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van den Bent, J.

Published in:
Al-Masq. Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean

DOI:
10.1080/09503110.2016.1198535

Link to publication

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“None of the Kings on Earth is Their Equal in āṣabiyya”: The Mongols in Ibn Khaldūn’s Works

Josephine van den Bent

ABSTRACT
The rise of the Mongol empire was a shock to the Arab world and led many Arab authors to describe these conquerors in decidedly negative terms. The great historian Ibn Khaldūn also discusses the Mongols’ rise and their conquests. As a nomadic people they challenged and defeated sedentary populations and founded their own dynasties. Consequently, the Mongol conquests perfectly fit Ibn Khaldūn’s theories on āṣabiyya – which is superior in nomadic groups – and the rise and fall of dynasties. For the Maghrebi historian, the rise of the Mongols was a natural step in the course of history. This consequently colours his view of the Mongols and affects the way he portrays them, especially regarding the themes of violence and religion – recurring themes in many contemporary works dealing with the Mongols – and in his depiction of the Turco-Mongolian conqueror Timur, who is presented in a more favourable light by Ibn Khaldūn than he is in many contemporary works.

KEYWORDS
Ibn Khaldūn; Abd al-Rahmān; historian; Mongols; people; Timur; Turkic conqueror; Jinghiz Khan; Mongol khan; Mamlūks; Egyptian dynasty

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols were on a campaign of conquest, leaving a trail of plunder and death throughout Central Asia and the Middle East. They managed to establish an empire that covered the greater part of Asia, the largest contiguous land empire in history. These events shocked the Arab world, and many writers from this area described the Mongols and their conquests in their works. Recurring themes in these descriptions are the violence employed by the Mongols and their depiction as infidels, in addition to a profound loathing of their leaders, particularly those with whom the Arab world came in direct contact, such as Hūlegū (d. 1265), but above all the Turko-Mongolian conqueror known as Timur Lenk (“Timur the Lame”, d. 1405).1 The fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn was naturally among those who gave attention to the Mongols, and it is his portrayal of these conquerors that is the topic of this study.

CONTACT
Josephine van den Bent, j.m.c.vandenbent@uva.nl University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities, Department of History, Bushuis | Room D.010 | Kloveniersburgwal 48 | 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands. This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research [grant number 322-50-002].


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Ibn Khaldūn

The Maghrebi author Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406) has regularly been described as a scholar who was unique in the Islamic world, detached from Islamic tradition. Due to his methodological approach to history, he has been labelled a sociologist and anthropologist avant la lettre, and his writings have been compared to those of thinkers ranging from Machiavelli to Marx. These comparisons are self-evidently anachronistic, and those who make them fail to see that Ibn Khaldūn was very much part of the tradition of Islamic historical writing, thereby doing scant justice to both the author in question and his contemporaries. Nevertheless, these comparisons, in addition to the many studies that have been and still are being produced on Ibn Khaldūn and his work, demonstrate the great interest that this author and his work continue to attract.

Ibn Khaldūn had personal experience of Timur and his army. He had the opportunity to meet the infamous conqueror in 1401, at a time when he and his armies were wreaking havoc on the region. Ibn Khaldūn met him in Damascus, where he had travelled as a member of the military expedition led by the Mamlūk sultan Faraj (r. 1399–1405; 1405–1412). The sultan had wished to attempt to halt Timur’s advance in Syria, and had specifically requested Ibn Khaldūn to join him on the expedition. Ibn Khaldūn was not particularly eager to do so but, given the sultan’s explicit request, he had little room to refuse. The expedition resulted in a fiasco: revolt broke out in Egypt and Faraj and a small group of confidants rushed back to Cairo. Ibn Khaldūn, together with the remainder of the army and the sultan’s retinue, was left behind in Damascus, besieged by Timur’s troops. After being invited by Timur, who had heard of his presence in the city, he decided to go down towards the enemy’s camp and he met with Timur there. The two of them met regularly for a month, and Ibn Khaldūn gives us an account of these meetings and conversations in his autobiography Al-ta’rif bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa-riḥlatuḥu gharban wa-sharqan.

Since Ibn Khaldūn’s encounter with Timur was a remarkable historical event, authors of general works on Ibn Khaldūn usually pay some attention to this meeting. In the 1950s, W. J. Fischel discussed Ibn Khaldūn’s meeting with Timur as well as his writing on Mongol history both in Al-ta’rif and in his world history Kitāb al-‘ibar wa-dīwān al-mubtada’ wa-l-khabar fī ayyām al-‘arab wa-l-‘ajam wa-l-barbar wa-man āṣarahum min dhawī al-sultān al-akbar. In addition, Fischel published a translation of the parts of Ibn Khaldūn’s autobiography that discuss his visits to Timur. While this translation is supplied with notes in which Fischel elaborately discusses the various aspects of the text, his study offers little by

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4At least, this is what Ibn Khaldūn tells us. According to Ibn ‘Arabshāh, Ibn Khaldūn was simply part of a delegation of scholars sent to Timur, to whom Timur then took a liking. See Ibn ‘Arabshāh, ‘Ajā’ib al-maqādūr, 211–14.

way of analysis – which is neither surprising nor particularly problematic, given that it is intended primarily as a critical translation. However, since Fischel, no studies have been published that focus on the theme of Ibn Khaldūn’s writing on the Mongols and Timur Lenk. Those sections in general works on Ibn Khaldūn tend to discuss his meeting with Timur in a rather brief and succinct manner, simply describing events and referring to Fischel’s study.⁶

Consequently, hardly any attention has been devoted to Ibn Khaldūn’s perception of and ideas about the Mongols, despite the fact that the historical background of the vast Mongol conquests combined with Ibn Khaldūn’s encounter with Timur raises significant questions. This article intends to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive analysis of Ibn Khaldūn’s views on the Mongols. Moreover, in addition to Al-ta’rif – the text to which Fischel confined himself – I shall also include the rarely discussed fragments from Ibn Khaldūn’s historical work Kitāb al-ībar in which he deals with Mongol history. I shall discuss the perceptions of the Mongols found in Ibn Khaldūn’s work, and argue that his reading of the Mongols and their conquests is influenced by the way in which they agreed with his theories and world view.

The Mongols in Ibn Khaldūn’s works

Timur and his men were a far cry from the still shamanist Mongols who had first appeared on the Asian stage in the early-thirteenth century. Although his tribe, the Barlas (descended from the Mongol Barulas tribe), was largely still nomadic, Timur was well integrated in the dominant, Turko-Mongolian culture of fourteenth-century Transoxania. This culture – with Islam as its religion, Turkic as its language, and a Mongolian political ideology – made him well-equipped to deal with both nomadic and settled populations.⁷ Although many things had changed since the time of Chinggis Khan, Ibn Khaldūn clearly views Timur and his troops as belonging to the Mongols. As he puts it:

In Turkestan and Bukhara in Transoxania (mâ warâ al-nahr) appeared an amir called Timur in a group of Mongols (mughul) and Tatars (tatar).⁸ He and his people trace their ancestry to

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8This matter of terminology – what the terms mughul and tatar (in all their variant spellings) mean in the various sources – has not yet been settled. It has been suggested that, while mughul referred to ethnically Mongol people, tatar referred to people who had become Mongol politically. See, e.g., David Morgan, The Mongols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 57. Reuven Amitai has the impression that this distinction in use between mughul and tatar is confirmed in some of the Arabic sources he uses (Amitai-Preiss, Mongols and Mamluks, 108 n. 8.) We see something similar in Ibn Khaldūn, who appears to see mughul and tatar as existing alongside one another (“a group of Mongols [mughul] and Tatars [tatar]”) and refers, for instance, to Hūleğū – indisputably of Mongol descent – as belonging to “the great of the mughul in his lineage” (Ibn Khaldūn, Kitāb al-ībar wa-diwan al-mubtada wa-l-khabar fi ‘ayyām al-arab wa-l-qam wa-l-barbar wa-man ʿasrahum min dhawī l-sulṭān al-akbar, volumes I–VII (Cairo: Abd al-Matba’a al-Miṣriyya bi-Būlaq, 1867), V: 506.) There might be another option as well, as we also find Ibn Khaldūn referring to Chingghis Khan as “amir al-mughul min shīʿūb al-tatar” (Ibn Khaldūn, Al-ta’rif bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa-riḥlatuḥu gharban wa-sharqaq (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta’līf wa-l-Tarjama, 1951), p. 360), and as conquering the lands of the Tatars (ibid), which may indicate that he regarded the Mongols as one of the tribes who lived “in the desert between Transoxania and China” (ibid., 381), with (part of) the other tribes being the Tatars. However, this is not consistently used throughout Kitāb al-ībar and Al-ta’rif. Given the general ambiguity on this topic, more research is clearly necessary. In order to be as clear as possible, whenever quoting Ibn Khaldūn, I shall indicate in brackets the term used, mughul or tatar.
Chaghadai. I do not know whether this is Chaghadai the son of Chinggis Khan or another Chaghadai of the Mongol [mughul] peoples, but the former is more likely.9

While Timur and his people were a concrete threat to Mamlük power in Ibn Khalḍûn’s lifetime, Mongol advances had constituted a menace to Mamlük power before. The Mongols, led by Hüleğû, had invaded Syria in 1259, easily conquering Aleppo. Soon afterwards, Hüleğû set out eastward, presumably concerned by the succession struggle that had broken out when the Great Khan, his brother Möngke, died. He left Syria to his general Kitbugha, who then proceeded to plunder the land until he was defeated by the Mamlûks at ‘Ayn Jâlût in 1260 – the first real defeat the Mongols experienced. All this led to a lengthy conflict between the Mamlûks and the Il-Khânid realm, which had become a de facto separate khanate following the aforementioned succession struggle. Relations between the Mamlûk sultanate and the neighbouring Il-Khânate were tense for decades during the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries.10

Unsurprisingly then, given the prominence of the Mongols in what was in Ibn Khalḍûn’s time recent history and his personal experiences, Ibn Khalḍûn wrote quite extensively on the Mongols and their earlier and later conquests.11 He discussed the Mongols both in Al-ta’rif and in Kitâb al-‘ibar. Regarding information on the Mongols, these two texts complement each other, with only a small partial overlap. Where Kitâb al-‘ibar focuses on the early Mongol conquests and the vicissitudes of the various successor khanates, ending with an account of the rise of Timur, Al-ta’rif is primarily an eyewitness account of Timur’s conquest of Damascus, which therefore gives special details on Timur himself.

In Kitâb al-‘ibar, Ibn Khalḍûn provides us with a comprehensive exposition of Mongol history. He describes the rise of Chinggis Khan and his conquests, in addition to giving a short biography of this founder of the Mongol empire. The Mongol wars with the Khwârîzım Shâh in particular are discussed extensively,12 followed by the Mongol campaigns of conquest into Khorasan, Turkistan, Persia and other lands, which Ibn Khalḍûn includes both in the histories of these areas and in the chapter on the Mongols themselves. In this chapter,13 Ibn Khalḍûn recapitulates the history of the Mongol conquests under Chinggis Khan and tells us his life story. Following Chinggis’s death, Ibn Khalḍûn turns to the fortunes of Chinggis’s four sons and their descendants: the division of the Mongol empire amongst them, their further conquests, and the competition between them. After briefly discussing the developments in the Chaghadaid ulûs (already including information on Timur), he then moves on to the more elaborate histories of the two

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9Ibn Khalḍûn, Kitâb al-‘ibar, V: 506. See also Ibn Khalḍûn, Al-ta’rif, 382. In Al-ta’rif, Ibn Khalḍûn also refers to Timur and his troops as mughul numerous times, including when he writes: “Al-Malik al-Zâhir (...) went out with his Turkish troops in order to try and defeat the Mongols (mughul) and their king Timur” (Ibn Khalḍûn, Al-ta’rif, 365). We also find them as al-tatar / al-tatar in numerous places (e.g. Ibn Khalḍûn, Al-ta’rif, 366, 380, 381, 382).


11Fischel, Ibn Khalḍûn in Egypt, 83.

12Ibn Khalḍûn, Kitâb Al-‘ibar, V: 111 ff., 519–24. The Khwârîzım Shâhs had first been vassals to the Qara Khiṭai empire but, by the early 1210s, Qara Khiṭai weakness allowed the Khwârîzmshans to take control of eastern and central Iran and Transoxania. A few years later, in 1220, the Khwârîzım army was overrun by Mongol forces. Khwârîzım Shâh ‘Alâ’ al-Dîn Muhammad fled and died within weeks, having sought refuge on an island in the Caspian Sea. His son, Jalâl al-Dîn Minbûn, made various attempts to re-establish his father’s kingdom, but any successes were short-lived and he was murdered in 1231. From then on, Mongol power was firmly established and the areas that had made up the Khwârîzım realm eventually became part of the Il-Khânate and the Chaghadaid khanate.

13Ibid., 515 ff.
khanates closest to the Mamlūk empire: the Jochid ulus (banū Dūshī Khān) and the Il-Khanate (banū Hulākī), in which he discusses the reigns of their various rulers. He ends with the rise of Timur, a passage that he wrote before meeting the vanquisher. Ibn Khaldūn based his information on the Mongols on the works of other historians – such as Ibn al-Athīr (1160–1233) and ‘Alāʾ al-Dīn ‘Atāʾ l-Juwaynī (1226–1283) – and on news relayed by traders and scholars who had travelled in the Mongol realm.

Apart from discussing his own encounter with Timur, Ibn Khaldūn also offers historical information on the Mongols in Al-taʾrif. Here too he describes how Chinggis Khan subdued large areas in Central Asia, which he subsequently divided among his sons. This time, he focuses on Hūlegū’s conquests – which would lead to the foundation of the Il-Khanate – and the developments under the Chaghedaids, the descendants of Chinggis Khan’s second son. Ibn Khaldūn relates how the Il-Khanate fell apart following the death of Abū Saʿīd in 1335, and how others, including the Chagadhaids, leapt at the opportunity and began to annex former Il-Khānid territory. It was from this same Chagadhai khanate that Timur and his series of invasions came. Timur eventually set his sights on Syria, which led to Ibn Khaldūn’s expedition to Damascus. After setting the historical background of the situation in Damascus, Ibn Khaldūn continues with an account of the events and his experiences in Timurid-besieged Damascus, in which he pays ample attention to his meetings with Timur. He recounts their conversations and relates his impressions of this feared ruler. In the last pages of his autobiography, he reproduces a letter he wrote to the Maghrebi ruler Abū Saʿīd (r. 1398–1420), in which he elaborately describes his experiences in Damascus and his meetings with Timur, and he also once again provides us with a short history of the Mongols.

**The Mongols and Ibn Khaldūn’s world view**

While his discussion of Mongol history is confined to the relevant sections of the historical part of Kitāb al-ʿibar, the Mongols do occasionally show up in Ibn Khaldūn’s explanation of the rise and fall of dynasties in the Muqaddima, the prolegomenon to his world history. Sometimes this is as a simple historical reference (for instance to the fall of Baghdad), but he occasionally gives the Mongols as an illustration of (parts of) his theories on the rise and fall of dynasties. An example of this is when Ibn Khaldūn states that a dynasty’s need for ʿaṣabiyya declines once it is well established and has stayed in power long enough: obedience from the people is more or less a given after a certain period of rule. In order to stay in power, it is sufficient to employ mercenaries and/or tribal client troops. This ingrained obedience does, however, pose a problem for the founder of a new dynasty, so founders of new dynasties need perseverance in order to overthrow the ruling dynasty: one successful battle is not enough. The decay of the ruling dynasty needs to become overtly clear to both its subjects – who will then lose their ingrained obedience – and the armies of the

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15Ibid., 94–5.
17Ibid., 365.
18Ibid., 380–3.
conquering new ruler – who will then have enough confidence to attack and overthrow the ruling dynasty. Ibn Khaldūn then offers a few examples of this, including the Mongols: “The same was the case with the Tatars who succeeded the Ṣaljūqs. They came out of the steppe in 617 [1220/21] but it took them forty years thereafter to gain domination.”

Thus, in the Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldūn already hints at the way in which the Mongols fit into his theories on the rise and fall of dynasties – albeit only a handful of times. A closer study of his writings on the Mongols in the historical parts of Kitāb al-ʿabar and in Al-tāʾrif shows us how well they fit in with Ibn Khaldūn’s theories, and how he indeed portrays them as such. This becomes clear first and foremost in his treatment of the Mongol leaders, in particular Chinggis Khan and Timur, whose respective ʿāṣābiyyas serve as an explanation for their supremely successful series of conquests.

According to Ibn Khaldūn, the historian can discover the patterns in human history by means of ʿilm al-ʿumrān (the study of civilisation), which will allow him to unearth its underlying mechanisms. The paramount – and most famous – of these mechanisms in Ibn Khaldūn’s work is his notion of ʿāṣābiyya. This term, notoriously difficult to translate, is possibly best described as “group solidarity”, and plays a key role in Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of the rise and fall of dynasties. ʿĀṣābiyya, for Ibn Khaldun, is people’s affection, interdependence and willingness to help one another, and is based primarily, but not exclusively, on blood relations. According to Ibn Khaldūn, it is ʿāṣābiyya that allows the group to gain power – indeed, it is its ultimate goal to achieve royal authority. As he himself puts it, ʿāṣābiyya “produces the ability to defend oneself, to offer opposition, to protect oneself, and to press one’s claims. Whoever loses [it] is too weak to do any of these things”.

Ibn Khaldūn differentiates between ʿumrān badāwī, societies that rely on nomadism and/or agriculture, and ʿumrān ḥadārī, sedentary societies. Nomadic groups lead harsher lives and are consequently not only hardier and more courageous, but also reliant on one another’s support and solidarity for survival. They therefore possess stronger ʿāṣābiyya than sedentary populations. Being sedentary leads to living in luxury and abundance, which corrupts people, saps their courage, and causes ʿāṣābiyya to dwindle. Consequently, the sedentary dynasty weakens, eventually ending in its ruin, usually because another – typically nomadic – group whose ʿāṣābiyya is still strong conquers their realm. That group will then slowly become sedentarised and corrupted, thereby slowly but surely losing their ʿāṣābiyya, after which – once again – an outside force with stronger ʿāṣābiyya shows up and defeats them. Ibn Khaldūn based this cyclic notion of history on his studies of the Berbers and Arabs in the Maghreb.

Having a strong ʿāṣābiyya is thus essential for conquering other societies, and in order to conquer other societies, a group needs a strong leader. In order to lead a group, a person must have a superior ʿāṣābiyya to that of other individuals in the group. These individuals will then become aware of that superiority, and follow and obey this leader.

In the case of the Mongols, it becomes clear from both Kitāb al-ʿabar as Al-tāʾrif that Ibn Khaldūn considers the ʿāṣābiyya of the Mongols to be very strong. First, this is found in the

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20Ibid., II: 134. Other instances where the Mongols are used as an example can be found in ibid., I: 315, 351; II: 128.
21For an overview of the various translations suggested in European languages, see Simon, Ibn Khaldūn, 149–50.
23Ibid., 289.
24Ibid., 269.
person of Chinggis Khan himself. Ibn Khal’dun devotes a separate paragraph to Chinggis Khan in Kitab al-ibar, entitled “Al-ta’rif bi-Djinkiz Khân”. Fischel points out that Ibn Khal’dun uses the term “al-ta’rif” – information, report – on only two other occasions and so he sees this choice of wording as significant, and indicating that Ibn Khal’dun regarded Chinggis Khan as character of importance.25

In this paragraph, Ibn Khal’dun describes Chinggis Khan’s life and conquests. Regarding the man himself, he writes: “He belonged to the inhabitants of the desert, and to a courageous family of high status”.26 His living in the desert is an indicator of his strong ‘asabiyya, given Ibn Khal’dun’s idea that nomads have a stronger ‘asabiyya than city dwellers. The status of his family is also important: according to Ibn Khal’dun, leadership rests with one family.27 Courage, for Ibn Khal’dun, is also a key quality of nomadic peoples.28

Furthermore, Chinggis Khan had a large number of children: “Regarding his children, they were many. This was unavoidable given his nomadic lifestyle and his ‘asabiyya”.29 Ibn Khal’dun here explicitly refers to Chinggis Khan’s strong ‘asabiyya, which had already been hinted at in his reference to Chinggis’s nomadism. This impressive amount of ‘asabiyya made him a leader of his people, who were then capable of great conquests under his guidance.

Chinggis Khan also wrote the yasa, the Mongol law code. “[Chinggis Khan] wrote a book for [the Mongols] on state law, which he named ‘The Great State Law’, and in which he mentioned laws of rule and war, and common laws. It resembles Sharia rules”.30 As the drafter of this law – the like of which had never been produced before, Ibn Khal’dun writes – Chinggis Khan is, in Ibn Khal’dun’s view, an important man to his people, even more so as he was also the one who was obeyed by the most important Mongol tribes: “Two of the greatest of the Mongol (mughul) tribes entered into his service, the Awrât and the Manfurât, and his group became grand”.31 This is a mechanism that Ibn Khal’dun also describes in the Muqaddima: if a group with greater ‘asabiyya is able to overpower other groups, these groups will be added to the first group – including in ‘asabiyya – and grow.32

Ibn Khal’dun’s portrayal of Timur is much more elaborate than his depiction of Chinggis Khan, which is unsurprising in view of the scholar’s personal encounter with the former. Ibn Khal’dun saw Timur, too, as a man important to his people. He had taken the son of the deceased ruler of the Chaghadaids, “Sâtlamish”,33 under his wing, taking care of both the young king and the latter’s mother.

26 Ibn Khal’dun, Kitab al-ibar, V: 526.
27 Ibn Khal’dun, Muqaddimah, l: 268–9, n. 59.
28 Ibid., 257–8.
29 Ibn Khal’dun, Kitab al-ibar, V: 527.
30 Ibid., 526. The yasa was a Mongol law code, supposedly introduced by Chingghis Khan. To this day, its exact contents are unknown and it remains shrouded in mystery. It did, however, captivate the minds of many Muslim writers, and references to it – ranging from passing mentions to elaborate and imaginative lists of what this yasa supposedly contained – are frequent. For an elaborate discussion of the topic, see for instance David Morgan, “The Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan” Revisited”, in Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World, ed. Reuven Amitai and Michal Biran (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 291–308; and David Ayalon, “The Great Yasa of Chingiz Khan: A Reexamination” (Parts A-C2) Studia Islamica 33, 34, 36 and 38 (1971–1973).
31 Ibn Khal’dun, Kitab al-ibar, V: 526.
32 Ibn Khal’dun, Muqaddimah, l: 284–6.
33 The puppet khan Soyurghatmish (1327–1388), whose enthronement had been arranged by Timur in 1370, and who, incidentally, was not of Chaghadaid descent at all, but from the Ögödeid lineage. Beatrice Forbes Manz, “Temür and the Early
Ibn Khaldûn also describes how Timur conquered Central Asia, and eventually defeated Toqtamysh (d. 1406), Timur’s protégé-turned-archenemy. After this victory, Timur managed to unite all the tribes behind him: “The Mongol (mughul) tribes returned to Timur and marched under his banner. (...) All clans of the Turks marched under Timur’s flag.”

This is a clear indication of Timur’s ‘asabiyya and leadership. Only by having a superior ‘asabiyya could he gather so many people, let alone all the clans, behind him.

The case of Timur and his impressive amount of ‘asabiyya, however, is more complicated than that of Chinggis Khan. During their first encounter, Ibn Khaldûn attempts to flatter him by stating that Timur’s arrival had been predicted, and says: “You are the sultan of the world and the ruler of the earth, and I do not believe that – from the age of Adam until now – a ruler like you has ever appeared.”

Although this statement is first and foremost meant to make a good impression on a rather imposing conqueror, Ibn Khaldûn does offer an explanation for his lofty words:

Rule only exists through ‘asabiyya, and the degree of rule depends on the amount of it. (...) Regarding the Turks, their battle with the Persian kings and their taking of Khorasan by their king Afrasyâb bears witness to their royal descent. None of the kings on earth is their equal in ‘asabiyya, not Chosroes, nor Caesar, not Alexander, nor Nebuchadnezzar.

Timur responds to this by stating that Nebuchadnezzar was not, unlike the others, a great king, but merely a general, “like I am merely a representative of the king on the throne.”

Here we find Ibn Khaldûn actually discussing the concept of ‘asabiyya and rulership (mulk) with Timur, explaining to him that the ‘asabiyya of the Turks, among whom he reckons Timur, is unequalled. While Ibn Khaldûn was certainly intending to flatter Timur, he does appear to believe his statement, since this digression was by no means necessary. If it was just flattery he intended, he could well have stopped with the first part of his compliment, in which he calls him the “sultan of the world”, the like of

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34Ibn Khaldûn, Al-ta’rif, 364. It is not entirely clear who Ibn Khaldûn means by “Turks” here. Possibly he is referring to the fact that the Chaghadaid ulus was historically home to a large Turkic population (something Ibn Khaldûn refers to in Al-ta’rif, 358, 361), with whom the Chaghadaid Mongols had intensive contact and elements of whose culture – including their language – they had adopted, to the extent that Timur, his troops and the culture he came from are often referred to as “Turko-Mongolian”. A large number of Timur’s troops were Turkič. Interestingly, Ibn Khaldûn speaks of his book being translated into al-lisân al-mughulî (Ibn Khaldûn, Al-ta’rif, 374), rather than into Turkic.

Another explanation for the use of the term “Turks” here, is that Mongols are frequently described as belonging to the Turkish race in Arabic sources, including by Ibn Khaldûn, who stated in multiple places that the “Tatars belong to the Turkish peoples” (Ibn Khaldûn, Kitâb al-ibar, III: 534; V: 506; Ibn Khaldûn, Al-ta’rif, 351). See also David Ayalon, “The European-Asiatic Steppe: A Major Reservoir of Power for the Islamic World”, in Proceedings of the 25th Congress of Orientalists: Moscow 9-16 August 1960, volumes I-V (Moscow: s.n., 1963), II: 47–52. Cf. note 35.


36This reference to the Turks is clearly made in light of the perceived relationship between the Mongols and the Turks (see note 64), in which the Mongols are part of the Turkish peoples. Ibn Khaldûn here goes on to elaborate on the differences in ‘asabiyya between the Turks and the peoples the aforementioned rulers belonged to. Timur clearly belongs to these Turks, as Ibn Khaldûn states: “And how far are these [other peoples] removed from the Turks! This is a clear proof of what I have claimed about this king [I.e. Timur, that he is the sultan of the world and that a ruler like him has never before appeared]” (Ibn Khaldûn, Al-ta’rif, 372).

37Ibid.

38Ibid., 373.

39Ibid., 372.

40Ibid.
whom has never emerged before. But instead, he opted to explain this statement in a way fully consistent with his own ideas on dynasty formation and rulership.

Timur, by responding that he is merely a representative rather than a king himself, is depicted as modest and putting his legitimate king’s interests before his own. This shows Timur’s willingness to put himself at the service of his group, striving for the greater good of the group as a whole, and thereby demonstrating its strong ‘āṣabiyya. That Timur’s people have impressive ‘āṣabiyya becomes clear elsewhere, too. In the historical preface to the report of his journey to Damascus, Ibn Khaldūn writes:

[All amirs of the Banū Jaqatāy [Chagataids] were in his [the young king’s] service, and the greatest among them was Timūr, known as Timur ibn Ṭaraghāy, and he took this youth under his wing and took care of him, and he married [the youth’s] mother.]

The fact that they all put themselves at the service of the king once again shows strong ‘āṣabiyya: they are all following this one leader, which allows them to attain greatness. Ibn Khaldūn also explains why their ‘āṣabiyya was so strong: “Their rule became formidable, because they did not have luxury or comfort, and preserved desert life”. Since Ibn Khaldūn regarded a longing for luxury and comfort as a causal factor in the decline of ‘āṣabiyya, which in turn led to a dynasty’s doom, this preservation of a nomadic life of hardship resulted in the conservation of ‘āṣabiyya and, consequently, the dynasty.

Chinggis Khan and Timur not only have the strong ‘āṣabiyya required to conquer vast areas, but also possess at least some of the qualities listed by Ibn Khaldūn as the mark of potential royal authority (mulk) in a person. Ibn Khaldūn gives us an extensive list of some twenty characteristics that one supposedly finds “[w]henever we observe people who possess group feeling and who have gained control over many lands and nations”. No less than five of the characteristics given relate to the treatment of religious scholars by these leaders – it is clearly a matter close to his heart. On the list we find:

- respect for the religious law and for the scholars who are learned in it, observation of the things to be done or not to be done that [those scholars] prescribe for them, thinking highly of [religious scholars], belief in and veneration for men of religion and a desire to receive their prayers, great respect for old men and teachers.

In his description of Chinggis Khan, we find some of the elements Ibn Khaldūn considers essential for royal authority: he is generous to two men who have warned him of an enemy, for instance. But in Ibn Khaldūn’s account of his meeting with Timur, one of the incidents he pays most attention to is when Timur requests Ibn Khaldūn’s opinion on a legal and religious matter. A man had requested an audience with Timur, claiming that he was the rightful caliph. Timur answers him that he will summon the jurists and judges for him, “and if they judge something in your favour, I will see to it that justice is done for you”. A number of jurists and judges are summoned, among them Ibn

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41Ibid.
42In reality, this young king was little more than a puppet, as was his father before him. See for instance Forbes Manz, “Temur”.
44Ibid., 363.
46Ibid.
48Ibn Khaldūn, Al-ta’rīf, 375.
Khaldūn. The man pleads his case, and both Ibn Khaldūn and another of the gathered experts state that the man’s claim is invalid. Timur then requests more information, and, according to Ibn Khaldūn, specifically from him, and he embarks upon an elaborate account of the history of the caliphate. The matter is then settled by Timur, who says: “You have heard what these judges say, and those who give legal opinions. It appears that you have no right to claim [the caliphate] before me, so leave and be rightly guided”.49

Timur here fits Ibn Khaldūn’s idea that a person with strong ʿasabiyya, who has conquered vast stretches of land, must treat religious scholars well and heed their recommendations: Timur explicitly asks for advice from these scholars and follows it when it is given. In this matter, to which Ibn Khaldūn attaches so much importance, judging by the fact that it takes up about a quarter of his list, Timur shows his innate royal authority.

This episode also hints at Timur’s devoutness, which also comes up elsewhere in Ibn Khaldūn’s description of him. When Ibn Khaldūn presents him with several gifts, amongst which are a prayer rug and a Qur’ān, he treats both with great respect. “I opened the Qur’ān, and when he saw that, he hastily arose and placed it on his head. (…) I then presented him with the prayer rug, and he accepted it and kissed it”.50 The same goes for Timur’s men. On Ibn Khaldūn’s arrival in Timur’s camp, he is greeted in an Islamic manner by several soldiers: “I said to them, ‘May God preserve your lives!’ and they said to me, ‘May God preserve your life!’ And I told them, ‘May I be your ransom, may I sacrifice myself for you!’, and they said to me, ‘May we be your ransom!’”51

This depiction of Timur and his army as devout Muslims contrasts with the way he is portrayed in other works from this period. For example, it may surprise many who are familiar with the works of the Damascene scholar Ibn ʿArabshāh (1392–1450). He called Timur – among a great many other slurs – an “unbelieving despot” (al-zulīm al-kufār) and wrote that he and his men are “shameless infidels” (al-kafara al-fajara). Timur presented himself as an Islamic ruler,52 but it is true that the Chaghadaid ulus was the slowest to Islamise – although by the late-thirteenth century, Islam had gained a strong foothold there, and not just among the elite.53 Other authors did consider Timur to be Muslim, but accused him of being Shiite – which was copied by several later scholars,54 but denied by Ibn Khaldūn in his letter to the Maghrebi ruler Abū Saʿīd.55 The Mamluks too, confronted with the threat of Timur in the late-fourteenth century, revived the notion of their role as protectors of Islam and presented Timur as an infidel enemy.56 Ibn Khaldūn’s depiction of Timur as a pious ruler is thus rather dissimilar to those of his contemporaries.

As already noted, the Mamluks revived their notion of an infidel enemy: the notion of conflict between Muslims and infidel Mongols was not a new one. Contemporary works discussing the Mongols often contain these elements, as they emphasise religious conflict

49Ibid., 376.  
50Ibid., 377.  
51Ibid., 368.  
54Forbes Manz, Rise and Rule, 17.  
55Ibn Khaldūn, Al-taʿrīf, 382.  
between the Muslims and the Mongols, even after the latter have been Islamised, in addition to violent atrocities committed by the Mongol armies. This leads to the question of how Ibn Khaldūn deals with these two topics.

Like other authors, Ibn Khaldūn describes the horrors of the Mongol conquests on various occasions, and clearly condemns them. Concerning Timur’s conquest of Aleppo, he writes: “The Mongols (al-mughul) entered the city from all directions, caused destruction, pillaged, looted, and seized the women, as no man has ever seen”. He himself witnessed the seizure of Damascus, and the circumstances of this takeover were hardly better. In spite of a peace settlement, Timur demanded more payments than had been agreed upon, and pillaging was rife, as Ibn Khaldūn relates:

He confiscated qinṭārūs of goods from people in the city. (...) Then he loosed [his men] to plunder the houses of the people of the city, and they uprooted their people and their possessions and set fire to whatever remained of debris and old furniture. The fire spread to the houses’ walls, which were supported by wood. It kept burning until it reached the Great Mosque [the Umayyad Mosque] and it climbed up to its roof. The lead melted, and its roof and walls collapsed. This deed was unimaginably horrible and appalling. The events are in God’s hands, He does with His creation what He wants, and decides in His kingdom what He wants.60

Kitāb al-‘ibar also discusses death and destruction brought about by the Mongols. Concerning the conquest of Central Asia, Ibn Khaldūn writes that they “caused in devastation and death and pillaging what no one had heard before”. This sentiment is prevalent throughout his descriptions of the Mongol invasions in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Near East: there is unprecedented destruction, we find Mongols killing and plundering “according to their habit” in Azerbaijan, there is massacre and slaughter, they commit atrocities. He generally keeps his descriptions rather succinct, without many details. This appears to be his overall style: we see a similar conciseness in his account of Jalāl al-Dīn Mingburnu and his attacks on various cities and regions.64


58Ibn Khaldūn, Al-taʿrīf, 365.

59A hundredweight, or hundred rāf (from Latin centenarius). The exact weight depended on the weight of the dirham al-kayl (weight dirham), which ranged between 3,086 and 3,148 grams, and on what was measured (the rāf could take various numbers of darāhim). Consequently, qanāṭir in medieval Egypt could vary between 45 and 96.7 kg. See Ulrich Reckstob, “Weights and Measures in Islam”, in Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures, ed. Helaine Selin (Berlin: Springer, 2008), pp. 2255–67.

60Ibn Khaldūn, Al-taʿrīf, 374.

61Ibn Khaldūn, Kitāb al-‘ibar, III: 535. The Mongols are here referred to as al-tatar.

62Ibid., V: 113.

63Ibid., 111 ff.

64Ibid., 120 ff. Jalāl al-Dīn Mingburnu wreaked havoc on various cities, especially in the Caucasus in the 1220s.
Occasionally, however, he does elaborate. One such instance relates to the infamous sack of Baghdad – this was, of course, a unique event, since it also meant the fall of the caliphate, which sent shock waves through the Islamic world. Ibn Khaldūn refers to it on various occasions throughout Kitāb al-ʿibar. Two noteworthy mentions can be found in volume III and volume V.

Women and youths went out with books and boards above their heads, but they were trampled by the soldiers and died. It is said that that day, 1.6 million people died. They took possession, from the caliphal palace and its treasuries, of what cannot be described or counted. All the books of knowledge that where in the treasury were thrown into the Tigris, and this was something that does not compare to what is claimed the Muslims did at the first conquest with the books of the Persians and their sciences.65

When Ibn Khaldūn describes the history of the Mongols, this episode is recounted again, albeit slightly differently.

It is said that there were 1.3 million deaths, and [the Mongols] took innumerable goods from the caliph’s palaces and warehouses. The scholarly books from the treasury were thrown into the Tigris, doing as it is claimed the Muslims did to the books of the Persians when they conquered [their] cities.66

Not only does the number of dead differ between these two fragments, but there is also a striking divergence in the way he compares the Mongol and Muslim treatment of the Persians’ books. Whereas in the first fragment, he draws explicit attention to the possible comparison with the Muslim actions but then denies it, in the second he does appear to directly link and compare the two. So although Ibn Khaldūn’s final feeling on the matter remains somewhat unclear, it is evident that he invites the comparison between the destruction of books and sciences brought about by these Mongols and the early Muslims – a group generally held in high esteem in the Muslim tradition.67

Ibn Khaldūn is shocked by the Mongol violence: statements declaring that acts were “unprecedented” abound in Kitāb al-ʿibar, and in Al-taʿrīf we read phrases like “[t]his deed was unimaginably horrible and appalling”,68 and that “[Timur’s] soldiers caused devastation in [the cities] that was more atrocious than people had ever heard”.69 But while Ibn Khaldūn may have been aghast, this course of events was most likely not a complete surprise to him. In the Muqaddima, he describes how Arab Bedouin are excessively destructive of the sedentary societies they conquer.70 As examples of their overly destructive tendencies, Ibn Khaldūn states that they have a blatant disregard for anything built: They have a need for stones to put under cooking pots? They simply pull them out of buildings. They want

65Ibn Khaldūn, Kitāb Al-ʿibar, III: 537.
66Ibid., 543.
67Ibn Khaldūn also relates the story of the Muslim destruction of the Persian books and texts in the Muqaddima. Saʿd ibn Abi Waqqāṣ, commander of the Muslim army, wrote to ʿUmar, asking him for permission to distribute the works among the Muslim soldiers. In his reply, ʿUmar told him not to, but to rather throw them in the river, for “[i]f what they contain is right guidance, God has given us better guidance. If it is error, God has protected us against it.” This order was then carried out, as Ibn Khaldūn continues: “Thus the (Muslims) threw them into the water or into the fire, and the sciences of the Persians were lost and did not reach us”. Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah, I: 114.
68Ibn Khaldūn, Al-taʿrīf, 374.
69Ibid., 380.
wood for a campfire? They tear down the roofs. They are interested in law nor order and only in looting and plunder: hence the destruction of any civilisation they manage to conquer. Only when they are influenced by religion – as they were by Islam – are they able to unite and thrive, and build proper civilisations. What applies to a primitive nomadic group such as the Arab Bedouin, presumably also applies to similar primitive and nomadic groups, such as the Mongols. Ibn Khaldūn states, in his letter to Abū Saʿīd:

[The Mongols] are an astounding exemplar in their raids and pillaging, and in killing people of the sedentary societies, and in making them suffer under all sorts of horrors, on top of what they collect from them in taxes, and in accordance with the following of the customs of the Arab Bedouin.

So while Ibn Khaldūn harshly condemns the Mongol violence and destruction, it does fit into one of his theories: it can be compared to the destructive tendencies of the Bedouin Arabs. The fact that Ibn Khaldūn compares the Mongols to Arab Bedouins is significant. It remains unclear who exactly Ibn Khaldūn is referring to when he speaks of “Arab Bedouins” (conquering Bedouins or pre-Islamic Arabs), and Ibn Khaldūn is, as stated above, not particularly impressed with their ways. Nevertheless, these Bedouins are the people from who the Arabs, and particularly the upper classes – including Ibn Khaldūn himself – claim descent. The Mongols and their violence are thus compared to a group that has traditionally enjoyed high prestige in Arabic-Islamic culture. And while Ibn Khaldūn seems somewhat undecided on the matter of the comparison between the Mongol destruction of books during the conquest of Baghdad and similar acts reportedly committed by early Muslims, he does draw a parallel here. This connection is also a notable choice, given that these early Muslims too are held in high esteem in the Islamic tradition, on account of their tremendous conquests shortly after the birth of Islam and their chronological closeness to the prophet. By drawing these parallels between the conquering Mongol armies and groups of people esteemed in Islamic history, and by the way in which the Mongol penchant for looting and razing is connected with his ideas on the behaviour of “savage nations”, Ibn Khaldūn places the Mongol violence in a wider context. Added to that is the fact that a certain amount of violence is of course needed in order to overthrow another dynasty and establish control. So, although Ibn Khaldūn harshly condemns the Mongol violence, is clearly appalled by it, and regards it as unique in scale, he does see a certain historical continuity.

Like his contemporaries, Ibn Khaldūn despised the Mongol violence, but we do find it – albeit implicitly – presented in the broader context of his theories. In the work of Ibn Khaldūn’s contemporaries, as stated above, the Muslim–infidel dichotomy was a frequently employed topic. We have already seen that Ibn Khaldūn depicts Timur as a pious man, but what images of the Mongols and religion do we find elsewhere in his works?

To a certain extent, Ibn Khaldūn, like his contemporaries, sees a religious opposition between the two groups. In the early clashes between the Mamlūks and the Mongols, he refers to the Mamlūk army as the “Muslim army” (jaysh al-muslimin), placing the

72Ibn Khaldūn, Al-taʿrif, 382.
73Ibid., 1–4.
74Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimah, II: 46–7.
75Ibn Khaldūn, Kitāb al-ʿibar, V: 546, 548, 549.
Mamlûks and Mongols in religious opposition to each other, and he does the same when referring to the earlier Mongol conquests in Muslim Central Asia. The Muslim−infidel opposition is most obvious in a description of the rise of the Mamlûk dynasty in Egypt.76

When the state had become submersed in civilisation and luxury, dressed in the garments of misfortune and weakness, it was assaulted by the infidel (kafara) Tatars (tatar), who removed the seat of the caliphate and obliterated the splendour of the land and replaced faith with unbelief (kufr).

This because of what its people had adopted in laziness in ambition and refraining from defending and engaging in battle, [due to] immersion in luxury, occupying themselves with pleasure, and abandoning themselves in opulence. (…) It was the mercy of God that the faith was kept alive [for] he mended the unity of Muslims in the Egyptian lands (…) by sending them amîrs from the powerful and abundant Turkish peoples and tribes.77

However, this is one of the few times, if not the only occasion, when he refers to the Mongols as kafara, infidels. In this statement there is also a clear component of praise for the Mamlûks, the “amîrs from the powerful and abundant Turkish peoples”. They were Ibn Khaḍûn’s patrons in Egypt, which might indicate that he chose in this section to echo their legitimising claim of being the defence of Islam against the infidel Mongol threat. In any case, while in some other works the unbelief of the Mongols is a recurrent and key topic, this is not the case with Ibn Khaḍûn. He does view the early clashes in the light of a struggle of Muslims versus non-Muslims, but it is not a pervasive theme.

Additionally, the conversion of Mongol leaders to Islam – which most likely coincided with or even followed the conversion of some amîrs and lower-ranked elements in the Mongol armies78 – is a subject of considerable interest to Ibn Khaḍûn. At first, he states, Chinggis Khan and his people were adherents of Zoroastrianism. “Guided by God”, however, later generations converted to Islam.80 Ibn Khaḍûn regularly pays attention to these conversions by various Mongol rulers. He gives an elaborate account of the Jochid ruler Berke Khan’s (r. 1257–1266) conversion to Islam after his encounter with sheikh Shams al-Dîn al-Bukhârî, and he recounts how Berke then declared allegiance to the ‘Abbâsid caliph al-Must’aṣîm (r. 1242–1258). In addition to describing their conversion, Ibn Khaḍûn relates how some Mongols made an active effort in the name of Islam. Berke, for instance, “built mosques and madrasas in all his territories, and was close to the jurists and the ‘ulamâ’”.82 Another Jochid convert, Özbeg Khan (r. 1313–1341), “built a mosque for prayer”.83 Ibn Khaḍûn notes not only the conversions and Islamic deeds of the rulers Jochid ulus, who were Mamlûk allies, but also those of the Il-Khânids, who were the main enemy of the Mamlûks during that period. He describes the conversion of Tegûder, “who was [now] called Ahmad”, and who sought contact with Egypt.84 and

76 Ibid., 369–73.
77 Ibid., 371.
78 For a discussion of the Islamisation of the various Mongol khanates, see DeWeese, “Islamization”.
79 Ibn Khaḍûn, Kitâb Al-iṭâr, V: 526. Ibn Khaḍûn uses the term majûs, which usually denotes Zoroastrianism, but which according to Rosenthal might also be taken to mean pagan (Ibn Khaḍûn, Muqaddimah, I: 93 n. 9). The religious practices of these Mongols are usually described as Shamanism. See for example Morgan, Mongols, 40–4.
81 Ibid., 529, 534. However, there is no reference to the role Berke’s conversion and his allegiance to the caliph may or may not have played in the conflict between the Jochids and the Ilkhânate. According to Ibn Khaḍûn, this conflict had its origin in Berke’s murder of his predecessor Sartaq (Sarkhâd). Ibid., 534–5.
82 Ibid., 534.
83 Ibid., 537.
84 Ibid., 546.
that of Abagha (r.1265–1282).\(^\text{85}\) Nowhere does Ibn Khaldun question the authenticity of these conversions. The only Mongol to receive severe religious criticism is the Il-Khan Öljeytu (r. 1304–1316).\(^\text{86}\) This, however, is unrelated to his Mongol descent or perceived paganism, but has everything to do with his conversion to Shiism. In summary, we see that, while Ibn Khaldun’s focus on religious opposition between Mongols and Muslims is relatively mild to begin with, it disappears entirely following the Mongol conversions, although this dimension continued to play a role contemporary works as mentioned above.

A final key contrast regarding the religious aspect is Ibn Khaldun’s brief discussion of the *yasa*. Noteworthy here is his statement that this Mongol law code resembled “Sharia rules”. The contrast between this description of the *yasa* and that by Ibn ‘Arabshah could not have been greater, since the latter went to great lengths to emphasise the un-Islamic character of this *yasa*, and all the ways in which it directly opposes Sharia. According to Ibn ‘Arabshah, there is no such thing as an ‘idda-period in the *yasa*; the family members of the husband are allowed to sleep with the latter’s wife and people must prostrate themselves before the magistrate (*hâkim*), to name but a few examples.\(^\text{87}\) We find the same portrayal of the *yasa* as decidedly un-Islamic in the works of al-Maqrizi, Ibn Khaldun’s student,\(^\text{88}\) who referred to the *yasa* as “Satanic” and “forbidden by Sharia”.\(^\text{89}\) And the Syrian scholar Ibn Ta‘imiyya (1263–1328) stated that the Mongols were not true Muslims, in part because they supposedly adhered to the Mongol *yasa* rather than to the Sharia. This meant that they were apostates, and that jihad should be waged against them.\(^\text{90}\) Ibn Khaldun does not portray the *yasa* as un-Islamic at all, quite the contrary.

Thus, while we find echoes of the prevailing notion of Mongol–Muslim religious conflict that we find in contemporary works in *Kitâb al-‘ibar* and *Al-ta’rif*, we also see some clear differences. In particular, Ibn Khaldun’s description of Timur as a pious man who is a good Islamic ruler, together with his comparison of the *yasa* to the Islamic Sharia, contrasts with depictions found elsewhere.

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86 Ibn Khaldun refers to him as “Kharband”, “Kharbanda” being his original name. Öljeytu was also known as Muhammad Khâdîbân.deh. He states that Öljeytu “became friends with râhîds, and his faith deteriorated, and he dropped the mention of the two sheikhs [the caliphs Abû Bakr and ‘Umar] in the *khutbah*. He had the names of the twelve imams engraved on coins, and he built a city between Qazwin and Hâmdân, which he named al-Sultânîyya. He settled there and built a fine house of gold and silver bricks, with a garden across from it, in which were golden trees with fruits of pearls and precious stones. Through it flowed rivers of milk and honey, and in it lived slave boys and girls, and it looked like heaven to him. He committed atrocities in opposing those things that were sacred to his people.” Ibn Khaldun, *Kitâb Al-‘ibar*, V: 549. Apart from his deviancy in no longer adhering to the “proper” rules of the Friday sermon and disrespecting those things sacred to his (Sunni) subjects, there is a clear religious undertone in the criticism aimed at him in the discussion of his exception

89 Ayalon, “The Great Yâsa (Part A)”. Ayalon also discusses al-Maqrizi’s motivations for this in this article.
Conclusion

In both his world history Kitāb al-ʿibar and his autobiography Al-taʿrīf, Ibn Khaldūn discusses the Mongols and their history in considerable detail. Among these Mongols he includes the Turco-Mongolian conqueror Timur, whom he met personally. The Mongols fit into Ibn Khaldūn’s theories on the rise and fall of dynasties extraordinarily well: as a nomadic people they overthrew sedentary societies and installed their own dynasties there. According to Ibn Khaldūn, nomads are able to do so by reason of their great ʿaṣabīyya, in contrast to that of sedentary populations, who are corrupted by luxury and abundance and therefore gradually lose their ʿaṣabīyya. That the Mongols would have great ʿaṣabīyya would then appear to follow logically out of this, and it becomes clear in Ibn Khaldūn’s depiction of them that he does consider them to be in possession of impressive ʿaṣabīyya.

The two most important Mongol conquerors, Chinggis Khan and Timur, are portrayed as having serious amounts of ʿaṣabīyya that allow them to rally numerous tribes and clans behind them. They also possess other qualities that Ibn Khaldūn regards as signs of royal authority, necessary for rulers to properly lead their people, such as Timur’s heeding of scholarly guidance. That the Chaghadaids surrounding Timur have great ʿaṣabīyya, too, is demonstrated in their unanimous willingness to serve their young king. In addition, they have managed to retain their nomadic values, and have not been corrupted by luxury; this is key to powerful ʿaṣabīyya. This is in sharp contrast to the Muslim states Ibn Khaldūn mentions, which have succumbed to luxury and whose people have become lazy; they were consequently overrun by the nomadic Mongols.

Thus, to Ibn Khaldūn, the rise of the Mongols was a natural step in the course of history. Their violent and destructive tendencies greatly disturb him, but they too fit in with his notion of the excessive destruction brought about by the savage Arab Bedouins, to whom the Mongols are easily compared – a comparison Ibn Khaldūn explicitly makes. In addition, we have Ibn Khaldūn’s – albeit hesitant – comparison of Mongol depradations to the actions of early Muslims. So although Ibn Khaldūn shares his contemporaries’ distaste for the Mongols’ violence and their penchant for destruction, he does see a certain historical continuity.

In many contemporary works, we also find a focus on religious opposition between Mongols and Muslims. In Ibn Khaldūn’s works, we do find echoes of this, but it is relatively mild to begin with and it disappears entirely following the Mongol conversions. We find Timur described as a pious man, and the Mongol yasa is referred to as something “resembling Sharia”. This lack of religiously-inspired elements may also be traced back to Ibn Khaldūn’s view of the Mongols as a logical step in the course of history. It made him less inclined to dabble in religious propaganda against them – although he certainly does not shy away from religious propaganda altogether, as is evidenced by the case of Öijeiti’s conversion to Shiism!

To Ibn Khaldūn, the Mongols were a textbook example of the theories he developed based on Maghrebi history, in particular of his ideas on ʿaṣabīyya and the rise and fall of dynasties. The fact that the Mongol conquests conform to these theories is referred to in his works both explicitly – as in the examples he offers in the Muqaddima – and implicitly on many occasions. This consequently colours his view of the Mongols and affects the way he portrays them, especially regarding the themes of violence and religion, and in his depiction of Timur, who is presented in a more favourable light than in many contemporary works.