

# The Eclipse of Khurāsān in the twelfth century

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## Abstract

The province of Khurāsān constituted the centre of political, cultural, and religious life in the Sunni Islamic world from the ninth until the mid-twelfth century, after which Khurāsān was completely eclipsed. The question of how this occurred has remained almost completely unstudied; and the one study that there is does not consult the key primary literary sources for the time. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to re-examine what the primary sources reveal about the catastrophic cultural and political eclipse of Khurāsān in the mid-twelfth century, in order to demonstrate that this catastrophe was not due to “climate, cotton and camels” – in fact, Khurāsān was doing very well until the 1150s – but to concrete human agency and action: namely, the province’s destruction by the rampaging Oghuz Turkmens after Sultan Sanjar had been taken captive by them in 1153, thus leading directly to the downfall of the Great Seljuq Sultanate.

**Keywords:** Seljuqs, Sultan Sanjar, Khurāsān, Oghuz Turkmens, Climate cooling

To “tell sad stories of the death of kings” has been the province of historians from ancient times until the present day. This is so not because historians are a lugubrious confraternity, but because contemplation and analysis of the ultimate evanescence of human power is both fascinating and instructive; it falls under the category of Aristotle’s catharsis of pity and terror. Naturally, the greater the human achievement or polity that eventually collapses in ruin, the more impressive and dramatic is its downfall; royal – or, better yet, imperial – decline, downfall, and decay: these are the stuff a historian’s dreams are made on. The classic example of this fascination with ruin and decay is Edward Gibbon’s *magnum opus* on the Roman Empire (Gibbon 1997); although the work covers over a millennium of history, in its author’s eyes the most salient theme was the empire’s extraordinarily protracted “decline and fall”.

Gibbon’s outlook has had a great intellectual influence over the centuries, most notably perhaps in that modern historians have tended to follow his illustrious precedent by reflexively seeking a protracted decline whenever an empire falls – so much so, in fact, that there has sometimes been a tendency among historians to anticipate and exaggerate ruin, and even to find it prematurely lurking in the shadows. In the words of David Morgan, historian of the Mongol period:

Historians tend to be mesmerised by what I term Gibbon’s Law (empires may not fall without having previously experienced a period of decline),

whereas in fact empires often seem to decline without falling, and to fall without declining (Morgan 2004: 134–5).

Adherence to Gibbon's Law has certainly been the case with modern historical research into the fall of various Islamic empires, from the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid caliphates through the Mongol and Ottoman Empires.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite historians' attentiveness to disaster and doom, one of the most dramatic downfalls in Islamic history has been almost entirely ignored until quite recently: namely, the destruction of the Great Seljuq Empire in the mid-twelfth century, and the accompanying ravaging of the province of Khurāsān by hordes of Oghuz Turkmens.

The Great Seljuq period was one of the most important in Iranian, Central Asian, and Islamic history, inaugurating profound political, religious, demographic and cultural transformation across the lands the dynasty ruled.<sup>2</sup> One important element of Islamic civilization, however, remained constant until the 1150s and the effective end of Seljuq power: under Seljuq rule, Khurāsān, the heart of Islamic Central Asia, continued to be the centre of political, cultural, and religious life in the Sunni Islamic world.<sup>3</sup> This pre-eminence ended, however, quite abruptly in the mid-twelfth century, at the same time as the downfall of the Great Sultanate, after which Khurāsān was completely eclipsed: for the first time since the political break-up of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate in the ninth century, the leading role in Sunni Islamic civilization moved outside Khurāsān to places such as Anatolia, India, Egypt, and Khwarazm, on the periphery of what had hitherto been the core Islamic heartlands.<sup>4</sup>

This eclipse of Khurāsān transpired many decades before the Mongol Conquests, yet the question of why and how it occurred has until recently remained, with one notable exception, almost completely unstudied.<sup>5</sup> That one

1 See e.g. on the Umayyads: Wellhausen 1927; on the 'Abbāsids, Crone 1980; on the Mongols, Melville 1999; for the Ottomans, leading scholars who follow Gibbon's Law include Inalcik 1995: 41–52; and Lewis 1961.

2 For recent studies on some of these changes see e.g. Peacock 2015; Tor 2016; and Tor 2009b.

3 On which see Tor 2015.

4 Shihadeh (2016: 7) has noted this phenomenon in the intellectual sphere: "During the first half of the twelfth century, Khurasan flourished as the main centre of philosophical activity east of Baghdad, due largely to the patronage provided to a wide range of scholarship, including philosophy, by Sanjar ibn Malik Shāh". He also notes (esp. pp. 7 and 16) that following the Oghuz rampage, intellectual activity shifted to nearby regions, particularly Khwarazm and Transoxiana. The present author is grateful to Ayman Shihadeh for having provided a copy of the relevant sections of this work.

5 Bulliet 2009. Although several scholars have indeed discussed the end of Sanjar's rule and Seljuq downfall, none has appreciated how the end of Seljuq rule marked the end of Khurāsān's pre-eminence as well. Thus, while Barthold (1968: 320–32) has a section on Transoxiana in the early twelfth century and Sanjar's role there, he does not seem to appreciate the real effects of the Oghuz plundering of the 1150s, which he dismisses (329) in one sentence: "The Ghuzz subjected some towns of Khurāsān, Merv and Nishāpūr among them, to terrible plundering". Başan (2010: 112) subscribes to the standard accepted wisdom, in which a Gibbon-like long decline preceded the supposed real end of Seljuq rule after Qaṭwān ("The end came after the crushing defeat at Katvan") – a view which, as we shall see, is directly contradicted by the historical evidence.

study, however, does not consult the key literary sources for the time during which the disaster occurred. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine what the written primary sources reveal about the catastrophic cultural and political eclipse of Khurāsān in the mid-twelfth century, in order to demonstrate that this catastrophe was not due to “climate, cotton and camels” – in fact, Khurāsān was doing very well until the 1150s – but rather to concrete human agency and action: namely, its utter destruction by the rampaging Oghuz Turkmens from 1153 onwards after Sultan Sanjar had been taken captive by them, thus leading directly not only to the downfall of the Great Seljuq Sultanate, but also to the end of Khurāsān’s pre-eminence. In other words, the downfall of the Seljuqs and the eclipse of Khurāsān were inextricably intertwined.

### The historical role of Khurāsān

In order to understand just how irreparable a loss the eclipse of Khurāsān was to Islamic civilization, one must first understand the region’s unique role in the centuries leading up to the fall of the Great Seljuq Sultanate. The collapse of ‘Abbāsīd political rule in the Islamic East in the mid-ninth century marked not only the permanent political autonomy of Khurāsān and its Central Asian dependencies, but also the opening of an outstandingly brilliant period in its history. Over the ensuing three centuries, Greater Khurāsān<sup>6</sup> became the seat of the leading political and military powers of the Sunni world, and assumed primacy in its cultural, religious, and intellectual life. The dynasties based here – the Ṣaffārids, Sāmānids, Ghaznavids and Seljuqs – not only provided a military and political bulwark against the non-Sunni groups dominating more westerly lands, but were also the prime bearers of the banner of *jihād* and territorial expansion in this period.<sup>7</sup>

Politically, the culmination of this era was reached during the Great Seljuq Sultanate, which is remembered in medieval Islamic historiography as the high point of the post-caliphal period stretching between the ninth century and the coming of the Mongols – understandably, since the territorial extent

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Köymen (1991: 430–45), while he estimates that at least a quarter of the urban population of Khurāsān must have been killed by the Oghuz, and appreciates the evidence in the primary sources about the impact the Oghuz rampage had on both the ‘*ulamā*’ and in ending Sanjar’s reign, does not draw any larger conclusions about the impact this had on the historical role and cultural life of Khurāsān. Ellenblum (2012: 61–76) follows Bulliet, but limits himself to the mid-eleventh century, to which period he dates “the decline of the East”, in direct contradiction of the historical evidence.

6 I.e. cis-Oxanian Khurāsān, together with what was usually its dependent province, Transoxiana (obviously, during Sāmānid times, the seat of government was actually located in Transoxiana), although “Khurāsān” is normally used in the primary sources to encompass both the cis-Oxanian and trans-Oxanian territories that were normally incorporated under the rule of the governorate of Khurāsān; it is in this more inclusive sense that the term “Khurāsān” will be used henceforth.

7 On which see, in addition to Tor 2015; Tor 2009a; Tor 2002; and Bosworth 1975: esp. 162–87.

of this dynasty's realm was far greater than that of any other Sunni dynasty had been since the political crumbling of the unitary caliphate.<sup>8</sup>

This was widely recognized by the medieval chroniclers. Thus, for instance, Nīshāpūrī writes:

It is well-known that in all the nation of Islam, since the *Ṣahāba* and the *Rāshidūn* caliphs, after the sons of the uncle of Muṣṭafā<sup>9</sup> ... there have been no kings greater and in their governing of the people more worthy than the kings of the House of Seljūq.<sup>10</sup>

While statements of this sort are useful for establishing the relative status of the Seljuqs, and the regard in which they were held, they are rather general; fortunately, al-Ḥusaynī's encomium provides more specific supporting detail:

The prosperity and populousness of the land was abundant because of [the Seljuqs], and the subjects were blanketed by their beneficence and generosity. Justice reigned in the lands and the populace dwelt in security. During their time, the heartlands and the borderlands [of the realm] were filled with justice, the outlying and peripheral regions were guarded, the winds of oppression were stilled and the wings of evildoers clipped.<sup>11</sup>

As can be seen from this last description, Khurāsān between the ninth and the twelfth centuries – including the twelfth century, an important point to which we shall be returning – was also one of the wealthiest of the Sunni lands: not just from agriculture, manufacturing, and mining, but also from, for instance, Sāmānid, Ghaznavid, and Seljuq conquests in the Central Asian steppes, India, and the Caucasus, and from trade with both Europe and eastern Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Most importantly, the efflorescence of Khurāsān during these three centuries was not purely physical: throughout this period Khurāsān and its associated territories in Islamic Central Asia constituted the religious, cultural, and intellectual heart of the Islamic world as well. In the religious sciences in particular, Khurāsān is remarkable for having produced the most outstanding legal scholars, theologians, and Sufīs, culminating in the brilliance of the Seljuq period, which witnessed the activities of luminaries such as al-Qushayrī, Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī, and Ahmed-i Jām. All of this dazzling cultural and intellectual production, and Khurāsān's pre-eminent place in the Sunni Islamic

8 Crone 2004: 219–49; Tor 2013: 532–3.

9 *Viz.* the 'Abbāsids, who were the descendants of the Prophet's ["al-Muṣṭafā"] uncle al-'Abbās.

10 Nīshāpūrī 2004: 2. Similarly, Rāvandī states that "In the nation of Islam, after the *Rāshidūn* caliphs, in the realms of Banū'l-'Abbās, there have been no kings greater and more pious than the House of Seljūq" (Rāvandī 1945: 65).

11 Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 196; tr. Bosworth 2011: 128–9.

12 On these conquests see e.g. Tor 2009a: *passim*; Bosworth 1966: 88; Peacock 2005: 205–30; on trade, e.g. Noonan 1998; Kovalev 2002: 197–216; and King 2011: 175–85.

world, came to a rather abrupt end in the middle of the twelfth century; the question is why.

### Richard Bulliet's "Big chill theory": problems of conception and scientific evidence

The most popular theory that has been advanced to account for the eclipse of Khurāsān – and, in fact, the only theory to date in monographic form<sup>13</sup> – one that is perhaps anachronistically influenced by present-day concerns, is that proposed by Richard Bulliet in *Cotton, Climate and Camels*. In his own summary of his thesis:

In the eleventh century the cotton boom [that drove the prosperity of Iran and Khurāsān] petered out in northern Iran while the agricultural economy in general suffered severe contraction. At the same time, Turkish nomads for the first time migrated en masse into Iran . . . the engine that drove the agricultural decline and triggered the initial Turkish migrations was a pronounced chilling of the Iranian climate that persisted for more than a century (Bulliet 2009: 1).

In other words, Bulliet is positing that the mid-twelfth-century eclipse of Khurāsān was due to a gradual and progressive economic collapse over the course of a century and a half, caused by a catastrophic decline in both the cotton trade and what he thought to be the camel-dependent Turkic steppe nomadic economy as a result of supposed climatic cooling in Central and Western Asia; which in turn caused, and also combined with, the nomadic invasions from the steppes that destroyed Khurāsān. Let us leave aside for the moment the question of whether or not Bulliet is overstating the importance of cotton as opposed to all other agricultural and manufacturing products, and also the problem that the large-scale nomadic invasion from the steppes, after the initial destruction and dislocation, actually brought about prosperity rather than decline for over a century. Khurāsān, according to eyewitness testimony, thrived throughout most of the Seljuq period, yet the Seljuqs and a goodly portion of their armies and followers were Turkmen nomads.

Let us, rather, focus for the moment on the heart of his argument, which is that Khurāsān experienced a "Big Chill" or climate cooling at this time, and that the steppe migrations beginning in the eleventh century, culminating in the complete eclipse of Khurāsān in the mid-twelfth century, were due primarily to this supposed cooling, and a concomitant human inability to adapt to it over the course of time.<sup>14</sup>

The first problem with Bulliet's thesis is that he does not establish that there even was a "Big Chill" in Khurāsān, at least of the type he posits. Let us

13 The present author has advanced the view contained in the literary primary sources in various non-monographic fora; see e.g. Tor 2015: 4–6.

14 As Jürgen Paul (2016: 520, n. 91) points out, one must, in taking climate into historical account, also "differentiate according to regions, and . . . take the adaptivity of [different] societies into account".

examine Bulliet's treatment of the rather scarce and problematic scientific evidence (although as we shall see below, there are several ice core studies he did not utilize that are germane to the issue). Essentially, his theory rests on two studies of tree rings from Western Mongolia, both conducted at the Tree-Ring Lab at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University. However, scientifically speaking, the tree ring record from Western Mongolia is not indicative even of the climate in Mongolia as a whole, let alone of the climate some four thousand kilometers away<sup>15</sup> – as Bulliet himself observes, “Western Mongolia is a long way from Irān”.<sup>16</sup> In any given era, there is a great deal of regional variation, even across far smaller distances, in aridity and precipitation.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Bulliet himself admits the speculative nature of his interpretive use of this very limited data:

What renders this speculative is a lack of a consistent correlation of scientific evidence with climatic events in places that may also have been affected, such as northern China, and a shortage . . . of strong anecdotal evidence corresponding to what should have been the coldest years at the turn of the twelfth/sixth century (Bulliet 2009: 69).

It should be noted, however, that his interpretation of what effect a possible cooling of a degree or two on the Central Asian steppes might have had on the nomads living there is also open to doubt. Even today, in an era of global warming, average winter temperatures on the steppes of Uzbekistan average around  $-8^{\circ}$  Celsius/ $18^{\circ}$  Fahrenheit, and in the Fergana valley of Kyrgyzstan,  $-10^{\circ}$  C/ $10^{\circ}$  F. As anyone living in, say, the American Midwest can aver, if one is prepared for  $-10^{\circ}$  C one is also prepared for  $-13^{\circ}$  C; and the differences under consideration here were smaller than that.<sup>18</sup> Any climate variability, in other words, that did not cause an Ice Age or desiccation to the point of desertification is not enough to explain the wholesale eclipse of Khurāsān – and this

15 The author is indebted for confirmation of this point to Edward Cook, the Ewing Lamont Research Professor and actual director of the aforementioned Lamont-Doherty Tree-Ring Lab, in a personal communication to the author at the workshop “Climate in History” convened by Michael McCormick at Harvard University in 2012.

16 Bulliet 2009: 72.

17 Preiser-Kapeller 2015: 201. The present author is indebted to Johannes Preiser-Kapeller for supplying a copy of this article.

18 This same point was taken up by Jürgen Paul, in his examination of literature regarding the palaeoclimate of the Aral Sea region specifically. According to his review of the relevant studies, the climate became cooler and drier in that specific area from 900 to 1200 – dropping from an average of  $-7$  Celsius to an average of  $-9$ ; what might arguably have made a difference was a corresponding drop in precipitation – but that would have affected agriculture most, yet the archaeological record shows no cessation of settlement (Paul 2016: 523); note, moreover, that Elena A. Tsvetsinskaya, Bella I. Vainberg, and Elena V. Glushko (Tsvetsinskaya et al. 2002: 370) state that in Khwārazm the record shows there was actually a decrease in aridity, not an increase. In any case, Paul's conclusion holds valid: “There was no Big Chill in the Aral Sea basin . . . The nomadic habitat was not so much colder than it had been before – winters had been very cold all along” (Paul 2016: 525). Paul also notes studies showing that in the Tianshan mountains, where the Syr Darya has its headwaters, there was actually a medieval warm period.

still leaves aside the question of human adaptability to gradual processes of weather and climate change.<sup>19</sup>

The second problem with the “Big Chill” theory is that it depends on what Jürgen Paul has shown to be an unwarranted assumption: namely, that the Oghuz specialized to a large extent in camel breeding, and that these particular herds were sensitive to cold.<sup>20</sup> Paul has marshalled convincing evidence, however, that “the Seljuq Ghuzz held a mixed herd of the well-known Central Asian type” (Paul 2016: 514), comprising mostly sheep, but also, in descending order of importance, goats, horses, cattle (which seem to have been the only animal absent in the Seljuq case), and camels (less than 3 per cent of the overall herds). It is clear from the literary sources, moreover (including those regarding Oghuz tax payments in the critical period, the mid-twelfth century<sup>21</sup>) that sheep “were the ‘bread and butter’ business, the animals by which the group survived. And there can be little doubt that sheep indeed made up a very large proportion of Ghuzz herds.”<sup>22</sup> Whenever the Seljuq mounts are described, moreover, they are named as horses, not camels. In fact, a contemporaneous anonymous author, writing in the year AD 982 of “the Ghuzz Country”, states explicitly: “Their wealth is in horses, cows, sheep, arms, and game in small quantities” (Anon. 1982: 100); camels are not mentioned.

### The “Big Chill” and the literary evidence

The third problem with the “Big Chill” theory, and the most critical for a historian, is that the literary evidence cited to bolster it also falls short, both in its nature and in the historical use made of it. Our examination will therefore focus on this evidence – the actual historical memory of both Seljuq rule and the eclipse of Khurāsān in the mid-twelfth century – and the manner in which it has been used, supplemented by the scientific studies and primary sources that have not previously been considered.

19 In Preiser-Kapeller’s words: “Mono-causal deterministic models of the impact of climatic conditions on political and economic developments are insufficient to capture the complex interplay between environmental parameters and social structures . . . the actual reaction of any ecosystem – including human societies – to environmental change does not only depend on the strength and frequency of these disturbances, but also on the capability of a system to resist or adapt to such changes” (Preiser-Kapeller 2015: 195–6).

20 Paul 2016: 513–9.

21 Which are enumerated in the primary sources (e.g. Nīshāpūrī 2004: 61; Rāvandī 1945: 177) as having consisted of a tax of 24,000 sheep for the Sultan’s kitchen; no camels appear there. Although camels are mentioned at one point for Qarluq nomads in Transoxiana, the word employed is not that for the special hybrid camel that *Cotton, Climate and Camels* posits, nor do the relative numbers and proportions suggest that any of these nomads were primarily camel herders: when the Qarluq of Transoxiana made a desperate attempt to placate Sanjar in 1141 before turning to the Gür Khān of the Qarākhitay for assistance, with disastrous effects for the Seljuqs, “They sent to him and offered to him service of 5,000 camels [*jamal*, not *bukht*], 5,000 horses, and 50,000 heads of sheep, but he did not accept” (Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 93).

22 Paul 2016: 515, basing himself on all the most important historical primary sources: Mīrkhwānd, Gardīzī, Bayhaqī, etc.

The literary evidence Bulliet adduces for the period is scant, consisting essentially of a handful of citations from Ibn al-Jawzī's chronicle (of which only two are unambiguously exceptional weather events); two citations, of dates only one year apart, in a translation of Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue; and a scattering of individual citations from Bayhaqī and 'Utbī – all limited to a period that is too early, from 920–1029.<sup>23</sup> The attestations from Ibn al-Jawzī dating to the years 1027 to 1029 can be immediately dismissed, since ice core research has shown that a major eruption of the Baitoushan volcano (located between today's North Korea and China) led to a sulfate spike in 1027, producing between 1028 and 1032 in the northern hemisphere the coldest winters in a thousand-year record (Oppenheimer 2003: 424). This was, in other words, demonstrably a short-lived volcanic winter weather anomaly;<sup>24</sup> this is a good illustration of one of the pitfalls of attempting to hypothesize about climate using anecdotal evidence from chronicles: climate is a scientific matter requiring, for instance, systematic ice-core analysis, and cannot be accurately evaluated by gleaned references to anomalous weather events recorded by chroniclers and travellers.<sup>25</sup>

Let us now examine the other reports from Ibn al-Jawzī, together with the two attestations from Ibn Faḍlān. One immediately notices that they are, first, all far too early: Ibn Faḍlān's account, together with at least two of Ibn al-Jawzī's, refers to snow in the mid-920s. The relevant passage from Ibn al-Jawzī refers to snowfall in Baghdad in the year 926 – but, once again, the unusually cold weather of this year is known from ice core research to have been tied to volcanic action rather than climate change (Castellano et al. 2005). The second instance reported by Ibn al-Jawzī refers to an isolated severe weather event, snowfall in Baghdad in 1007. Once again, this is far too early (as well as geographically too distant from Khurāsān), for Bulliet's timeline; if the climate had worsened significantly and persistently to a degree that affected agriculture and pastoral nomadism, then there should have been similar attestations from the later eleventh and twelfth centuries when, according to Bulliet's hypothesis, the cooling culminated, and these attestations should have become more, not less, frequent and of greater reported severity; further, it would not take a century and a half for the effect of drastic climatic worsening to show up – it does not take one hundred and fifty years for camels to get cold or cotton to die – and yet the eclipse of Khurāsān transpired in the mid-twelfth century, not when Ibn al-Jawzī describes the snow as having fallen. In fact, one of the few studies undertaken by climatologists involving medieval Baghdad has shown that while there was perhaps a period of cooling, this occurred in the tenth century, in accord with Ibn al-Jawzī's evidence, not in the eleventh and twelfth, which were significantly warmer, not cooler (Dominguez-Castro et al. 2012: 76–82).

23 Since, according to the "Big Chill", the growing cold should have reached its peak during the Seljuq period, especially the twelfth century. Bulliet (2009: 77) also cites one that is so early as to be irrelevant (regarding the year AD 855), from Ḥamza al-İṣfahānī; Ibn al-Jawzī, cited pp. 70, 78; Ibn Faḍlān, 79; Bayhaqī, 80–83; 'Utbī, 83.

24 For which see e.g. Kōdera 1994: 1273–82; Dunn 2004: 46–9.

25 Especially since a traveller such as Ibn Faḍlān, who was accustomed to a very warm climate, would no doubt find the winters on the steppes of Asia or the North American Great Plains to be extraordinarily frigid, even if they were substantially warmer than usual; his standard of reference would be inappropriate.



Another significant problem with adducing particular instances of severe cold weather, such as the Baghdadi winter of 1007, as evidence for climate cooling is that isolated weather events do not equal climate: Bulliet states that “Today a five-hour snow shower in Baghdad would be as startling and memorable as it was in 904/291” (Bulliet 2009: 71). But in our own day, snow did indeed fall in Baghdad in 2008 for the first time in 100 years; and Jerusalem experienced in 2013 a record 8 inches of snowfall, and freezing temperatures for five consecutive days – yet we live in an era of global warming, not of a “Big Chill”. Most importantly, moreover, Baghdad, although closer than Mongolia, is still geographically too far away from Khurāsān to be of relevance in this type of climate discussion; the literary attestations for Khurāsānian climatic severity should not have to be dredged up from places that were a thousand miles distant.

The other, more ambiguous, literary evidence Bulliet cites evinces similar analytical problems. To wit, his primary literary evidence apart from the extreme weather events consists of accounts of crop failure and famine; yet Bulliet does not examine the historical context of those reported famines. Such an examination of the broader context, however, suggests that these reported cases might well be due more to human action than to climate factors. Thus, Bayhaqī’s report regarding the ruins in which Nīshāpūr lay in 1040, which Bulliet interprets as having been due to climate change (Bulliet 2009: 81), was surely due not to extraordinary weather, but rather, first, to ongoing Ghaznavid misgovernment and mulcting of Khurāsān, the result of which was that “the land became ruined and the population dispersed”;<sup>26</sup> and, second, to the prolonged Seljuq conquest and years of warfare and marauding that preceded it, which meant there was no agricultural margin for the inevitable bad harvest or unfavourable weather event, and that supply lines and the agricultural hinterland had been ruined.<sup>27</sup> Bayhaqī, in fact, speaks of physical destruction, which was obviously due to warfare, marauders, and successive occupations, not to cold: “Nīshāpūr this time was not as I had seen it [in the past]; everything had been destroyed, and little wealth [or] population remained” (Bayhaqī: 738).

Moreover, when one examines the immediate context of the passage Bulliet cites, one sees that this food scarcity clearly refers to Nīshāpūr alone, and was wrought by the Seljuq occupation of the city with their army; this scarcity is contrasted with the abundance found in parts of Khurāsān that had not come under Seljuq occupation or attack, most notably Ghazna; it is thus clear that the cold is mentioned merely as an additional hardship, not as the root cause of the ruinous state of the city. Bayhaqī in fact contrasts the dearth of food in war-plagued Nīshāpūr with the abundance of food in Ghazna at the very same moment: “We have such a huge amount of corn in Ghazni, and such dearth and want here!” (Bayhaqī: 741; trans. Bosworth 2011: 2: 301). In light of this reported abundance of food crops in parts of Khurāsān that were not war-torn, Bulliet’s interpretation of Bayhaqī’s passage becomes untenable; for all the cases of famine during the 1030s that he cites are limited to war-torn and

26 Ibn al-Athīr, as cited and translated by Bosworth 1968: 14.

27 On the drawn-out conquest of Nīshāpūr see Paul 2005: 575–85.

Turkmen-ravaged areas of Khurāsān, and abundance is reported where the warring armies and raiders did not reach.<sup>28</sup>

This lack of historical contextualization also leads Bulliet in some cases to confuse cause and effect, attributing, for instance, the Seljuq civil war over the succession (1092–1105) that ensued upon Malikshāh's untimely death, to "a heightened competition for dwindling resources" (Bulliet 2009: 86). This is implausible: not only are there numerous instances throughout human history of succession struggles among underage child princes and their regents after the untimely death of a sovereign, occurring in every era and therefore not attributable to "Big Chills", but also, the restoration of law and order in Khurāsān after 1106 and the resultant second Seljuq golden age under Sanjar thereafter, simply could not have resulted in the great prosperity noted by all the literary sources, had climate-induced food scarcity been the cause of the previous disorders.<sup>29</sup> Sanjar's time should in fact have been even more disorderly and poverty-stricken according to Bulliet's theory, but according to the historical record the contrary is the case.<sup>30</sup>

Another case of interpretation divorced from the necessary historical context is Bulliet's citing of al-Ghazālī's letter of 1106 asking for tax remission for the people of Ṭūs: the reasons Bulliet quotes<sup>31</sup> are that the people have "suffered boundless injustice, and [their] grain was destroyed by cold and drought" – note that even in this excerpt, the primary blame is the "boundless injustice"; the cold was just the coup de grace.<sup>32</sup> The paragraph from the letter reads as follows:

... The people of Ṭūs are overtaken by troubles, dispersed and uprooted, by injustice [*zulm*] and fate; and because the crops were spoiled by cold and drought . . . . Have mercy upon them, so that God, may He be exalted, will have mercy upon you. . . (Al-Ghazālī 1333/1914f.: 10).

- 28 In fact, at least two sources explicitly make clear this connection: Ibn al-Athīr specifically attributes food dearth to the extended campaigns of both armies in the province, stating: "When the sojourn of Subashi [the Ghaznavid general] and his armies, and of the Saljuqs, in Khurasan lengthened, the country was despoiled and blood flowed [freely]; and provisions and foodstuffs became short, especially for the armies" (Ibn al-Athīr 1979, 9: 480). Similarly, al-Ḥusaynī (1984: 7) relates how Chaghri Beg, seeing how the Muslims of Nīshāpūr were suffering from the high prices that resulted from the Seljuq occupation of the districts around Nīshāpūr, and thus prevented caravans and supplies from reaching the city, out of ruth withdrew his forces. On the same page he notes that Sultan Mas'ūd refrained from going to "Khurāsān" due to the dearth of supplies there; so he wintered at Bust instead. Again, a global-cooling-induced famine would have touched Bust as well as Nīshāpūr.
- 29 Moreover, even if a cooling climate had indeed affected cotton by shortening its growing season, this does not automatically hold true for wheat and other grains. The author is indebted to Jürgen Paul, in a personal communication, for this point.
- 30 See below for an extensive discussion of what the literary sources report about Seljuq rule in the twelfth century.
- 31 It is unclear from what source, since he provides no reference; his translation appears to differ slightly from the standard Iqbāl Persian edition of the letters.
- 32 And, as Jürgen Paul has pointed out in a communication with the author, "Cold, drought, locusts etc. are a *topos* in such letters. The subject always is that good administration takes such events into account, and bad administration insists on the letter of the tax assignment".

To what does that “injustice and fate/misfortune” refer? The answer is given in the same letter collection, in a missive al-Ghazālī addressed to Sanjar’s vizier Fakhr al-Mulk, in which primary blame for the problems of Ṭūs is clearly attributed to bad government and “oppression”:

Know in truth that this city [Ṭūs] has been depopulated by oppression [*zulm*] and dearth. Whilst news of you was spread from Isfarā’in and Damghān,<sup>33</sup> then they were afraid, and the dihqāns from terror sold the grain and the oppressors [*zālimān*] asked pardon from the oppressed [*mazlūmān*]. Now that you have gone from that place, however [viz. the vizier is farther away], every fear and dread has [re-]arisen, and the dihqāns and bakers have placed a chain upon the grain and the stores [i.e. have hoarded the crops], and the oppressors have become bold, and put their hand again to robbery. They have been high-handed, and in the night they broke into some houses and stores . . . and they have seized, on [baseless] accusation of theft, faultless, upright men . . . . And if anyone tells you something to contrary about the state of this city, he is the enemy of your religion (Al-Ghazālī 1333/1914f: 31).

Wholly apart from what appears to have been the problem of specific local officials and notables, one must not ignore the fact that, in addition to the brutal and highly destructive civil war that was ongoing until the death of Berkyaruq in 1105, there was also an Ismaili campaign of destruction taking place at this time – and this almost surely played some kind of role in what al-Ghazālī is describing.

We discover by opening any chronicle of the period that precisely this area, in the years leading up to al-Ghazālī’s request, had experienced devastation from unchecked Ismaili activity that had flourished in the disorder caused by the long Seljuq civil war – indeed, warring against the Ismailis was to be one of the first campaigns Sulṭān Muḥammad Ṭapar undertook in 1105–06 after the death of his brother and the end of the succession struggle that had lasted for over a decade.<sup>34</sup> Regarding this Ismaili activity, Ibn al-Athīr reports that a large group of Ismailis, originally from Bayhaq:

Wrought devastation . . . killing extensively among the inhabitants [of Khurāsān], plundering their belongings, and capturing their women. . . . And in this year [1104–05] their matter became worse, and they became strengthened; they did not hold their hands back from anyone whom they wished to kill, because the sultans were occupied with other things. Among their deeds: they prevented the Hajj from gathering from Transoxiana, Khurāsān, India, and other lands; they spread all the way to the districts of Rayy . . . and set them to the sword, killing [people]

33 The distance between Nīshāpūr and Isfarā’in as the crow flies is 93 miles; to modern Ṭūs, 119 miles; Damghān to Nīshāpūr is 248 miles; to Ṭūs, 288.

34 On Muḥammad’s war against the Ismailis, see e.g. al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 79–80, and Hillenbrand 1996: 205–20.

however they wished, and plundering their goods and beasts; they did not leave anything (Ibn al-Athīr 1979, 10: 392–3).

Clearly the environs of Nīshāpūr and Ṭūs were among those areas of Ismaili activity, since in the very year of al-Ghazālī's request, 1106, in Nīshāpūr itself, this very same vizier, Fakhr al-Mulk, Niẓām al-Mulk's most competent son and Sanjar's vizier, was assassinated by Bāṭinīs.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, to put these letters and al-Ghazālī's request in perspective: if the agricultural areas around Aleppo in 2017 were to have experienced an unusually severe winter and suffer a poor harvest, it would be historically and climatologically indefensible to blame this on a supposed "Big Chill" rather than the ongoing Syrian civil war. The only additional literary source from the Seljuq period adduced in support of the "Big Chill" theory is one sole report in Ibn al-Athīr that cold weather in the winter of 1098 caused a rise in prices (Bulliet 2009: 84), something that can be found periodically in any annalistic record, whether it be written during a period of climate warming, cooling, or stasis.

### **The historical memory of the later Seljuq period: the twelfth century and Sanjar**

The most important objection to the "Big Chill" thesis, however, is that it stands in opposition to the testimony of the written primary sources for the twelfth century, both in its timeline and in its attribution of cause. If there really had been a one hundred and fifty year period of cooling in Western Asia, with the accompanying adverse agricultural effects that the theory posits, reaching its apex in the twelfth century, then Khurāsān throughout the Seljuq period, but especially in the first half of the twelfth century under Sanjar, should have witnessed increasing agricultural difficulties and impoverishment; indeed, the Seljuq period in its entirety should have been recorded by medieval historians as one of cold, penury, and dwindling resources; and both Malikshah's and Sanjar's periods should have been more straitened than, say, Toghril Beg's and Alp Arslān's – yet, as we shall see, both the people of the time and those who lived in succeeding generations reported precisely the opposite: Seljuq rule was regarded as puissant, wealthy, and glorious, and these two reigns in particular, of Malikshāh and Sanjar, are viewed as high points, not only of Seljuq rule, but of the entire Persianate dynastic period. There is, in other words, not only a lack of historical evidence that supposed long-term climate cooling caused gradual economic decline and destitution, but an actual refutation of this thesis in the testimony and perceptions of both the people who lived through it and the historians who viewed it in perspective after it had ended.<sup>36</sup>

35 Ibn al-Athīr 1979, 10: 418–9; Ibn al-Jawzī 1412/1992, 10: 99; Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī 1434/2013: 13: 306, 311.

36 It should be noted that this is also supported by the archaeology; Wordsworth (2015: 59), for instance, states that the trade route he was examining between Marv and points west "formed a 'high-road' of travel between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries at least". That is, flourishing economic activity continued until the Oghuz made this impossible.

In part, this error rests on a mistaken timeline of decline, which first arose from the dearth of research on the twelfth century, and led to the hitherto prevailing scholarly assumption that the power of the Great Sultans never recovered from the civil war over the succession to Malikshāh that began in 1092 and lasted for over a decade, until 1105. In other words, as a result of the almost complete absence of research into the latter half of Seljuq rule, earlier scholars simply assumed that the political weakness of the great sultanate that marked the succession crisis must also have characterized the entire second half of the Saljūq polity.<sup>37</sup>

In short, the conventional wisdom for a long while simply assumed that the entire last century of Seljuq rule was in effect one long Gibbon-like decline, and that the sultans were impotent puppet-rulers – a view, as we shall see, not supported by the primary sources, and no longer the consensus view among scholars;<sup>38</sup> rather, the power and authority of the Great Seljuq Sultans was restored after the civil wars ended in 1105, and particularly after Sanjar b. Malikshāh's assumption of the Supreme Sultanate in 1118, thereby reversing, in Greater Khurāsān at least (that is, the areas under Sanjar's direct control, rather than that of suffragan sultans), the centrifugal tendencies which had taken root during the succession dispute. Part of what has confused the issue was the fact that the centre of the Great Sultanate after 1118 shifted very far to the east, so that the Baghdadī chroniclers upon whom most modern historians relied were now recording events only under weaker subordinate sultans on the periphery of the empire, rather than at its centre (a point that several scholars did not take into account) – that, however, is outside the scope of this study.<sup>39</sup>

Returning to the “Big Chill” theory, however, let us examine what the literary sources reveal about the Seljuq period generally, which according to the “Big Chill” should have been markedly poorer than those that preceded it, and growing ever more so. As we noted above, the sources do not bear this out – nor does the historical record: the fact remains that the Seljuq empire was by far the largest territorially to arise in the Islamic heartlands since the ‘Abbāsīd collapse, and it underwent even further expansion (in both India and Central Asia) during Sanjar's time in the early twelfth century. This sheer size and scale of rule over the course of a century could not have been possible had the resources of Seljuq

37 E.g. Sana'ullah 1938; Hodgson 1977, 2: 52, who states that after 1092 “there disappeared . . . all check on the centrifugal tendencies of the amīrs”; Cahen (1969: 162, 168), who goes so far as to aver that the death of Malikshāh “resulted in a partition of the empire, devastation, administrative disorder, and universal usurpation. For what had begun in 1092 got worse with every change of ruler”, and that no subsequent sultan ever “aspir[ed] to reunite the whole empire under his sway”; and Bosworth 1968: 119–20. Pace Bosworth's statement (p. 102), that “After 485/1092 the caliphs would never again have to fear so powerful a member of the Great Saljuq dynasty”, the Seljuqs in fact only began murdering and deposing caliphs in the second quarter of the twelfth century (see Tor 2009b). The only notable exceptions to the decline theory regarding the second half of Seljuq rule are Spuler (1970: 151), who noted that “in the east Sanjar . . . vigorously reunited the Seljuq empire” and Köymen (1994, which originally appeared in 1954).

38 See e.g. Paul 2013: 81; Tor, s.v. “Sanjar, Aḥmed b. Malekshāh”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*; although Peacock (2015: 101), appears to espouse a modified version of Gibbon's Law.

39 The present author has repeatedly drawn attention to this shift and its political consequences; see e.g. most recently Tor 2017: 301–14.

government been fewer than those at the disposal of the Sāmānid and Ghaznavid administrations.

In fact, the literary record – whether written towards the end of the Seljuq period, within a century after the end of their rule, or more than a century later – clearly and unanimously conveys the fact that the Seljuq period overall was one of material prosperity rather than growing indigence.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, several historians not only rate the Seljuqs highly, but do so in relation to past Muslim rulers; for instance, the earliest historian of the period whose work survives, Nīshāpūrī, who wrote during the reign of the last Seljuq sultan, Toghril b. Arslān (d. 1194), avers as a universally known fact, writes that, since the ‘Abbāsīd heyday:

There were no kings greater, nor more worthy in the governing of creation, than the kings of the House of Seljūq . . . . Some of the good things that transpired during the days of their reign [as] in no other period were: the revival of the signs of religion and the raising high of the pillars of the Muslim faith; the building and creating of mosques, madrasas, *ribāṭs* and bridges; and the bestowing lavishly upon . . . and granting endowment to the religious scholars, descendants of the Prophet, ascetics, and pious people; and the signs of that are apparent throughout the realms of Islam.<sup>41</sup>

Even allowing for panegyric excess (after all, the author did not have to be enthusiastic to such a degree), this is not the eulogy of a dynasty that was considered to be poorer or less grand than its predecessors – and this is confirmed by an examination of the sources composed after the Seljuq period had ended, and there would have been no question of sycophantic flattery.<sup>42</sup> Thus, for instance, returning to al-Ḥusaynī’s statement,<sup>43</sup> written within a few decades of the end of Seljuq rule, which was cited earlier:

The prosperity and populousness of the land was abundant because of [the Seljuqs], and the subjects were blanketed by their beneficence and generosity. Justice reigned in the lands and the populace dwelt in security . . . .

40 For discussions of the main sources (particularly for the late Seljuq period) and their dating, see Meisami’s chapter “The historiography of the Saljūq period”, in Meisami 1999:141–280; and the brief survey in Peacock 2015: 14–7.

41 Nīshāpūrī 2004: 2–3. The “greater” part, at least, is indisputable; as first noted by Crone (2004: 234), they were the only dynasty to reunite under their rule all the Islamic heartlands, “from Transoxiana to Syria”, after the break-up of the unitary caliphate; in A.C.S. Peacock’s words (Peacock 2015: 6): “The scale of the state the Seljuqs founded dwarfed any earlier Muslim Turkish polity – indeed, in terms of area, it was second only to the ‘Abbāsīd caliphate at its height and was considerably larger than any of the other contemporary Muslim empires such as the Fatimids in Egypt or the Almoravids in Morocco and Spain.”

42 All of which confirm Nīshāpūrī’s appraisal at least implicitly – for instance regarding the founding of religious institutions (see Tor 2011b; Tor 2016: 386–90). The chronicles are littered with accounts of religious foundations of every variety throughout the Seljuq period, by both members of the ruling dynasty – including women – and of its administration.

43 The *terminus ad quem* for the final form of this chronicle is given by Bosworth as 1262, although al-Ḥusaynī himself, the primary author, apparently served under the Khwārazmshāh Muḥammad b. Tekish (r. 1200–1220); Bosworth, *History*, 4–5.

During their time, the heartlands and the borderlands [of the realm] were filled with justice, the outlying and peripheral regions were guarded, the winds of oppression were stilled and the wings of evildoers clipped.<sup>44</sup>

Rāvandī, also writing around 1204 (Meisami 1999: 239), similarly extols Seljuq rule, echoing Nīshāpūrī: “In the nation of Islam, after the Rāshidūn caliphs, throughout the reign of the Banī ‘Abbās, there were no kings more pious or greater than the Seljuqs” (Rāvandī 1945: 65). And, giving some historical perspective from the first part of the fourteenth century, Mustawfī Qazvīnī states:

The lords of the dynasties which existed in the Islamic era, every one of them, were stained by some flaw. . . . But the Saljuqs were free of these defects: they were perfect, and Sunni, and of pure religion and good beliefs; possessed of liberality, gracious to their subjects, and to the blessing of these; in their state, no Khārijī ever rebelled<sup>45</sup> . . . . God, may He be exalted, always kept the pillars of the dynasty [viz. the magnates] in perpetual submission to the kings.<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, the Seljuq sultans could not have been liberal had they not also been wealthy; and the sources make quite clear that they were indeed wealthy rulers – including, most importantly, and to the detriment of both “The Big Chill” theory and Gibbon’s Law, Sanjar.

For the literary sources for the Seljuq period all maintain in no uncertain terms that Sanjar’s reign was a high point in Islamic history, in terms of both prosperity and power; the only other Seljuq ruler whose reign they write about with anything close to the enthusiasm and encomia they accord to Sanjar’s is Malikshāh. Thus, Nīshāpūrī states that:

[Sanjar] was, among the Seljuqs, the ruler who enjoyed the greatest length of life . . . wide-spread reputation, accumulation of wealth, conquest of lands, and suppression of opponents. . . . He possessed the kingly glory [*farr*] of the Kayānids and the majesty of the Sasanids. He had thorough command of the customs of rule, the statutes of kingship, and the dignity of rulership.<sup>47</sup>

Nīshāpūrī also points out, most importantly, that “for nigh unto forty years he made nineteen conquests, during which at no time did he display weakness, nor was he defeated”, concluding that “He was a blessed king; the Shadow of God, strong, of auspicious aspect. The boundary of Khurāsān in his time became

44 Al-Ḥusaynī, 1984: 196; tr. Bosworth 2011: 128–9.

45 Note that he maintains a discreet silence regarding Bāṭinīs.

46 Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f.: 426. Although Jürgen Paul has pointed out to the author the anti-Khwārazmian tendencies of Rāvandī, the other authors serve as a control for him; he is not stating anything that other authors, without his political agenda, do not also state.

47 Nīshāpūrī 2004: 54; quoted more or less verbatim by Rāvandī 1945: 168. Cf. also the poet Anvarī’s paean comparing Sanjar to Khusro (Anvarī 1959, 1: 116–7).

the desire of mortals and the native soil of the sciences, the fountain of literary attainments and the mine of knowledge” (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 56). Indeed, another source informs us: “all the rulers of the world submitted to him and became obedient to his command”.<sup>48</sup>

The other major sources corroborate this assessment. Al-Ḥusaynī, for instance, states: “Sultan Sanjar was successful in all his actions; victorious in his military campaigns [*ghazawātihi*] . . . and he ruled great kingdoms, the likes of which no one before him and no one after him ever ruled, except his father the Sultan Malikshāh” (Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 90). He further describes Sanjar as “The mightiest monarch whom God had [ever] made king” (Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 92) and describes his great wealth and munificence – on one occasion, he is said to have distributed 700,000 dīnārs over the course of five days (Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 125). This picture of magnificence, wealth, and power rather than decline, is further confirmed by Rāvandī, who adds:

[Sanjar] was a king of blessed shadow, God-fearing, of auspicious encounter. In his period the boundary of Khurāsān became the desire of mortals, the source of the religious sciences, the fountain of virtues and the mine of science.<sup>49</sup>

Another late-twelfth-century author, the Arabic chronicler Ibn al-Jawzī, likewise states that after Sanjar became Supreme Sultan in 1118, “. . . his power was exalted and [he] was awe-inspiring . . . so the country was peaceful in his time” (Ibn al-Jawzī 1412/1992, 18: 121). Ibn Khallikān, too, writing in the thirteenth century, reports Sanjar’s treasurer as stating:

The wealth gathered in [Sanjar’s] treasury was such that I never heard that the treasuries of a single one of the Khusroes had gathered its like . . . [Indeed,] I never heard of any king who had the like, nor of anything close to him. And his power did not cease increasing and his good fortune in ascending until the Oghuz vanquished him (Ibn Khallikān 1419/1998, 2: 356).

And, finally, the important fourteenth-century sources confirm that this reputation held true even with the perspective of distance: Mustawfī Qazvīnī writes in similar mode that Sanjar was “The Sultan of the Sultans of the world . . . Amongst the sultans of Islam he was as Parvīz among the Khusroes, through many conquests, high dignity and pursuit of success”;<sup>50</sup> and al-Yazdī, after heralding him as “Lord, subduer of enemies, King of kings, benevolent; strengthener of religion, defender of truth, aid of [all] creatures” (Yazdī 1388/1968: 83) effuses:

48 Isfīzārī 1959: 1: 391. Similarly, a source actually written during Sanjar’s time (Anon. 1318/1939f.: 317), states: “In all the lands of Islam. . . the *khutba* was made in his name upon the *minbars*,” and, in a like laudatory vein, Jūzjānī 1363/1944: 1: 258.

49 Rāvandī 1945: 171; this is a paraphrase of Nīshāpūrī 2004: 56.

50 Or, possibly, “prosperity”, if one amends “*kām-rawā’i*” to “*kām-rānī*”. Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f.: 448.



He was a potent monarch in establishing the pillars of universal sway, a non-pareil [*‘adīm al-mithāl*] ... In suppressing enemies and opponents and conquering of cities and lands, and the attainment of all sorts of wishes and the breaking of the hearts of the people of perverseness/rebellion, and making easy the situation of the community of worshippers, he was a paradigm in his rule [*āyatī bovad dar shān-i ū*]. For forty years, he patiently gave his very self to the trouble of journey and the pain of waging war, in order to make the people of the time obedient and yield to command.<sup>51</sup>

Lest one think that all of this is uncritical fawning, or its echo down the centuries, it should be noted, first, that the chroniclers could not have invented wholesale Sanjar’s string of military victories – and that includes not only his decades of success prior to 1141, but also, crucially, his victories subsequent to the debacle of Qaṭwān. Second, even supposing that all the authors had, mysteriously, been in universal collusion across the centuries tendentiously to inflate Sanjar’s success for their own didactic purposes, they need not have done it to such a degree; merely placing him on a par with, say, Toghril Beg or Maḥmūd of Ghazna would have done the trick.

Finally, it is significant that the appraisals of Sanjar’s puissance are universal across the centuries, and also include the commentary of authors who were demonstrably uninhibited in their frank evaluation of his power, which makes them particularly valuable in this context. Thus, for instance, Bundārī, writing of Sanjar’s own first years as ostensible governor of Khurāsān, when Sanjar was a mere boy of about ten,<sup>52</sup> has no hesitation in describing Sanjar as having been a cypher at that time, “not assuming responsibility for governing ... but possessing only the name of government ...” (Bundārī 1889: 259). Therefore when this same author writes to the contrary regarding Sanjar’s reign in the early years of the twelfth century, showing that as Sanjar matured he became a vigorous and effective monarch, the statement carries weight: “[Sanjar’s] rule continued in Khurāsān, and his sultanate became ever stronger and his power held sway...” (Bundārī 1889: 262). After 1105, so Bundārī enthuses, “[Sanjar’s] success continued and his affairs were fortunate, his dawns illuminated, and his light broke forth” (Bundārī 1889: 262).

Indeed, the proof of Sanjar’s real strength is found in the fact that, even after his sole pre-Oghuz military defeat, which took place in 1141 in battle with the infidel Qara Khitai at Qaṭwān, he still remained the supreme Muslim power of the age, and was able to put down the ensuing rebellions by his most powerful liegemen. Yet, the fact that the defeat at Qaṭwān was a major blow to the Saljūq

51 Yazdī 1362/1983f: 84. One might add to this the fifteenth-century author Mīrkhwānd’s echoing: “Sanjar had good command of the usages of universal conquest and world-possession, and was able to establish the royal and imperial exigencies exactly as it behoved.” Mīrkhwānd 1339/1920), 4: 310.

52 The date of Sanjar’s birth is variously given as 477/1084f. (al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 64; Ibn al-Athīr 1979: 10: 141) or 479/1086f. (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 68; Ibn al-Jawzī 1412/1992: 18: 121); the later date would almost certainly be correct, since it coincides with Malikshāh’s campaign in Syria, during the course of which Sanjar was said to have been born (for Malikshāh’s campaign in 479: Ibn al-Wardī 1417/1996: 2:3; Ibn al-Athīr 1979: 10: 148–50).

state – militarily, financially, and prestige-wise<sup>53</sup> – has been erroneously interpreted by some modern historians, in the teeth of all evidence, to mean that Saljūq rule disintegrated after the battle of Qaṭwān. Once again, however, an examination of the course of events between 1141 and Sanjar’s downfall in 1153 proves the opposite: Sanjar remained the most formidable ruler of his time, despite the blow the Saljūq state had received, right up until his abrupt and surprising downfall at the hands of the Oghuz. In fact, the sources state this explicitly. Such attestation to the re-establishment of Seljuq power after Qaṭwān includes the following several examples: “The power of the king’s rule was established anew” (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 59); “His status remained high and his success ever growing until he was taken prisoner by the Oghuz” (Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 95); and “[Sanjar’s] rule recovered its original splendour, and the prestige of the holy warrior [*ghāzī*] sultan was firm in the hearts of both the obedient and the rebellious, the nearest and the farthest” (Yazdī 1388/1968: 88).

These appraisals are also validated by the empirical evidence of the actual course of events: in the twelve years after Sanjar’s defeat at Qaṭwān, he crushed every rebellion and bid for power – and there were surprisingly few: that of the governor of Khwarazm for the second time in 1141, in the immediate aftermath of the defeat;<sup>54</sup> and that of the vassal ruler of the province of Ghūr in 1152,<sup>55</sup> in alliance with one of Sanjar’s important magnates.<sup>56</sup> In fact, the Ghūrid ruler and Sanjar’s overly ambitious lieutenant seem to have committed the same error as modern historians: “They thought [Sanjar] would no longer be victorious in war after the battle with the infidel Qara-Khitai, and that conquest would no longer come to him as usual” (Yazdī 1388/1968: 88). They were proved wrong – in the case of the disloyal magnate, fatally so; he was beaten in two under a banner or milestone.

The rehabilitation of Sanjar’s might was confirmed by this last victory, which “restored the majesty and grandeur, which had suffered a setback after the unsuccessful war with the [Qara-]Khitai, and [Sanjar’s] power was restored afresh” (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 60). Clearly, bitter as the defeat at Qaṭwān was, it did not break the power of the Saljūq state. On the contrary, Sanjar was still demonstrably the strongest ruler in the Islamic world: he defeated quite handily in battle the only other two contenders for that title, the rulers of the Seljuq provinces of Khwarazm and Ghūr, whose polities were subsequently to assume supremacy in the eastern Muslim world after Sanjar’s death.

In sum, the description of the Seljuq period during the first half of the twelfth century, and especially throughout Sanjar’s long reign in Khurāsān, that is

53 Nīshāpūrī 2004: 56–8; Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f.: 449; al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 94. In all, Sanjar paid around one million dinars in ransom for his wife and major amirs, apart from the 3 million dinars in reported costs (al-Ḥusaynī, 1984: 95). In Mustawfī Qazvīnī’s words, “The dignity of Sultan Sanjar because of this defeat was lessened in the hearts of the people” (Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f.: 450).

54 Ibn al-Athīr 1979: 11: 87–8; Nīshāpūrī 2004: 59; Paul 2013.

55 Ibn al-Athīr 1979: 11: 164. See also Nizāmī ‘Arūḍī Samarqandī 1375/1955f.: 104–5, according to which the Ghurid paid a hefty ransom.

56 Alī Chatrī, who was the Sultan’s major domo and the fief-holder of Herat; Rāvandī, 176; Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f.: 450.

presented in the historical record is in no way compatible with the “Big Chill” theory of long and gradual decline. Sanjar’s period is, on the contrary, explicitly depicted as one of outstanding and continuing prosperity, not growing impoverishment, and a high point not only of Seljuq times, but of Islamic history generally. Furthermore, even after the defeat of Qaṭwān in 1141, Sanjar demonstrated on the battlefield that he was still the supreme power of the central and eastern Islamic world. It should be noted that *Cotton, Climate, and Camels* does not cite any of these literary sources.

### The Eclipse of Khurāsān in the historical record

We must look elsewhere, then, for an explanation of the eclipse of Khurāsān in the mid-twelfth century, which was, according to the primary sources, sudden and abrupt. Happily, the literary sources for the twelfth century have preserved the historical memory of the destruction of Khurāsān at this time – indeed, they supply an explicit explanation for the precipitous end of Khurāsān’s greatness, and especially for the sharp drop in *‘ulamā’* and intellectuals coming from that province after the 1150s. That explanation lies in the unexpected and disastrous captivity of Sanjar in the hands of a group of Oghuz Turkmen from 1153 to 1156, who then proceeded systematically to loot and ravage the province. While a lengthy analysis of this disaster and its causes lies outside the scope of this article, it suffices to say that Bundārī supplies the background explanation for Sanjar’s abrupt and unexpected downfall, and the attendant evil consequences this had for Khurāsān: enfeeblement due to old age and a concomitant weakening of Sanjar’s control over his own magnates.

At a time when power depended on the force of personality of an individual ruler, rather than on the strength of public institutions, any relaxing of the ruler’s personal grip over his jockeying magnates could have catastrophic consequences. This is quite different from an extended imperial decline; rather, it is the personal failure of the figure at the centre of the political order, who played a role similar to that of a hub in a wheel; the weakness of such a leader, under the right circumstances, would not require very many years to bring about the unravelling of the polity. Thus, according to Bundārī, as Sanjar became senescent:

the *amīrs* gained sway over the rule of his affairs, and behaved familiarly with his power; the junior [*amīrs*] despised the right of the senior [*amīrs*], and the senior [*amīrs*] tarried in promoting the junior ones ... so that mutual envy and hatred prevailed among them and mutual assistance and esprit de corps disappeared and melted away.<sup>57</sup>

This was in fact what is described as having been the deciding factor during Sanjar’s battle with the Turkmen Oghuz rabble; the magnates were too busy

57 Al-Bundārī 1889: 276. The present author detailed Sanjar’s relations with both the Turkmen and his other amirs at the conference “Every inch a king: from Alexander to the King of Kings”, held at the University of Cambridge in 2008, and in the article “Mamluk loyalty” (Tor 2011a); the ideas the author expounded then have also since been adopted by one of the participants at the conference (Durand-Guédy 2011).

with their own quarrels to fight the Oghuz: “When [Sanjar’s] battle with the Oghuz occurred, the Oghuz had not the ability to fight even one of his amirs; but envy of the Amīr ... Yaranqush brought [the other amīrs] to forsake [Sanjar] while he was in battle.”<sup>58</sup>

What then ensued was frightful; during the years of Sanjar’s captivity, the nomads went on a three-year rampage of pillage and rapine, in the course of which they not only destroyed the physical infrastructure of the province, but are also said specifically to have targetted the ‘*ulamā*’ for wholesale extermination, since they were seen as being hand-in-glove with the Seljuqs (see Tor 2016: 398–401); and, finally, the province’s subsequent political dismemberment, which began during the period of Sanjar’s imprisonment and continued after his death in 1157, six months after his escape from captivity.<sup>59</sup>

The primary sources are rife with explicit statements to this effect. Some of these include the *Tārīkh-i guzīdah*, which laments:

The Ghuzz during that time wreaked desolation in the world, and they held lawful for themselves the property, lives and privities of the Muslims. In all Khurasan there did not remain a village that was not destroyed by their oppression. They destroyed the ‘*ulama*, the *shaykhs*, and the great ones of the world under torture for exactions ... and the dominions were destroyed (Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f: 452).

Nīshāpūrī similarly writes, regarding the targetting of the ‘*ulamā*’, that “the [Oghuz] killed them with torture; palates and mouths which had for so many years been the revealers of the Shar‘ī sciences and the founts of religious ordinances, they stuffed with earth [until they died]” (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 65). According to Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī and Yazdī, in Nīshāpūr alone, the Turkmens are said to have killed 30,000 people, and a river of blood flowed in the streets (Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī 2013, 13: 29; Yazdī 1968: 91–2). Indeed, according to Nīshāpūrī, so severe was the destruction there that “no one recognized his

58 Al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 123; Bayḍāwī 1313/1934: 78–9. Jürgen Paul has suggested a different explanation in private correspondence with the author: “The system of *khidma* relationships has an inbuilt fault line: accepted claims of men serving the dynasty can be so high that the sitting king simply does not have the resources to deliver, even if he is an exceptionally prosperous king. This is the result of the dynamics of service, benefit, and increase. The defection of Atsiz should probably be explained this way, and the position of such amirs as Qumach, Yaranqush and others was similar in principle.” While the present author agrees that this can perhaps explain Atsiz’s rebellion, the explanation is much less convincing regarding the amirs in Sanjar’s actual retinue. Here the problem would seem to lie more in the known pattern of intra-amiral group dynamics of social comparison, coupled with Sanjar’s weakening faculties and powers, as expounded in Tor 2011a: 776–80; otherwise, the timing of this cannot be explained – after all, Sanjar ruled for sixty years; had the problem been what Paul suggests, it would surely have surfaced much earlier, as did Atsiz’s first rebellion; see Paul 2014: esp. 403–5; and on the Atsiz problem in particular, Paul 2013: 81–129.

59 The current author first presented this explanation of the intertwined Seljuq and Khurāsānian downfall at several conferences, most notably in Cambridge (2008) and Hamburg (2011); it has since been expounded by Peacock as well (Peacock 2015: 107–10).

own quarter and house, and those places where the familiar mosques and madrasas of religious knowledge and assemblies [had stood] . . . were become pastures for sheep and hiding places for wild beasts and serpents” (Nīshāpūrī 2004: 66).

The capital, Marv, was looted for three solid days, after which “in all the city nothing remained except the stuffing of cushions and mattresses . . . and that also they [then] took. Most of the people of the city they took captive.” (Nīshāpūrī 2003: 63.) Al-Yazdī reports in a similar lamentation:

They [viz. the Oghuz pillagers] stretched forth the hand of attack from the sleeve of power, and they targeted money, property, gold and silver, and livestock; old and new, precious things and buried treasures, provisions and treasuries; every inhabitant and rent-payer, the envied and the envious . . . . And the goods of rich and poor, great and small . . . they carried off in plunder (Yazdī 1968: 91–2).

These descriptions of the utter ruination of the province by Oghuz plundering, as well as the targeted killing of the class of religious clerics, are echoed and memorialized in one of the most famous of all Persian poems, Anvarī’s so-called “Tears of Khurāsān” (Anvarī 1959: 201–5), which was written contemporaneously with the destruction of Khurāsān, as a desperate appeal to the ruler of Samarqand to intervene and save the province, noting in particular the targeted killing of the *‘ulamā’*: “The Friday mosque in every town is become a stable for animals, roofless . . . . They do not make the *khutba* throughout Khurāsān in the name of the Oghuz because there is now no preacher, no *minbar*.” (Anvarī 1959: 202.)

Khurāsān was so physically destroyed and depopulated (including of its religio-intellectual elite) in fact, that Sanjar was unable to reconstitute his realm when he finally escaped to freedom – and the sources inform us of that as well, stating explicitly that “his realm had been destroyed”.<sup>60</sup> Sanjar soon realized that the task of rebuilding Seljuq rule from the shattered ruins of his domains was impossible, and is said simply to have given up and died in despair:

. . . For he saw that the treasury was empty, his realms destroyed, the populace driven away and the army non-existent. . . . Care and spiritual thought were joined with human weakness, and it ended in an illness which was his final illness. . . . In the year 451/1157 he departed from the world and he was buried in the mausoleum that he had built in Marv.<sup>61</sup>

The result was that by the end of the 1150s, the brilliance of Khurāsān had been extinguished and its leading role annihilated: From having been the centre of kingdoms and the seat of culture of the entire *mashriq* for over three centuries, it became instead a politically unsettled subordinate province, control over

60 Mustawfī Qazvīnī 1362/1983f: 452; Nīshāpūrī 2004: 67–8; Yazdī 1968: 112; al-Ḥusaynī 1984: 196–, although this last states, incorrectly, that “Khurāsān was destroyed with the death of Sanjar b. Malikshāh”; actually, according to all of these accounts, it was destroyed over the preceding four years.

61 Nīshāpūrī 2004: 68; in greater detail, Yazdī 1969: 112.

which was fought over by forces from the periphery, the Khwārazmshāhs and the Ghūrīds – one of which, the Khwārazmshāhs, eventually triumphed, even though, if Bulliet's thesis had been correct, their realm should have been even more impoverished and depopulated.

In sum, there is no good evidence that there was a “Big Chill”, let alone that it caused a steady economic decline that led over the course of a century and a half to the political and cultural eclipse of Khurāsān – although Bulliet deserves all credit for drawing attention to the fact that the eclipse of Khurāsān actually occurred in the mid-twelfth century, decades before the Mongol catastrophe. There is, on the other hand, a great deal of explicit evidence in the written primary sources testifying that it was human agency which led to the chain of events that resulted in Khurāsān's blighting. Namely, Sanjar's increasing senescence and infirmity gave scope to the inherent factionalism that afflicted all medieval magnates, in both the Islamic and Christian worlds; and their resultant infighting allowed what was by all accounts a militarily unprepossessing group of nomadic Turkmens to defeat the Seljuq army and ravage unchecked for years, with spectacularly ruinous consequences, not just for the Great Seljuq Sultanate, but for the land of Khurāsān itself.

Let us give the last word to the great historian Ibn Khaldūn, who first noted this eclipse and its cause, the triumph of nomadic over sedentary culture:

The intellectual sciences were then the special preserve of the Persians. This situation continued in the cities as long as the Persians and the Persian countries, Iraq, Khurāsān, and Transoxania, retained their sedentary culture. But when those cities fell into ruins, sedentary culture, which God has devised for the attainment of sciences and crafts, disappeared from them. Along with it, scholarship altogether disappeared from among the Persians ... (Ibn Khaldūn 1958, 3: 314–5).

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