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THE VOLGA BULGARS' AMBUSH ON THE MONGOLS AND THE DEATH OF JEBE NOYAN

A.Y. Oğuz

Ibn Haldun University
Istanbul, Turkey
aniloguz1133@gmail.com

Abstract. Research objectives: This study seeks to reassess the events that occurred during the return phase of the Dasht-i Kıpchak campaign, led by Jebe Noyan and Subutai Ba'atur, with a particular focus on determining the circumstances of Jebe Noyan's death. By critically analyzing historical sources, the research aims to reconstruct the sequence of events and evaluate competing hypotheses regarding his fate.

Research materials: In addition to recent scholarly works that propose various hypotheses regarding the well-known Dasht-i Kıpchak campaign and the death of Jebe Noyan, this study primarily relies on Islamic and Chinese sources that provide information about these events.

Results and novelty of the research: In recent years, various researchers have put forward new and differing claims regarding the death of Jebe Noyan. Notably, Stephen Pow argued that Jebe was killed at the onset of the Battle of Kalka by the Kipchaks and the Rus and that this fact was deliberately concealed by pro-Mongol sources. Subsequently, Ma Xiaolin and Qiu Zhirong, in a jointly authored article, suggested that Jebe was not killed but rather died of natural causes at the beginning of the Battle of Kalka, though the Kipchaks falsely claimed responsibility for his death. Both hypotheses are fundamentally based on Russian sources, which report that Mongol vanguard forces were defeated at the start of the battle and that their leader, referred to as "Gemya Beg," was killed. On the other hand, Timokhin and Tishin, in their study, strongly opposed the notion that Jebe was killed, arguing that there is insufficient and unconvincing evidence to support Pow's hypothesis. However, Timokhin and Tishin also asserted that Jebe was not killed during the Western campaign but instead survived and returned.

In this article, the author reexamines primary sources in an attempt to reconstruct the Mongol ambush by the Volga Bulgars in the autumn of 1223. The study argues that Jebe Noyan was most likely killed during this ambush or may have died later as a result of wounds sustained during the attack. In particular, the biography of "Ismail" in the Yuanshi, which provides the most extensive account of Jebe's life, suggests that the most plausible hypothesis is that Jebe died after the Battle of Kalka. This, in turn, directs attention to the next major event after Kalka – the Volga Bulgar ambush. The scale of this ambush, as reflected in historical sources, along with the narrative in Ibn al-Athir, suggests that Jebe's death during his return journey may have been directly linked to this event.

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Keywords: Mongols; Jebe Noyan; Volga Bulgar; Kalka River; ambush; Kıpchak

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Introduction. Muhammad Khwarazmshah (r. 1200–1220), whose flawed tactics against the Mongol campaign are well-documented, abandoned all cities in the face of the Mongol invasion of Transoxiana and fled through Balkh towards Khorasan, arriving in Nishapur on April 18, 1220. In response, Genghis Khan, in May 1220, tasked his elite commanders–Jebe and Subutai, referred to as "the four dogs" (*dörben noqai*) in the *Secret History* [4, p. 88, 106]–along with his son-in-law Toquchar, with pursuing and capturing Muhammad Khwarazmshah [30, p. 33]. According to Ibn al-Athir, Genghis Khan assigned them a total of 20,000 troops [10, p. 210]; Rashid al-Din records 30,000 troops, divided into *tumen*s [28, I/2, p. 209]; Juzjani claims 60,000 [15, p. 58]; and the *Yuanshi* biography of Subutai mentions 10,000 troops [29, 121.2976; 26, p. 55]. The latter figure likely refers only to the forces under Subutai Ba'atur's direct command, while Juzjani's number appears to be an exaggeration. Al-Nasawi also notes that Genghis Khan assigned 30,000 troops to Jebe Noyan and Subutai Ba'atur [20, p. 84]. Aligning with Rashid al-Din's account, it is reasonable to conclude that these three commanders collectively led between 20,000 and 30,000 troops when they began pursuing Muhammad Khwarazmshah. As Pow suggests, following Toquchar's death, the force likely diminished by one tumen, leaving approximately 20,000 soldiers under Jebe and Subutai's command [25, p. 37].

This renowned cavalry expedition, remarkable for its extensive range and victories, extended from Iran through the Caucasus and into the Dasht-i Kipchak. One of the most decisive battles during this campaign, led by Jebe and Subutai, was the Battle of Kalka on May 31[1], 1223, against the Kipchak-Rus allied forces. After annihilating the allied troops, the Mongols began their return journey via the Don and Volga rivers, in accordance with the route previously agreed upon with Genghis Khan, likely intending to reunite with Jochi on the Kazakh steppes. Before reconstructing the battle between the Volga Bulgars and the Mongols, it is useful to examine the structure of the Mongol army.

According to Rashid al-Din, during this extensive cavalry campaign, Jebe commanded the vanguard (*manglai*), Toquchar led the reserves (*gejige*), and Subutai followed as part of the rear guard. Thackston's translation, however, mistakenly suggests that Jebe Noyan was sent with a *tumen* as a reserve force (*gejige*), followed by Toquchar with another *tumen*, omitting any reference to Subutai [27, II, p. 249]. Conversely, the Russian translation more accurately indicates that Genghis Khan dispatched Jebe Noyan with a *tumen* as the vanguard, Subutai Ba'atur with another tumen as the rear guard, and Toquchar Ba'atur with an additional tumen [28, I/2, p. 209]. The term *gejige*, rendered as "rear guard" (арьергард) in the Russian translation, is likely intended to denote reserve forces. This discrepancy highlights an error in Thackston's translation. Thus, Jebe Noyan was tasked with leading the vanguard, followed by Subutai and Toquchar managing the re-

[1] It is worth noting that this is a traditional dating, and that the Battle of the Kalka River may have taken place sometime between 28 May and 16 June.

serve forces. Subutai's unit may be interpreted as the rear guard (*chagdu'ul*), while Toquchar's could be seen as the reserve (*gejige*). The *Secret History* also contains several earlier examples of Jebe Noyan being sent ahead as the commander of the advance troops (*alginchin*) [4, p. 58, 85], underscoring his consistent role in leading forward-moving units.[2]

Jebe Noyan was considered the third most prominent and senior figure in the Mongol Empire after Muqali, leader of the *Tamma* army left in Northern China by Genghis Khan, and Kitan Ila Tugha (Yelu Tuhua). According to Song envoy Zhao Gong, during the Khwarazmshah campaign, Genghis Khan entrusted his elite forces to Jebe's command [34, p. 441; 6, p. 35; 3, p. 79]. Interestingly, this Song envoy does not mention Subutai Ba'atur among the senior and notable commanders and state officials. Subutai's prominent role and increased recognition in historical sources likely emerged after Jebe's death. Therefore, it can be concluded that Jebe Noyan held primary authority during this famous cavalry campaign. This assertion is further supported by the *Yuanshi* biography of Ismail, who participated in the campaign and describes Jebe as the "Grand General" (*dajiang* 大将) [29, 120.2969].

As known, Toquchar was killed during the siege of Nishapur [15, p. 58]. Consequently, the main campaign was subsequently led by Jebe Noyan and Subutai Ba'atur. After Toquchar's death, Jebe likely continued leading the vanguard (*manglai*), while Subutai may have assumed command of the reserve (*gejige*). Zhao Gong states that during the Khwarazmshah campaign, Jebe Noyan commanded forces referred to as *zhongbing* (重兵), which can be translated as "heavy troops" [34, p. 441]. We interpret this term to describe the Mongol army's striking and formidable heavy cavalry units, suggesting that Jebe led the heavily armored vanguard forces (*manglai*) within the Mongol military system. Peng Daya, another Song envoy who visited the Mongols in the 1230s, clarifies that "to break reinforced units and dismantle enemy formations, they rely heavily on vanguard forces, which constitute one-third of the assault troops and wear armor made from animal hides" [34, p. 508; 3, p. 121]. This record demonstrates that the units under Jebe Noyan's command consisted of heavily armored cavalry, likely armed with long lances, responsible for initiating contact with the enemy. We believe translating these forces as "crack troops" more accurately conveys their elite status. As Pow emphasizes, leading vanguard units was a defining characteristic of Jebe Noyan. Jebe also commanded the vanguard during Genghis Khan's Jin campaigns, beginning in 1211, utilizing classic feigned retreat tactics to lure the enemy and facilitate the capture of fortified positions such as the Juyong Pass and Dongjing [25, p. 35–36]. Jebe's past experiences provide valuable context for understanding his military role during the Volga Bulgar ambush, as we will explore further.

Hypotheses Regarding the Death of Jebe Noyan

Recently, Pow proposed an intriguing hypothesis regarding the death of Jebe Noyan. According to Russian chronicles, at least 8–9 days before the Battle of Kalka on May 31, 1223, Mongol vanguard forces approached the Kipchak-Rus alliance too closely in the area of the island of Khortytsya and were defeated by the allied forces. When the Mongol vanguard appeared near the Dnieper River,

[2] For military terms and their approximate meanings, see: [24].

Mstislav the Brave of Galicia launched a sudden attack, crossing the Dnieper with 1,000 soldiers to assault the Mongol vanguard on the opposite bank. If we are to trust the Russian chronicles, the allied forces achieved a complete victory over the Mongol vanguard. In response to this defeat, the Mongols attempted to flee eastward with their leader, referred to as "Gemya Beg" (Гемябѣг), but realizing they could not escape further, they hid their leader in a Kipchak burial mound (*kurgan*) in an effort to save his life. The Kipchaks pursued this leader, convincing the Rus forces to allow them to search the *kurgan*s. Eventually, they found and killed Gemya Beg, who had been hidden inside a *kurgan* [32, p. 65; 22, p. 287].

Pow argues, based on linguistic data and textual ambiguities, that the leader of the Mongol vanguard, "Gemya Beg," was none other than Jebe Noyan himself. According to Pow, the title *bäg* corresponds to the Mongol title *noyan*, and the documented Turkic form of the name Jebe, "Yämä," was transmitted through Kipchak Turkish and recorded by the Russians as "Gemya". Suggesting that pro-Mongol sources deliberately censored the circumstances surrounding Jebe Noyan's death, Pow claims that Jebe was killed by Kipchak-Rus forces after advancing too close with the Mongol vanguard [25, p. 40 ff.].

Pow's hypothesis has sparked significant speculation, leading to numerous studies on the subject. For instance, Chinese historians Ma Xiaolin and Qiu Zhirong authored an article suggesting that Jebe Noyan died between May 16 and May 19, 1223, on the path to the Battle of Kalka. While fundamentally agreeing with Pow's assertion and connecting Jebe's death to the related attack described in Russian sources, they argue that Jebe was not killed in battle. Instead, they suggest he was intentionally defeated as part of a feigned retreat at the Dnieper and died suddenly during this maneuver. Following Mongol burial customs, his body was interred in a nearby Kipchak *kurgan*. They propose that the Kipchaks deliberately spread the false information and myth that they had killed Jebe. Unlike Pow, these authors assert that the lack of information regarding Jebe's death in sources stems from an absence of data rather than intentional concealment by the Mongols [17].

Thus, despite differing in details, Ma Xiaolin and Qiu Zhirong's hypothesis, like Pow's, is rooted in the Russian accounts of the Mongol vanguard's confrontation and the incident involving Gemya Beg's death. However, the most robust counterargument to Pow's entire hypothesis comes from a paper by Timokhin and Tishin [33]. The authors state that there is no linguistic evidence connecting "Gemya" to "Jebe," and Pow's claims are not supported by the existing corpus of sources. The most important aspect of Ma Xiaolin and Qiu Zhirong's article is that they disprove Timokhin and Tishin's claim that there is no linguistic evidence connecting "Gemya" with "Yämä". They demonstrate that the name "Yämä", which is another form of the name Jebe found in the sources and, in particular, in its Turkic pronunciation, could indeed have been rendered as "Gemya" in Russian sources. The linguistic phenomenon of the transformation of "j" into "y" which linguists have pointed out and which can be observed even in earlier periods, including the era of the Turkic Khaganates, is well established. It is therefore highly likely that the name "Jebe" was pronounced as "Yämä" within the Turkic cultural sphere. Indeed, other Islamic sources also transmit the name Jebe in the form Yämä. Likewise, the title *bäg*, which was widely used in the Turkic cultural sphere, is clearly the equivalent of the Mongolian title *noyan*. The only point that needs to be established here is whether the initial "y" sound could have been rendered as a "g/γ"

sound in written Russian sources. Ma and Qiu argue that Timokhin and Tishin effectively refute their own argument by citing the example of the Turkic title *erkin*, which could apparently appear in Russian as "girgen" [17, pp. 131–132]. However, this argument is itself questionable, since there is no conclusive evidence that the "girgen" recorded in Russian sources was in fact the Turkic title *erkin*. As Timokhin and Tishin themselves point out, the "girgen" recorded at the beginning of the twelfth century could have represented another Turkic word [33, p. 607]. Nevertheless, even if we accept the argument that "Yämä" could have been rendered as "Gemya", this does not prove the accuracy of the account of Gemya Beg's death in the Russian source. On the contrary, it conflicts with the strong evidence, based on the biography of "Ismail" in the *Yuanshi* and the accounts of Ibn al-Athir, that Jebe must have died later and independently of the Battle of the Kalka River. Therefore, the story of the death of Gemya Beg recorded in the Russian sources–probably based on an account heard from the Kipchaks–may actually represent an event that occurred later, perhaps again with the involvement of the Kipchaks, but was retrospectively placed at the Battle of the Kalka due to chronological and narrative confusion. As we will examine below, this event may have been connected to the aftermath of the Bulgar raid. Consequently, based on the clear arguments presented by Timokhin and Tishin, as well as the expressions found in Chinese sources, we consider it unlikely that Jebe's death was connected to any event related to the Battle of Kalka.

The Volga Bulgars' Victory over the Mongols and Its Connection to the Death of Jebe Noyan

The *Yuanshi* contains one of the few references to Jebe's death, specifically in the biography of Ismail. According to the source, Ismail was a statesman from Balasagun (*Quz Ordu), a city under Kara Khitai rule, who joined Jebe during his campaign against the Kara Khitai and continued to accompany him in the subsequent cavalry expedition with Subutai. As such, Ismail serves as an eyewitness. His biography in the *Yuanshi* provides significant details that clarify Jebe's role in the cavalry campaigns through Iran and the Caucasus. Although some parts are ambiguous, this biography is crucial for understanding Jebe's death.

The biography states that after the Khwarazmshah campaign, Genghis Khan sent Jebe to attack the **Kipcha'ut/Kipchaks* (*qincha* 欽察). During this mission, Jebe dispatched Ismail to call for the surrender of the fortresses of **Kürt* (*querte* 曲兒忒) and **Shirvanshah* (*shierwan sha* 失兒灣沙). Subsequently, when the **Gürchi* (*guerzhi* 谷兒只) and **Asut* (*asu* 阿速) tribes resisted, Jebe defeated them in battle and secured their submission. He then invited the surrender of **Kerim Fortress* (*heilin cheng* 黑林城). Advancing further, Jebe attacked the **Orus* (*woluosi* 斡羅思) at **Terk/Ter Hill* (*tier shan* 鐵兒山), defeating them and capturing their ruler, **Michislav* (*mizhisila* 密只思臘). Jebe then instructed Ismail to present this ruler to "Crown Prince" Jochi and to execute him. Following this, the narrative in the biography appears to refer to campaigns conducted by Ismail either under Jochi's command or independently until he reached Jochi. After receiving Jebe's orders, Ismail campaigned against the **Kangli* (*kangli* 康裏), advancing to the city of **Boz Baliq* (*bozi bali* 孛子八里), where he defeated their leader, **Qutuz Khan* (*huotuosi han* 霍脫思罕), in battle. Immediately afterward, he advanced

against the *Kipcha'ut/Kipchaks*, bringing them under control. Subsequently, the text states, "軍還，哲伯卒" (*jun huan zhebo zu*) [29, 120.2969–2970; 23, p. 345–346], which we translate as "[The Mongol] army was returning when Jebe died." It should be noted that punctuation in Chinese texts was added later, and the phrase could also be interpreted as "軍還哲伯卒" (*jun huan zhebo zu*), suggesting "Jebe died while returning with his army." This likely refers to the period following the Battle of Kalka.

These Chinese records, though somewhat ambiguous, contain several noteworthy details. They reference battles conducted by Jebe and Subutai against the Georgian Kingdom and the Alan/As forces in the northern Caucasus. The term **Kerim* deserves particular attention. Derived from the Kipchak Turkish verb *ker-* meaning "to enclose," this term signifies "fortress." The synonymous term *Kermen* also originates from this root. While the term *Man-Kermen* ("Great Fortress") in Rashid al-Din's work and the *Secret History* is typically associated with Kiev, Zimonyi argues persuasively that Biler, one of the Volga Bulgars' major cities and capitals, was also known by this name [36]. Thus, the term **Kerim* could refer not only to Kiev but also to the Volga Bulgars. If Zimonyi's interpretation is correct and the term refers to Biler, this suggests that Jebe intended to subjugate the Volga Bulgar Kingdom at some point, indicating the occurrence of a battle with the Volga Bulgars. Drawing on a range of sources–including Latin authors such as Plano Carpini, Persian historians like Rashid al-Din, as well as Chinese and Russian chronicles–it is clear that the Mongol western campaign was carried out primarily under the leadership and authority of Jochi. As Mirgaleev notes, a central objective of this operation for Jochi, alongside Jebe and Subutai, was the subjugation of the Volga Bulgars and their satellite Saqsin, and the unification of the Eastern and Western Kipchaks under a single political structure [19, p. 195–196].

Interestingly, the battle against the Rus is said to have taken place on a mountain/hill called **Terk* or **Ter*, possibly referring to the Terki Fortress in the northern Caucasus, southwest of the Caspian Sea near the city of Atil, as mentioned in contemporary Islamic sources. While this could be a textual error, it suggests that after their victories over the Rus, the Mongols may have advanced toward the Lower Volga at some point in the chronology, without any mention of their defeat by the Volga Bulgars. Indeed, as Ibn al-Athir reports, following their battle with the Volga Bulgars, the Mongols advanced to the city of Saqsin, located on the Lower Volga region. Therefore, as we will see, it appears that after the Bulgar ambush, the Mongols advanced to the Lower Volga region at some point and had to pass through this territory. This difficult return must be closely related to Jebe's death. The order given by Jebe to Ismail to hand over the captive prince Mstislav to Jochi may reflect an error in the famous narrative suggesting that the captive Russian princes were crushed under the banquet platform after the Battle of Kalka. In other words, Mstislav was not killed immediately after the Battle of the Kalka River; rather, he was sent to Jochi and was probably killed later by Jochi, perhaps in the manner described in the Rus' sources, by being placed beneath a banquet platform. However, the three-day resistance carried out by Prince Mstislav Romanovich of Kiev and his two sons-in-law on a nearby hill after the Battle of Kalka may have been confused and combined with the hill where the Terki Fortress is located in Ismail's biography. In this context, the statement found in the Chinese biography indicating that Jebe died on his return journey should be inter-

preted as evidence that his death occurred either in the Lower Volga region or to its east, following the Bulgar ambush. The order for Ismail to deliver the captured Mstislav (Kievan Grand Prince Mstislav Romanovich the Elder) to Jochi is noteworthy, as it suggests that Jebe was still alive after the Battle of Kalka and was in communication with Jochi. As suggested by the narrative's progression, Jebe's death likely occurred after the Battle of Kalka. Timokhin and Tishin previously noted that the final statement in the Chinese source unequivocally indicates Jebe was alive following Kalka [33, p. 603].

In the *Yuanshi* biography, the **Qutuz* mentioned in Ismail's campaign against the Kangli is likely the same individual referred to elsewhere in the *Yuanshi* as the father of *Heshang*, a member of the Kipchak's **Ölberli-Baya'ut* (*yu'erbieli boyawutai* 玉耳别里伯牙吾台) clan [29, 134.3256; 23, p. 282]. This suggests that the surviving units of the Mongol army conducted campaigns against the Kangli and Kipchaks east of the Volga. Subsequently, Jebe died while returning after the victory over the Rus. Chinese sources indicate that during this period, the Kipchak's Ölberli tribe resided between the Ural and Volga rivers [1, p. 7]. The city referred to in the text–possibly transliterated as **Boz Baliq*, meaning "grey city" or "grey fortress"–may, in fact, denote the settlement of Saqsin, which was inhabited in part by Kipchaks. Notably, Ibn al-Athir also reports that the surviving Mongols retreated to Saqsin following the Bulgar ambush. If the term Saqsin is interpreted as the Turkic *Sarighshin*, meaning "yellow" or "white-colored," the Chinese source's designation of the location as *Boz Baliq* gains a much more plausible linguistic and cultural grounding. Accordingly, it can be argued that the Mongols retreated to the Lower Volga and its eastern regions after the Bulgar ambush, and that Jebe likely perished during this withdrawal–a detail that may have been deliberately omitted in the Chinese account. This hypothesis appears to be a far more coherent and plausible explanation of the events. In light of the sources, Jebe's death should be dated to the period following the Volga Bulgars' raid against the Mongols, that is, to the Mongols' campaign against the Kipchaks and Kanglis of the Lower Volga. Despite the chronological discrepancy, this may at least be conflated with the incident recorded in the Rus' source in which Gemya Beg was killed by the Kipchaks before the Battle of Kalka, insofar as it indicates the involvement of the Kipchaks in Jebe's death.

H.D. Martin was the first to suggest that Jebe Noyan may have died from wounds sustained during an ambush by the Volga Bulgars in 1223. According to Martin, had Jebe survived, he would have become one of the greatest commanders of the Mongol Empire. Martin estimates that Jebe was 42 or 43 years old at the time of his death [18, p. 274]. Subsequent research, particularly biographies of Subutai Ba'atur, reflect a similar narrative. Sverdrup, who authored a biography of Subutai Ba'atur, claims that Jebe died shortly after the Volga Bulgar ambush, with Subutai taking credit for all the successes in the Dasht-i Kipchak campaign [30, p. 39]. Hrapachevsky tentatively calculates Jebe's date of birth as 1165–1166, accepting 1155 as Genghis Khan's date of birth and reasoning that Jebe must have been younger than him [9, pp. 183–184]. However, in our view, 1162 is the most plausible date of birth for Genghis Khan. Following Hrapachevsky's reasoning, if we assume that Jebe was approximately ten years younger than Genghis Khan, then a date between 1172 and 1175 would seem more appropriate for Jebe's birth. For this reason, rather than Hrapachevsky's calculation, we are inclined to accept

Martin's estimate regarding Jebe's age at death. In other words, when Jebe died toward the end of 1223, he was probably in his late forties.

In this study, we support Martin's long-standing hypothesis, derived from the progression of events in historical sources, suggesting that Jebe Noyan likely died during the Bulgar ambush near the Volga while returning from the Battle of Kalka. However, as a reasonable hypothesis, it may be suggested that he died on the way after descending to the Lower Volga region following the Bulgar ambush and continuing his advance toward the east. We believe that the omission of the cause of Jebe Noyan's death in the sources is linked to a much larger event–the significant defeat suffered by the Mongols at the hands of the Bulgars near the Volga during their return from Kalka. The central assumption supported in this study is that the Volga Bulgars inflicted a major defeat and ambush on the Mongols, during which Jebe Noyan was killed or seriously injured. This great embarrassment likely led pro-Mongol sources and historians, such as Rashid al-Din, Juvayni, the *Secret History*, and the *Yuanshi*, to remain silent about the Bulgar ambush and Jebe Noyan's death. For instance, when examining Juvayni's account of the Mongols' Dasht-i Kipchak campaign, we find no mention of any battles after crossing the Caucasus; instead, it is stated that the Mongol army reunited with Jochi's forces and returned to Genghis Khan [14, I, p. 149]. Rashid al-Din briefly mentions the Battle of Kalka, noting that after defeating the Rus and Kipchaks, the Mongols returned to rejoin Genghis Khan [27, II, p. 260]. Neither of the *Yuanshi* biographies of Subutai mentions the defeat in 1223 [26]. Both Rashid al-Din and Juvayni omit any reference to the Volga Bulgars' ambush of the Mongols and the death of Jebe Noyan. Such silences, as expected from pro-Mongol sources, indicate a deliberate avoidance of discussing this humiliating event.

While Ma Xiaolin and Qiu Zhirong's assertion [17, p. 135–136] that the absence of a comprehensive biography or life story for Jebe in the sources is due to a lack of data is notable, it does not clarify the silence regarding the Bulgar ambush. As is typical in official historical narratives, defeats are often downplayed or omitted. This is particularly true for the Mongols, and as Atwood demonstrates in a well-researched article, many scandalous defeats during the Mongol campaigns against the Jin Dynasty are concealed in pro-Mongol sources [2]. Therefore, while various interpretations can be made regarding the gaps in Jebe Noyan's life story, the ambiguity surrounding the Bulgar ambush is most plausibly due to deliberate suppression.

Despite this, the critical point remains that both Juvayni and Rashid al-Din assert that Jebe and Subutai returned after Kalka. The *Yuanshi* biography of Ismail also indicates that Jebe died while the Mongol army was returning from Kalka. Our primary source for the Volga Bulgars' victory over the Mongols in the autumn of 1223 is Ibn al-Athir's historical work. Regarding the Bulgar ambush that occurred during the return from the Battle of Kalka, Ibn al-Athir provides the following details under the title "The Story of the Tatars' Return to Their Leader from the Lands of the Rus and Kipchaks":

After the Tatars treated the Russians as described above and plundered their lands, they withdrew and, by the end of 620 [late 1223], set their sights on the Bulgars. Upon hearing of their approach, the Bulgars set up ambushes at several locations. The Bulgars then advanced to engage them, luring them [the Tatars] until they passed through the locations where the ambushes had been set. [Then] they

emerged from behind their rear ranks, trapping them [the Mongols] in the middle. The Mongols were then surrounded and fell prey to swords from all sides. A large portion of them were slaughtered, and only a few managed to escape: it is said that they numbered around 4,000. On their return journey to their leader, Genghis Khan, they set out toward Saqsîn. The lands of the Kipchaks were freed from their control, and the survivors returned to their homes. [11, X, p. 418][3].

Ibn al-Athir's mention, where 4,000 troops are referenced, likely points to the number of Mongol soldiers who managed to escape the Bulgar ambush. Since the region referred to as Saqsin lies on the lower Volga, this suggests it was part of the return route after the ambush. As previously discussed, sources confirm that Jebe was part of the army during the return journey from Kalka, indicating that he, alongside Subutai, was in command during the ambush. Ibn al-Athir's framing of the event as "The Story of the Tatars' Return to Their Leader" aligns with the *Yuanshi* account, stating that "Jebe died while returning with his army". Thus, the most significant event related to Jebe's death that arises is the ambush of the Volga Bulgars.

Although Ibn al-Athir's account remains the primary source for the Bulgar ambush, Zimonyi believes that other sources also hint at this defeat, and he is likely correct [35]. For instance, the reports from Hungarian Dominican friar Julianus, who traveled to the Volga region in 1234/1235 and again in 1237 in search of "Magna Ungaria," believed to be his ancestral homeland, provide intriguing insights. While we have a summary by Friar Riccardus regarding the first journey, Julianus's own letter documents the second. In these records, Julianus notes that after subjugating the Kipchaks, the Mongols advanced into "Magna Ungaria" and fought for 14 years, only achieving dominance in the 15th year. Another entry by Julianus recounts that the Mongols battled a group in "Magna Ungaria," believed to be the ancestors of the Hungarians, and were initially defeated, with the Mongols failing to conquer them in their first engagement [8, p. 79, 104; 35, p. 198]. The region Julianus visited in 1235 and 1237 likely corresponds to the Bashkir area near the Volga. Julianus reports hearing the story of the Mongols' defeat directly from the local Hungarians. His letter also describes how, after conquering Iran and the Kipchaks, the Mongols entered "Magna Ungaria" and engaged in battle. This clearly refers to the events during Jebe and Subutai's cavalry campaign. The 14-year struggle likely refers to the period following 1222–1223. By the time the Mongols began their European campaign around 1237, the Volga Bulgars had been thoroughly defeated and brought under control. Riccardus's summary notes that

[3] For the English translation of the passage, see: [10, p. 224]. The Turkish translation of the passage is as follows:

Moğollar, yukarıda kaydettiğimiz gibi, Ruslar'ı mağlûp edip ülkelerini yağmaladıktan sonra 620 (1223) yılı sonlarında Bulgar diyarına doğru harekete geçtiler. Bulgarlar Moğollar'ın üzerlerine geldiğini öğrenince yolları üzerine muhtelif noktalara pusular kurup, bu pusulara askerlerini yerleştirdikten sonra geri kalan adamlarıyla Moğollar'a karşı çıkıp onlarla karşılaşmış ve onları pusulara çekmeğe başlamışlardı. Moğollar Bulgarlar'ın kurduğu bu pusuları geçtikten sonra Bulgarlar birden geriye dönmüş ve pusudakiler de yerlerinden fırlayarak Moğollar'ı iki ateş arasında bırakmışlardı. Bulgarlar her iki taraftan kılıçla Moğollar'ı doğramağa başlamışlar, *çok azı müstesna onlardan kurtulan olmamıştı*.

Bir rivayette anlatıldığına göre, bu Moğollar dört bin civarında olup Saksîn'e doğru yürümüş ve hükümdarları Cengiz Han'ın yanına geri dönmüşlerdi. Böylece Kıpçak diyarı Moğollar'dan temizlenmiş oldu. [12, XII, p. 348].

Julianus arrived in "Great Bulgaria," described as a "large and powerful kingdom" with wealthy cities. In Bulgaria, Julianus encountered a Hungarian woman in a city capable of fielding 50,000 soldiers, who informed him that "Magna Ungaria" was two days' journey away [8, p. 78–79]. At that time, the community known as "Magna Ungaria" or "Bashkir/Bashkort," which appeared to speak Hungarian, lived between the Volga and Don rivers under the authority of the Volga Bulgars.

Julianus's accounts explicitly mention the Mongols' defeat, and the timeline corresponds with Jebe and Subutai's campaign. Therefore, "Magna Ungaria"–in reality, the Volga Bulgars–clashing with and defeating the Mongols in 1223 is corroborated by another source [35]. The *Secret History of the Mongols* also records that Genghis Khan sent Subutai to campaign against the Kanglis, Kipchaks, Bashkirs, Rus, Hungarians, Ossetians, Saqsins, Circassians, Kashmiris, Bulgars, and Kerel [4, p. 141–142]. Although this passage includes kingdoms targeted during the later European campaign led by Batu and Subutai, it confirms that Subutai was sent against the Bulgars during Genghis Khan's time. The Volga Bulgars were referred to as Bolar-Molar by the Mongols. As Zimonyi suggests, this record in the *Secret History* indicates a conflict between Subutai and the Volga Bulgars [35, p. 200]. The most direct hint of the Mongols' difficult situation against the Volga Bulgars, however, comes from another paragraph in the *Secret History*, which notes that Subutai "found himself in many difficult situations among these peoples" after listing the groups he encountered in campaigns and battles [4, p. 147]. This likely alludes to the defeat suffered by Jebe and Subutai against the Volga Bulgars in 1223.

Therefore, Ibn al-Athir's account, particularly when cross-referenced with Julianus's reports, indicates that the Mongols were defeated by the Volga Bulgars around 1223. Modern scholarship, particularly biographies of Subutai, has increasingly accepted this outcome. In Buell's biography of Subutai, it is noted that after the Battle of Kalka, Jebe and Subutai advanced on the Volga Bulgars and "were treated harshly" [5, p. 19]. Sverdrup's biography of Subutai states that instead of advancing into Rus territory after Kalka, the Mongols turned toward the Volga Bulgars but saw their streak of victories end in "late 1223," when the Bulgars ambushed Subutai. According to Sverdrup, Subutai's intelligence and reconnaissance failed him at this point [30, p. 39]. Thus, Ibn al-Athir's account is now broadly accepted in the academic community, and Latin sources also contain references to this ambush.

When reconstructing the battle between Jebe, Subutai, and the Volga Bulgars, it is estimated that the Volga Bulgars could field between 7,000 and 10,000 cavalry, with additional infantry support from Mordvin and Bashkir allies. Given their nomadic origins and continued traditions, it is likely that they possessed both light mounted archers and heavy cavalry, familiar with steppe warfare tactics [21, p. 22–23]. Ibn al-Athir's account clearly shows that the Bulgars won the battle using classic steppe tactics like feigned retreats and encirclements [16, p. 214]. Julianus's accounts of his travels in the region also suggest that Bashkirs under Bulgar authority participated in the battle. Sverdrup posits that, after gathering intelligence on the wealthy Volga Bulgar Kingdom, Subutai and Jebe decided to advance towards it. The battle with the Bulgars, who learned of the Mongol advance through refugee Kipchaks, may have occurred near present-day Penza in the west [31, p. 209 ff.]. One of the final conclusions reached by Izmailov, based on archaeological findings, is that the battle took place in the Penza region, near the Zolotarevskoe settlement; according to him, the Mongols suffered a major defeat in this area [13].

Considering that the Mongols left Samarkand under Jebe, Subutai, and Toquchar's command with 20,000 to 30,000 troops and suffered losses in multiple battles along the way, it is likely that they could muster only 8,000 to 10,000 soldiers for the battle. Thus, the Volga Bulgar army was equal to or slightly greater in number than the Mongols, but had a strategic advantage.

Although sources provide no explicit information on the leader of the Volga Bulgars during the battle, considering the historical timeframe, it is plausible that Emir Ilham commanded the Bulgar forces [16, p. 214]. According to Fahrutdinov, there were two primary reasons for the Volga Bulgars' victory: firstly, the Mongol army had been significantly depleted due to numerous battles during the campaign; secondly, the Volga Bulgars were well-prepared for a pitched battle [7, p. 98]. As previously mentioned, after the Battle of Kalka, Jebe Noyan likely continued to command the surviving armored vanguard units, while Subutai Ba'atur managed the remaining forces as the reserve. The Mongol army probably carried a heavy load of spoils and a substantial supply train. Ibn al-Athir's depiction of the battle suggests that the Bulgars employed tactics similar to the feigned retreats used by the Mongols at Kalka, turning the tables on the Mongols with their own strategies of deception and ambush. The Bulgars' emergence from the rear of the Mongol army, as described by Ibn al-Athir, and their subsequent encirclement likely eliminated any chance of retreat for Jebe Noyan, who led the vanguard. Thus, Jebe and his vanguard were surrounded and overwhelmed by the Bulgar forces. Ibn al-Athir's mention of 4,000 survivors may refer to the troops under Subutai Ba'atur, who commanded the reserve forces. Considering Song envoy Peng Daya's remark that the vanguard constituted one-third of the total army, it becomes evident that the Mongol force facing the Volga Bulgars was quite small. According to Ibn al-Athir's account, the defeated Mongol troops retreated to Saqsin in the Lower Volga region and likely began their journey eastward from there. It is plausible that Jochi, advancing westward in a campaign against the Kipchaks and Kanglis, intended to rendezvous with Subutai, leaving a detachment in the Dasht-i Kipchak. Although Jochi may have intended to attack the Volga Bulgars, his campaign appears to have been incomplete, with Subutai reuniting with only a portion of Jochi's forces. Following their defeat by the Volga Bulgars, the Mongols seem to have retreated southward under the protection of Jochi's eastern campaigns against the Kipchaks and Kanglis. The Volga-Ural region served as a strategic link between Mongolia and the territories targeted in the Mongols' subsequent campaigns against Russia, the Western Kipchaks, and Europe [1, p. 11–13].

Conclusion. The exact reasons behind the defeat of Jebe and Subutai remain uncertain–whether it was due to intelligence failures, miscommunication during the battle, delays in expected reinforcements from Jochi, or an inability to coordinate with him. However, it is clear that Subutai and Jebe deliberately targeted the Volga Bulgars as a strategic objective, likely anticipating assistance from Jochi. Despite their efforts, they suffered a significant defeat, and we argue that Jebe Noyan was killed in this battle.

Ibn al-Athir's explicit account and Julianus's reports indicate that the Mongols suffered a heavy defeat. Even if Jebe did not die in the battle, he likely succumbed to his wounds or the harsh conditions shortly thereafter. The events of the Bulgar ambush and Jebe's death in late 1223 serve as important case studies in the cautious interpretation of pro-Mongol sources. Similar to the Jin Dynasty campaigns in

the 1230s, where Mongol defeats were downplayed or omitted in pro-Mongol accounts, the silence surrounding the Bulgar ambush can be attributed to this tendency. The fact that very few Mongols survived the ambush may have further facilitated this narrative omission.

The silence of Ismail's biography in the *Yuanshi* regarding the Bulgar ambush is notable. However, as the biography indicates, Ismail likely separated from Jebe and moved eastward to join Jochi, possibly lacking detailed knowledge of the main army's fate. The clear statement that "Jebe died while returning with his army" may indeed point to the Mongol army's defeat. Nevertheless, until further sources and evidence come to light, it remains challenging to reconstruct the events of autumn 1223 definitively.

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БОЛГАРСКАЯ ЗАСАДА ДЛЯ МОНГОЛОВ И СМЕРТЬ ДЖЭБЭ НОЙОНА

А.Я. Огуз

Университет Ибн Халдуна
Стамбул, Турция
aniloguz1133@gmail.com

Резюме. Цели исследования: Данное исследование направлено на переоценку событий, произошедших во время обратного этапа похода в Дешт-и-Кыпчак под руководством Джэбэ-нойона и Субэдэй-Баатура, с особым вниманием к установлению обстоятельств смерти Джэбэ-нойона. Путем критического анализа исторических источников исследование стремится реконструировать последовательность событий и оценить конкурирующие гипотезы о его судьбе.

Материалы исследования: В дополнение к современным научным работам, содержащим различные гипотезы о знаменитом походе в Дешт-и-Кыпчак и смерти Джэбэ-нойона, в исследовании используются главным образом исламские и китайские источники, содержащие сведения об этих событиях.

Результаты и научная новизна: В последние годы различные исследователи выдвинули новые и противоречивые версии о смерти Джэбэ-нойона. В частности, Стивен Пау утверждал, что Джэбэ был убит в начале битвы на реке Калке кипчаками и русскими, а этот факт был намеренно скрыт источниками, благоприятствующими монголам. Впоследствии Ма Сяолинь и Цю Чжижун в совместной статье предположили, что Джэбэ не был убит, а скончался естественной смертью в начале битвы на Калке, тогда как кыпчаки распространили ложную информацию о его убийстве. Обе гипотезы в значительной степени основаны на русских источниках, в которых сообщается о поражении передовых монгольских сил в начале сражения и гибели их предводителя, именуемого «Гемя-бек». С другой стороны, Тимохин и Тишин в своем исследовании решительно оспорили утверждение о гибели Джэбэ, заявив, что нет достаточных и убедительных доказательств в поддержку гипотезы Пау. Однако Тимохин и Тишин также утверждали, что Джэбэ не погиб во время западного похода, а выжил и вернулся.

В данной статье автор повторно анализирует первичные источники, пытаясь реконструировать монгольскую засаду, устроенную волжскими булгарами осенью 1223 года. Исследование предполагает, что Джэбэ-нойон, скорее всего, погиб во время этой засады или умер позднее от полученных в бою ран. В частности, биография «Исмаил» в Юань-ши, являющаяся наиболее подробным описанием жизни Джэбэ, свидетельствует о том, что наиболее логичной гипотезой является его смерть после битвы на Калке. Это, в свою очередь, обращает внимание на следующее крупное событие после Калки–засаду волжских булгар. Масштаб этой засады, отраженный в исторических источниках, а также описание в сочинении Ибн аль-Асира, позволяют предположить, что смерть Джэбэ на обратном пути могла быть непосредственно связана с этим событием.

Ключевые слова: Монголы; Джебе Нойон; Волжская Булгария; Река Калка; засада; Кыпчак

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ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

Анил Ясин Огуз – научный сотрудник (Отделение истории), Университет Ибн Халдуна (34480, район Башак, ул. Орду, Башакшехир, Стамбул, Турция); ORCID: 0000-0003-2876-8954, ResearcherID: JAN-4711-2023. E-mail: aniloguz1133@gmail.com

INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anıl Yasin Oğuz – Research Assistant (Department of History), Ibn Haldun University (Basak dist., Ordu Str., Basaksehir, İstanbul 34480, Turkey); ORCID: 0000-0003-2876-8954, ResearcherID: JAN-4711-2023. E-mail: aniloguz1133@gmail.com

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