heads are given in Boyle, *Juvainī*, 41. Cf. also 41, note 7. The lection with the arrows, in order to “advice and instruct them each” can also be found in, 593. There it is said that Genghis told this story “at the first rising to power”.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183.

²¹ Concerning the death of Kublai cf. Roux, *Histoire*, 416.; Morris Rossabi, *Kublai Khan. His Life and Times*. London 1988, 225.

the *Propulsion of Epochs*) as a continuation of Juvainī (whose work ended in 1257). Wassāf writes that Kubilai knew that he would die and because of this knowledge he called for the members of his government. When they were assembled, he told them that he would die and suggested they vote for Temür as the new Khan and his heir, which was granted unanimously. After having solved the problem of succession without any conflict, the “fair-minded Khan” met his end calmly, and to quote Wassāf – “only his good name remained”.²²

The history of Yüan, *Yüan Shih*, which was compiled by official historians of the Ming Dynasty (in 1370), describes the last hours before Genghis Khan died with a different emphasis, as a series of military orders. Here too Genghis felt that his death was near and because of this he assembled and spoke to his trusted men. However, in this narrative, Genghis gives his combatants orders about their military situation and further strategies. The description of the strategic advice is very detailed. After Genghis Khan had uttered his strategy, he died. In this account, Genghis’ last deeds and sorrows are only concerned with military campaigns, he is depicted as a military genius with knowledge of his own death and of future events.²³

A final example is a source which is in contrast to those mentioned above in being tendentiously anti-Mongol: in his *Tabaqāt-i Nāsiri* (finished in 1260), Jūzjānī describes the circumstances of Genghis Khan’s death in a compromising way. He describes Genghis Khan as “adept in magic and deception, and some of the devils were his friends”.²⁴ Jūzjānī writes of a prophecy²⁵ which was spoken by another ruler named Tingri Khan, who, knowing that Genghis Khan would kill him, sent a message to the latter, saying that he had never done anything against Genghis Khan and that therefore he did not deserve such a death. Tingri prophesied that when he was executed, his blood would flow as white as milk, and Genghis Khan would die within three days. Genghis just laughed at this and put Tingri Khan to death. Then “Chingiz Khān, the accursed, [...] when he saw that the occurrence was actually so, it struck his heart, and his strength forsook him; and, on the third day, his heart broke, and he went to hell”.²⁶ Before he died he requested that all of Tingri Khan’s people should be slaughtered and that his heir should be Ögedei Khan who indeed then fulfilled the last wish of his father.

Jūzjānī makes clear that Genghis Khan’s invasion of the kingdom of Tingri Khan was “perfidious” and “contrary to the covenant”. It was Genghis who had

²² J. Hammer-Purgstall, ed., *Geschichte Wassafs*. Persisch herausgegeben und deutsch übersetzt von Hammer-Purgstall, I. Band. Wien 1856, 46.

²³ Krause, *Reichsannalen*, fol. 22 a–22b, 40.

²⁴ H. G. Raverty, ed., *Abu Umar Usman ibn Muhammad al-Minhaj-e-Siraj al Juzjani: Tabakat-i-Nasiri: A General History of the Muhammadan Dynasties of Asia, Including Hindustan, from A.H. 194 (810 A.D.) to A.H. 658 (1260 A.D.) and the Irruption of the Infidel Mughals into Islam*. 2 vols. New-Delhi 1970, 1077. Cf. also *Ibid.*, 954 and n. 8, 1078.

²⁵ Raverty criticizes this episode as a “childish fable [...] much after the fashion” of Sa-gang Setschen. Cf. Raverty, *Juzjani*, n. 3, 1085.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1096.

broken an existing agreement and therefore he had to meet his death (as a cursed emperor).²⁷

(2) Forebodings and omens of death

In sources across different cultural backgrounds, we find stories that deal with omens of death, like supernatural beings, which occur before a ruler or an important person is to die. It was believed that kings – in our case Khans – were closer to heaven than ordinary people and that they were under heaven's special protection.²⁸ This led to the belief that the occurrence of certain natural phenomena was in a causal connection with an important event or person.²⁹ In the sources, natural phenomena which are more or less random occurrences were interpreted and connected with incidents which happened almost at the same time to human beings. In medieval sources, natural phenomena like earthquakes, solar eclipses and comets signify something; they must make sense as a *conditio sine qua non*.

Based on such beliefs, the sources claim that rulers knew about the time of their death, especially because of auguries. Some stories dealing with misgivings in connection with the death of a person are also handed down regarding Mongol Khans.

2.1 Genghis Khan and the unicorn

Again, we have to start with Genghis Khan. The *Yüan Shih* relates that in a campaign against the East (which may have happened in the year 1224) Genghis Khan caught sight of a unicorn.³⁰ On that account he commanded his army to withdraw, because he believed that this must be an ill omen. The unicorn omen is also told in the seventeenth-century chronicle *Erdeni-yin tobči* by Sagang Sečen.³¹ In this later version of the story, the unicorn bows, bending its knees three times, in front of Genghis. The astonished emperor asks himself what this could have meant and comes to the conclusion that his father, the god Tengri, may have sent him a warning. The mythological unicorn appears – according to Chinese tradi-

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cf. A. Sárközi, "Mandate of Heaven. Heavenly Support of the Mongol Ruler," in B. Kellner-Henkele, ed., *Altaica Berolinensa*. Wiesbaden 1993, 215–221.

²⁹ E.g. Leila Bargmann, „Der Tod Friedrichs I. im Spiegel der Quellenüberlieferung,“ in: *Concilium medii aevi* 13 (2010), 234: *Die kausale Verknüpfung des Zwischenfalls mit dem Tod des Kaisers erfolgt [...] erst retrospektiv. Die Frage nach der Funktion dieser Vorzeichen führt zu den Grundlagen des Phänomens*. Online: <http://cma.gbv.de/dr,cma,013,2010,a,09.pdf> [28. 02. 2011].

³⁰ Krause, *Reichsannalen*, fol. 21a, 39.

³¹ Sagang Sečen, *Geschichte der Mongolen und ihres Fürstenhauses*. Aus dem Mongolischen übersetzt von I. J. Schmidt. Neu herausgegeben und mit einem Vorwort versehen von W. Heissig. Zürich 1985, 116. The unicorn story is also given in Chinese accounts, where the unicorn is a green colored beast, speaking four foreign languages. Cf. *Ibid.*, n. 48, 469. According to Haenisch, Ghengis Khan never took part in such a military campaign: Haenisch, *Die letzten Feldzüge*, 543.

tion – only when wise and fair kings rule, it is an omen.³² For example, it is told that a unicorn appeared when Confucius (551–479 BC) was born, and just before his death the unicorn was seen again.³³

2.2 Ögedei Khan and the wolf

We also find omens of the approaching death of Ögedei Khan in the sources. The Persian historian Juvainī narrates that a man came to Ögedei Khan and told him that a wolf fell upon a flock of sheep and killed many of them. The Khan wanted to know where the wolf had gone. At the same time a wolf with its jaws bound was brought to the Court and the Khan bought the wolf in order to set it free, saying that no one would have an advantage or benefit if the wolf were killed.

“We will release this wolf so that he can inform his friends of what has happened and they may leave this region.” When they released the wolf the lion-like hounds of the dog-keepers ran after it and tore it to pieces. Qa’an was angry and ordered the dogs to be put to death for killing the wolf. He entered the *ordu* in a pensive and melancholic state of mind and turning to his ministers and courtiers he said: “I set that wolf free because I felt a weakness in my bowels and I thought that if I saved a living creature from destruction God Almighty would grant that I too should be spared. Since the wolf did not escape from the dogs, neither perhaps shall I come forth from this danger.” A few days later he passed away. Now it is not concealed from the wise and discriminating that kings are snatched up and carried off by God and that they receive divine inspiration.³⁴

The same story is told by Rashid al-Dīn in a similar way.³⁵

³² According to the Chinese “bamboo annals”, the first sighting of it was at the time of Huang-ti. The Chinese unicorn has the body of a deer, the hooves of a horse, the tail of an ox and one single horn. It does not eat other beings and would not even harm the growing grass with its feet. After: H. Mode, *Fabeltiere und Dämonen. Die Welt der phantastischen Wesen*. Leipzig 2005, 177. Cf. also *Lexikon des Mittelalters* 3, Stuttgart; Weimar 1999 (henceforth: *LexMA*), s.v. „Einhorn“, 1741f; *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* 2, Berlin and New York 1987 (henceforth: *HWBdda*), s.v. „Einhorn“, 708–712.

³³ J. Cherry (ed.), *Fabeltiere. Von Drachen, Einhörnern und anderen mythischen Wesen*. Stuttgart 1997, 101.

³⁴ Boyle, *Juvainī*, 231–233.

³⁵ Boyle, *Rashīd*, 92–93. The story is also given in Roux, *Histoire*, 301. Both versions of the story as given in Juvainī and Rashīd are – in the translation of John Andrew Boyle – very similar, except for some small details. E.g. Ögedei Khan is quoted in Juvainī as saying: “neither perhaps shall I come forth from this danger”, but Rashīd cites him with: “neither surely shall I come forth from this danger”. Also the last sentence is different, when Juvainī states: “Now it is not concealed from the wise and discriminating that kings are snatched up and carried off by God and that they receive divine inspiration”, Rashīd tells us that “it is not concealed that kings are raised up by divine aid and receive inspirations and so are aware of [future] events”.

This anecdote is interesting on several levels. First, the wolf is a totem of the ancestors of Genghis Khan, as it is told in the *Secret History*.³⁶ Ögedei is weak and feels the coming of death. In consequence of this knowledge, he tries to save his life through sparing the life of the wolf, which is a creature with a close relationship to heaven. But the wolf gets torn to pieces by the dogs and Ögedei's opportunity which could have saved him is obviously gone. The protection of heaven has left the Khan.

Second, Rashīd al-Dīn and Juvainī write, that they believe – like “the wise and discriminating” men – that signs and “divine inspiration” do exist, as Rashīd says: kings “are aware of [future] events”.³⁷

Third, it seems that the sparing of life is regarded as an instrument to cheat one's own death or at least to influence the date of death through extending life. Another example of this belief is given in the *Yüan Shih*, where it is related that Ögedei became ill when he was hunting. Therefore he ordered all his prisoners and slaves to be set free. According to this source, due to this amnesty the Khan's health improved and he was once again able to attend a great hunt. One of his favorites sent him a huge amount of wine, Ögedei Khan was very pleased about it and drank until midnight. He died in the morning.³⁸

In another story, Ögedei Khan's life was spared due to the self sacrifice of his brother Tolui (d. 1233) – a story which includes a large political dimension concerning the succession within the different branches of the Genghisid family.³⁹

³⁶ Taube, *Geheime Geschichte*, § 1, 5. See also Roux, *Histoire*, 301; P. Poucha, „Zum Stamm-
baum Tschingis Chan,“ in J. Schubert and U. Schneider, eds., *Asiatica. Festschrift Friedrich Weller*. Zum 65. Geburtstag gewidmet von seinen Freunden, Kollegen und Schülern. Leipzig 1954, 445. On myths of the wolf and the crow in Central Asia, cf. Namu Jila, “Myths and Traditional Beliefs about the Wolf and the Crow in Central Asia. Examples from the Turkic Wu-Sun and the Mongols,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, 65:2 (2006), 161-177. Although for the Qipchaq, cf. P. B. Golden, “Wolves, Dogs and Qipčaq Religion,” in P. Golden, ed., *Nomads and their Neighbours in the Russian Steppe. Turks, Khazars and Qipchaqs*, Variorum Collected Studies Series CS752. Aldershot 2003, 87-93.

³⁷ Boyle, *Rashīd*, 93.

³⁸ W. Abramowski, „Die chinesischen Reichsannalen von Ögödei und Güyük. Übersetzung des 2. Kapitels des Yüan-shih,“ in *Zentral Asiatische Studien* 10 (1976) chap. 2, 134. Rashīd al-Dīn also tells us that excessive drinking was the reason of Ögedei's illness. Cf. Boyle, *Rashīd* [*Account of Qa'an's illness and death*], 65-67; On a rumour that Ögedei had been poisoned, see: *Ibid.* 66, n. 239; Gießauf, *Carpini*, chap. VIII, 5, 108 and chap. IX, 36, 119. It is said, that Ögedei died before Güyük could reach him. Cf. Boyle, *Rashīd*, 180.

³⁹ Cf. G. Humble, “The curiously idealized death of Tolui: a political assessment of the accounts in the *Secret History* of the Mongols and the *Jāmi'ut-Tawārikh*”. Dissertation, University of Leeds 2009; Summary online available: http://leeds.academia.edu/GeoffHumble/Talks/21708/A_Princely_sacrifice_The_Death_of_Tolui_in_Imperial [27. 02. 2011]; C. R. Bawden, “The supernatural element in sickness and death according to Mongol tradition. Part I,” *Asia Maior* 8:2 (1960), 215-257, and C. R. Bawden, “The supernatural element in sickness and death according to Mongol tradition. Part II,” *Asia Maior* 9:2 (1962), 153-178.

2.3 Hülegü Khan and the comet

The Ilkhan Hülegü (1215–1265)⁴⁰ was a grandson of Genghis, a son of Tolui and brother of Möngke Khan and Khubilai Khan. He died on February 8, 1265, after feasting and taking a bath, perhaps because of epilepsy, when he was about 48 years old.⁴¹

Armenian sources which deal with Mongolian history for 1264 refer to the appearance of a huge comet and/or the death of Hülegü and his wife in the following year. For example, Hayton (ca. 1245–after 1316) mentions in his *Flos historiarum terre orientis*, which was written about forty years after Hülegü's death, that after Hülegü had raised an army, he became ill and after fifteen days in bed, he died.⁴² However, Grigor of Akner (ca. 1200–1271), who wrote his *History of the Nation of the Archers* between 1241 and 1265, combines the two elements of the appearance of a comet and the death of Hülegü in a new, meaningful way – here, Hülegü immediately understands that the sign applied to him.

“During these days a comet appeared. It first rose in the morning of the Sabbath day of the Feast of the Tabernacle. From day to day the star's rays and beams increased. At first it appeared in the morning, then a little later it came in the hour of the noon meal and then rose. As the days went on, it appeared in the evening, and at the eleventh hour of the day its rays like hair reached from the east into the center of our country. It increased its hairlike rays till it seemed very terrible to all the country, because they never had seen such a terrible portent on the earth. Thus increasing its broad and huge rays it remained until the beginning of the winter months. Then just as it increased so little by little, it decreased, day by day, till all of the rays of its tail were shortened and it appeared no more. Then Hulawu Ğan, when he saw it, knew at once that this star appeared in regard to him [lit. me]. He cast himself on his face and prostrated himself before God, for he was very much frightened when the rays of the star began to lessen. All the world knew that the star's rays extended as far as the horse of Hulawu Ğan had gone and as far as he had conquered the earth. Then it disappeared. Hulawu Ğan lived one more year, then he departed from the world leaving behind him thirty sons. In the same year that Hulawu Ğan died his good wife

⁴⁰ *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “Hulāgu Khan” (R. Amitai). Online: <http://www.iranica-online.org/articles/hulagu-khan> [28. 02. 2011].

⁴¹ B. Spuler, *Die Mongolen im Iran*, Berlin 1985, 59. Sources are given in *ibid.*, n. 121.

⁴² Baum, *Hethum*, 68.

Tawvus Xat'un also passed away. All of the Christians were very much grieved by her death."⁴³

Throughout history and in different cultures in most cases the appearance of a comet has been interpreted with misgiving.⁴⁴ Not only comets, but also other forebodings (earthquakes, solar eclipses etc.), related to the death of kings are well known in ancient and medieval sources.⁴⁵

The comet which appeared in 1264 is also mentioned in European sources, where it is not linked with the death of the Mongol Khan Hülegü but with the death of another "ruler" – namely Pope Urban IV (d. October 2, 1264). As for the medieval central European sources, the situation is similar to the case of the Armenian sources regarding the comet and the death of Hülegü. Some medieval European sources just mention the death of the pope,⁴⁶ or mention both the death of the pope and the appearance of the comet but do not explicitly combine these two events.⁴⁷ In other sources, however, the relation between the comet and an important happening, in this case the death of the pope, is obvious. For instance, it is also mentioned that the comet vanished after Urban IV had died.⁴⁸

⁴³ *History of the Nation of the Archers (the Mongols) by Grigor of Akanc'. Hitherto ascribed to Mayak'ia the Monk.* The Armenian Text with an English Translation and Notes by R. P. Blake and R. N. Frye, Cambridge 1954, 351.

⁴⁴ Cf. *LexMA*, vol. 5, Stuttgart and Weimar 1999, s.v. "Kometen", 1276f.; *HWBddA*, vol. 5, 1987, s.v. "Komet", 89–170.

⁴⁵ A famous comet (*sidus Iulium*) appeared after Caesar's assassination. Cf. Sueton, Caesar, 88. The comet can also be found in *William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*, 2, 2: [Calpurnia:] "When beggars die there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes". Comets also appeared at the death of other Roman emperors: e.g. Augustus: Cassius Dio 56, 29; Claudius: Sueton, Claudius 46; Nero: Tacitus, *Annales* XIV, 22,1: "*Inter quae sidus cometes effulsit, de quo vulgi opinio es, tamquam mutationem regis portendat*"; Vespasian: Cassius Dio 66, 17,2 and Sueton, Vespasian 23, which jokes that the comet with its hairy tale can hardly be an omen for Vespasian, who was bald, therefore it must be a sign for the king of the Parthians who used to wear their hair long. After: *HWBddA*, vol. 5, 1987, s.v. „Komet", 97, n. 53. For the Middle Ages, in which different omens are mentioned, see e.g. the Einhard's biography on Karl the Great (*Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni*) 32. See also the Bayeux Tapestry, where Halley's Comet is shown, which might indicate the imminent death of King Harold (d. 14 October, 1066).

⁴⁶ Cf. *Annales Ianuenses annorum 1249–1264*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores* (henceforth: *MGH SS*) XVIII, 248: "*Urbanus papa IV mense ... obit morte et sepultus fuit ad Perusium.*"

⁴⁷ Cf. *Annales Parmenses Maiores*, in: *MGH SS* XVIII, 678: "*Et illo anno [1264] obiit dominus Urbanus papa IV. de mense Septembris. Et eodem anno aparuit in celo una stella longa, habens caudam longham per unam vel duos perticas, que videbatur quasi fumus*"; *Annales Urbeveterani*, in: *MGH SS* XVIII Hannoverae 1963, 270: "*Eodem anno [1264] papa Urbanus recessit de Urbeveteri, et mortuus est in via. Eodem anno apparuit cometa in parte orientali, et duravit mense Iulii, Augusti et Septembris.*"

⁴⁸ Notae S. Georgii Mediolanus, in: *MGH SS* XVIII, 389: 8. Kal. Iul. 1264 [24 April, 1264] "*apparuit stella caudata in ahere quasi mortua, que apparuit per duos menses, et infra annum*

2.4 Abaqa and the crow

In the case of Hülegü's son, the second Il-khan Abaqa (1234–April 1, 1282)⁴⁹ we find an animal symbolizing the approaching death of the emperor, namely a crow.⁵⁰ In many cultures, a crow is said to have a close relationship with death, being a messenger of death as well as a collector of souls.⁵¹

It is said that Il-khan Abaqa was a drunkard, which caused his death.⁵² Rashīd al-Dīn, who was in the service of Abaqa, describes the situation before Abaqa's demise happened. One day Abaqa was drunk again and in his intoxication he be-

mortuus est papa [...]. The story of the comet which causes the death of Urban IV is also given in the famous German fifteenth-century *Weltchronik* by Hartmann Schedel: "Nach der gepurt cristi tausent zwayhundert.lxiii. iar erschine ein mercklicher großer comet. Vber drey monat vom(m) auffgang bis in das mittel des hymels steygende vnd sein stryten gein dem nydergang streckende. v(o)n in (der) nacht darin(en) Vrbanus starb ho*ret diser comet auff zescheynen". Cited after: Hartmann Schedel, *Weltchronik*. Kolorierte Gesamtausgabe von 1493. Einleitung und Kommentar von Stephan Füssel. Augsburg 2005, CCXIII, verso: The belief that a comet signals the death of a ruler can also be found in Schedel's *Weltchronik* on different occasions, cf. *ibid.* CCXXII, verso – death of Philip IV of France (1314) and CCXXV recto – death of Louis IV, Holy Roman Emperor (1347). In the last case the appearance of the comet also causes famine and an increase in prices; *Die Chronik des Salimbene von Parma*, nach der Ausgabe der MGH bearbeitet von Alfred Doren, 2 Bde. (= Geschichtsschreiber der deutschen Vorzeit 93). Leipzig 1914, 272: "Unter allen bedeutenden Sternerscheinungen aber ragte die hervor, die unter Papst Urban IV. sich der ganzen Welt offenbarte. Denn im Jahre, da er starb, erschien, am Fest des heiligen Apollinaris [July 23, 1264], ein Komet am Himmel in Form einer Fackel und währte bis zum Tode des Papstes [October 2, 1264]". In the *Annales Placentini Gibellini* we find – besides the description of the comet – also a prophecy: "Aug. Eodem anno [1264] de mense Augusti aparuit stela versus orientem cum cauda magna et ibat versus occidentem; et oriebatur ipsa stela circa horam matutinam, et duravit bene per tres edomatas, de qua scriptum est, ut infra legitur: Visa fuit stela, designans plurima bella. / Omen erit guere, mors et destrucio terre. / Marte perit Grecus, Ligurum undique cetus. / Regnum mutatur, Sciculus Kalabrusque fugatur, / Francia lectatur [recte: laetatur], demum devicta nectatur [recte: necatur] / Tartarus adveniet, lis Rome maxima fiet. / Tartarus aratur, sic orbis pacificatur." After: *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, A. 1263–1265, in: MGH SS XVIII, 514.

⁴⁹ P. Jackson, "Abaqa" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/abaqa> [accessed February 28, 2011].

⁵⁰ "Ad Tod verkündende Zeichen bei den Türkstämmen": N. Th. Katanoff, „Über die Bestattungsgebräuche bei den Türkstämmen Central- und Ostasiens." *Keleti Szemle* 1 (1900). reprinted in *Indiana University Publications of Uralic and Altaic Studies* 66/1 (1966), 285.

⁵¹ Cf. *LexMA*, vol. 7 (1999), 381f. s.v. „Rabe" and *LexMA*, vol. 5, 1464f. s.v. „Krähe"; *HWBddA*, vol. 7, Berlin; Leipzig (1935/36), 427–457, s.v. „Rabe" and *HWBddA*, vol. 5 (1987), Berlin and New York, 352–370, s.v. „Krähe".

⁵² B. Spuler, *Geschichte der Islamischen Länder*. Ein Überblick. II. Die Mongolenzeit. Berlin 1948, 30. It is well known that many Mongol Khans consumed a great deal of alcohol, which is also noticed in medieval sources: Cf. e.g. Painter, *Bridia*, § 54, 96; See also: Spuler, *Mongolen im Iran*, 369. Genghis Khan was aware of the problems caused by excessive drinking. P. Ratchnevsky, *Činggis-Khan. Sein Leben und Wirken*. Wiesbaden 1983, 168.

lieved he saw a huge black crow. The Khan ordered his guards to shoot at the crow, but his servants could not even see the bird.⁵³ The Persian historian Wassāf (fl. 1299–1323) tells us the same story and introduces the bird as the crow of death. In Wassāf's tale the crow even speaks in a poem to the ill Abaqa about the death of a king. The Khan recognizes that the "crow wants his soul" and therefore he gives orders to scare the crow away, but after the crow has vanished, he loses consciousness and dies.⁵⁴

If this story is based on a real occurrence, the appearance of the crow might indicate that Abaqa had a hallucination because of his intoxication, or that he was in a state of *delirium tremens*⁵⁵ which is a withdrawal symptom and makes people believe they see not only white mice but also black animals such as black birds.

(3) Modalities of death as the final moral evaluation or, to live and let die – a matter of opinion

The deaths of emperors are often described according to the way they lived their lives. This means that if a ruler was – in the eyes of his biographer – a good and wise emperor, or if someone wished that the king should be known after his death as good ruler and that he had lived in a moral way, then he died in a nice way. On the contrary, an unloved ruler deserved a "bad death".⁵⁶

A good example is the description of the death of Ögedei's son Güyük (1206–April 1248)⁵⁷ in the work of Jūzjānī, who, as already mentioned, did not favor the Mongols. He tells us about the death of the third Great Khan in a chapter titled "The decease of Güyük, the accursed". Jūzjānī states that Güyük preferred the religion of Christ and oppressed the Muslims – and therefore he died. He tells us that one day a discussion on the different religions was held before Güyük. An imām spoke about his religion and was then ordered to pray in front of the Khan to prove his religion. Jūzjānī writes:

"When, in the act of prostration, he [the imām] placed his forehead to the ground, some individuals among the infidels, whom Kyuk had introduced and prompted, greatly annoyed that godly Imām,

⁵³ German translation of Rashīd al-Dīn in: B. Spuler, *Geschichte der Mongolen nach östlichen und europäischen Zeugnissen des 13. und 14. Jahrhunderts*. Zürich and Stuttgart 1968, 152.

⁵⁴ Hammer-Purgstall, *Wassaf*, 200.

⁵⁵ Jackson, "Abaqa".

⁵⁶ This was also the case for "normal" people. Cf. A. Borst, *Lebensformen im Mittelalter*. 2. Aufl. Berlin 1999, 126.

⁵⁷ Cf. Boyle, *Juvainī*, 248–262; Boyle, *Rashīd*, 175–185; P. Jackson, "Güyük Khan", in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online: <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/gyk-khan>> [accessed February 28, 2011]. E. Blochet, "La mort du Khaghan Kouyouk," *Revue de l'orient chrétien* 3:23 (1922–23), 160–171, Also online available: <http://www.catholicapedia.net/Documents/Revue-de-l.Orient-chretien/23-1922.1923_revue-de-l.orient-ch_paris.pdf> [accessed February 27, 2011]; H. Kim, "A reappraisal of Güyük Khan," in R. Amitai and M. Biran, ed., *Mongols, Turks and Others* (Inner Asian Library 1). Leiden and Boston MA, 2005, 331.; Roux, *Histoire*, 321.

and the other Musalmān who had followed him [in praying], [they] knocked their heads with force against the ground, and committed other unbecoming actions towards them, in order that, thereby, the prayers might perhaps be rendered ineffectual. But the godly Imām [...] made no mistake whatever, and the prayers were in no way rendered ineffectual. [...] Almighty God of His perfect power and foe-consuming vengeance that same night inflicted a disease upon Kyuk which, with the knife of death, severed the artery of his existence, so that verily that same night he went to hell, and the Musalmāns were delivered from his tyranny and oppression."⁵⁸

As for the conclusion, Grigor of Akner gives a similar story. He talks about a son of Mōngke Khan which he calls Xul⁵⁹ but in his account it is the Christian God who punishes the Muslim. Grigor writes, for the year 1257:

"Then that chieftain, who called himself the brother of God, came into the interior of the country and mercilessly fell upon the miserable Christians. They burned all the wooden crosses wherever they found them erected on the roads and mountains. But nothing whatever satisfied them. Wherever they found monasteries in the land they plundered and oppressed, eating and drinking. They trussed up venerable priests and flogged them mercilessly."⁶⁰

Xul fell ill with gout. An "infidel" Jewish⁶¹ doctor told him that his illness could be cured if he put his foot in the stomachs of red-haired boys but these stomachs had to be opened while the boys were still alive. The Mongols seized thirty Christian boys and killed them in the aforesaid way, but the gout still did not get better. Now Xul realized that he had done great injustice "because of the harm done to the children" and ordered that the Jewish doctor should be "brought before him and disemboweled, and his entrails thrown to the dogs. [...] but Xul himself died an evil death".⁶²

Other examples can be found in Grigor's account,⁶³ and in other sources, as in the stories of Kirakos and Juvainī, where a cruel end due to the punishment of (the Christian or Muslim) God is attributed to the unjust.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Raverty, *Juzjani*, 1163.

⁵⁹ Blake and Frye, *Grigor of Akanc'*, 432: Xul is equal to "Qul".

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁶¹ This is clearly anti-Semitic but it would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss anti-Semitic stereotypes and patterns of these sources here.

⁶² Cf. *Ibid.*, 331; See also F. W. Cleaves, "A Medical Practice of the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17:3/4 (Dec. 1954), 428-444, who focuses on the medical practice described in the text.

⁶³ E.g. see the story of Chormaqan, in Blake and Frye, *Grigor of Akanc'*, 299-301. *Ibid.* 299 mentions also a comet and a solar eclipse.

⁶⁴ Bedrosian, *Kirakos*, 44, 260-262. Online: <<http://rbedrosian.com/kg10.htm#44>> [Accessed February 28, 2011]; Boyle, *Juvaini*, 543-544.

Conclusion

The deaths of Mongol Khans which have been handed down in the sources are not to be understood as historic facts but primarily as a "message". Here we have to deal with constructions which are statements of political and moral/religious belief. Apart from these manipulations, supernatural elements and literary topoi, like the "deathbed scenes", are testified through sources with different cultural backgrounds.