The Mongol World

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Consort Families in the Successor Khanates

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315165172-34
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Published online on: 26 May 2022

How to cite: Anne F. Broadbridge. 26 May 2022, Consort Families in the Successor Khanates from: The Mongol World Routledge
Accessed on: 29 Nov 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315165172-34

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The formation of the Yeke Monggol Ulus is typically treated as both a political and a social revolution. Not only did Chinggis Khan unify the warring states of the Mongolian Plateau, but he also provided them with a new sense of identity and belonging, which transcended earlier loyalties of kinship and service. This point can be over-emphasised, and there was still a great deal that survived from the earlier period, not least of all the törü – a series of principles and customs which governed relationships between lords and servants, parents and children, and also husbands and wives. As late as the fourteenth century, the Persian scholar-bureaucrat Rashid al-Din still felt obliged to list the lineages of the households that had governed Mongolia prior to Chinggis Khan’s rise to power, suggesting that these old identity groups retained some residual importance. Nevertheless, the creation of an empire, the development of an administrative framework, and the institutionalization of laws, offices, and entitlements would have a profound impact upon familial, social, and political relationships. This change would have only been exaggerated by the conquest of new territories and the intercourse that followed it. The movement of people necessarily resulted in the transmission of goods and ideas, which saw the rise of new fashions, rituals, and understandings of the Mongols’ place in the world. This transformation was evidenced among the Mongols as well as their subject population, who were both the agents and subjects of change under Mongol rule.

Women, who occupy important positions in the heroic historical genre of the Secret History of the Mongols, serve as useful barometers for social change in the Mongol Empire. The number and diversity of Chinggis Khan’s wives expanded simultaneously with his political confederation, at first led by his most trusted and beloved wife, Börte, but later including women from the conquered populations. His household included princesses from the Kereit royal family, who lent their prestige and nobility to the khan’s house, as well as women from atomised units, such as the Tatars, whose intimacy with the khan mirrored the assimilation of their people into the Mongol union. Princesses were even taken from more distant enemies, such as the Naiman, the Jin, and the Khwarazmshah Empire, though perhaps more as
trophies than as companions. In any case, the household of the khan was a micro-
cosm of his new political union, and senior wives therefore had enormous potential
to shape the khan’s policy.

Not all imperial wives were of equal power or status. From the earliest days of
the Mongol Empire, Chinggis Khan and his successors prioritised marriages with
the aristocratic lineages of non-atomised peoples. These were warring states, or principalities, which held separate political and social identities to the Mongols prior
to 1206 and whom Rashid al-Din describes as “Turkic tribes that have also had
separate monarchies.”

They managed to retain much of their former autonomy by submitting to Chinggis Khan and supporting his campaigns against his adversaries. Exchange marriages between the Chinggisids and these aristocratic lineages were,
therefore, a way to renew personal bonds of fealty and friendship, whilst also per-
petuating elite lineages at the apex of the Mongol Ulus (Anne F. Broadbridge). Of
course, the strength of these alliances varied with time and depended upon the pol-
itical climate. The growing importance of commanders of atomised units after the
reign of Ghazan Khan (1295–1304), Özbeg Khan (1313–1341), and Qaishan Qa’an
(1307–1311), to some extent, disrupted earlier patterns of marriage and resulted in
the initiation of new exchange marriages with commoner (qarachu) families (Bruno
De Nicola). In some cases, even concubines and women from the conquered popu-
lalion appear to have challenged the traditional role of the older Mongolian families.

The autonomy and influence of these women were also subject to political and ideologi-
ical shifts. Women were, for example, central to the transmission of culture,
especially religion, which was a marker of identity within the Mongol Empire. The
soldiers of the tamma armies posted in China, Iran, and the Pontic were especially
prone to marriage with the conquered population, as seems to have been the case
with the Qaraunas, whom the African traveller Ibn Battuta described as being of
mixed Mongol and South Asian descent. Marriage with local women drawn from
the families of merchants, magistrates, and religious leaders would have been one
avenue for the transmission of new faith, as suggested by the numerous stories
which link Islamization to the imbibing of milk from Muslim wetnurses. Judith
Pfeiffer commented on the seemingly apocryphal story of the unnamed wife of Baiju
Noyan, the tamma commander of Azerbaijan, playing a role in the conversion of her
husband, though we also know of several marriage ties between senior Chinggisid
princes and princesses from the provincial Salghurid, Qutlughkhanid, and Seljuq
dynasties, which may have played a role in the Islamization of the Ilkhan court.

Less information is at hand for women in the east of the Mongol Empire, though
there is certainly evidence that Qubilai’s wife Chabui Khatun was critical in intro-
ducing Buddhism to the Yuan court (Brian Baumann). These innovations have in
turn spurred debate about whether the introduction of new religions would have
entailed a change to relationships between the khans and their wives. The shift away
from levirate marriage towards widow chastity, evidenced in the juridical books of
the Yuan during the fourteenth century, may suggest that this was the case among
the common people, but the khan and his relatives were often treated as exceptions.

In any case, imperial wives were still among the most prominent political actors
in the Ilkhanate, the Jochid Ulus, and the Yuan Empire mid-way through the four-
teenth century, indicating that gender relationships were highly complex and did not
always shift with religious allegiances.
Women were, of course, not the only ones affected by the changing confessional makeup of the Mongol Empire. Religion had always been an important medium for monitoring relationships between the Mongols and their subjects, as the latter were commonly grouped according to their confessional identity, and the Mongols were experts at manipulating communal tensions to advance their own interests (Na’ama O. Arom and Jesse Sloane). As we have already seen, the Mongol conquest of East Turkistan was, in no small part, facilitated by Chinggis Khan’s decree that Muslims of the region could practice their religion without persecution, after they had suffered the rule of the Buddhist Qara Khitai. The Cilician Armenians were, likewise, enticed to submit to Mongol rule in part because the conquerors would negate the threat posed by the Muslim Seljuqs and because of the numerous accounts of Christian princesses and princes at the khan’s ordu (Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog). Similar stories prompted King Louis IX to dispatch clandestine envoys to the Jochid prince Sartaq, who was reputedly a Christian. His emissary, William of Rubruck, was, however, disappointed by Sartaq, whose officers abrasively ordered the European visitors, “Do not say that our master is a Christian. He is not a Christian; he is a Mo’al [Mongol].” Clearly, the Mongols identified Christianity with the conquered Russian and Transcaucasian population, and so while they were presumably all praying to the same God, the Chinggisids did not regard themselves as Christians. The same reticence is evident in Güyük Qa’an’s letter to Pope Innocent IV, in which he decries the possibility that he would ever become a “trembling Nestorian Christian,” despite the fact that several of his most senior officials were Nestorian Christians. God had chosen Chinggis Khan and his descendants to rule, whereas the Pope and his followers had shown an inexcusable ignorance of this fact and therefore demonstrated their lack of true spiritual insight.

The separation between the Mongols and the faith-based communities of their conquered people was, however, eroded to some extent by their formal conversion to a number of world religions. Islam was the most popular and therefore the most influential religion across most of the Mongol Empire, which contributed in no small way to the spread of the faith across Eurasia during this period. The rulers of the Jochid Ulus, the Ilkhanate, and the Middle Empire all adopted Islam, while at least one of Qubilai Qa’an’s grandsons, Ananda, was reported to have done so (Ishayahu Landa). The extent to which this led the Mongols to abandon their former ecumenicalism is debatable. The Mongols were only ever “tolerant” of their subjects’ religions insofar as those subjects were willing to pray for the longevity and strength of Mongol rule and profess the divine mandate of the khan – whether given by the Abrahamic God or by Eternal Heaven. The Muslim Özbeg was, as such, still willing to grant Italian merchants and Orthodox churches trading rights and tax exemptions, while Ghazan Khan showed compassion to the Catholicos Mar Yahballah III after his churches had been ransacked by his over-zealous supporters. Nevertheless, the absence of any coordinated campaign of persecution did not preclude small-scale opportunistic attacks from governors and commanders, eager to ingratiate themselves and build up a personal powerbase among the conquered people.

Tension did, however, often exist between the rituals and taboos of the Mongols and their conquered people, which were often heightened by the conversion of a Mongol ruler. The Muslim khans Ahmad Tegüder (Ilkhanate) and Tarmashirin (Middle Empire) were both overthrown by rebellions, with their conversion to...
Islam and strict enforcement of the shari’a over the jasaq being cited as reasons (or pretexts) for opposition. Much seems to have depended upon the personal approach of the ruler and those around him, as demonstrated by the example of Ögödei, who refused to punish Muslims for breaking Mongol taboos. The records of papal envoys also testify to the willingness of individual Mongol commanders to either explain or forego certain court ceremonies when they offended the sensibilities of foreign visitors, such as the insistence that they bow to the ground three times in honour of the khan or the obligation that those entering the khan’s presence pass by two fires. Other Mongol leaders, by contrast, appear to have deliberately forced their subjects to choose between their religious proscriptions and their loyalty to the khan, as evidenced when Aqa Khan held out a piece of pork on a fork for his Muslim chief minister Shams al-Din Juvayni. Juvayni accepted the meat, but Aqa Khan turned to his companions and said that he would have used the same fork to pluck out the minister’s eyes if he had refused to eat it. Loyalty was always of paramount importance to the Mongols, who prioritised their own personal connection to the god-head above any affiliation with the confessional communities of their subjects.

The growing role of world religions at the various Mongol courts was, however, expressed in the material culture of the empire. The Mongols acquired spiritual capital and prestige through the patronage of foundations (such as temples, schools, and charitable endowments), individuals (like artists, musicians, craftsmen, adepts, and occultists), and special projects (poetry, historical literature, portraiture, and sacred books). Such relationships of patronage could be established by prospective benefactors or, perhaps more regularly, by those seeking a backer. The Mongols’ control over people, offices, and revenues made them natural objects of attraction for all manner of supplicants, entrepreneurs, and beggars. The impression given by Juvayni was that the khan encountered many such petitioners on a daily basis, some seeking small grants to tide them over through lean months, while others had more grandiose ambitions. It was incumbent upon a khan to demonstrate his largesse by granting as many requests as was practical, thereby redistributing the wealth of the empire and building relationships of obligation and fealty between the khan and his subjects. Although some of these functions were taken over by dedicated ministries during the reign of Möngke and his brother Qubilai, khans, khatuns, commanders, and office-holders also maintained their own networks with regional notables in the areas where they had been appointed.

The artists, authors, and architects who produced these works served as intermediaries, linking the Mongols to the consumers of their art. Andrew Peacock has recently demonstrated the way that Turkmen beylik and Persian officials would patronise copies of texts in order to appropriate the knowledge and prestige of a particular civilization for themselves. The extent to which the Mongols were engaged in a similar process was evidenced in the projects linking Chinggisid princes and princesses with artists in overt imitation of earlier Chinese dynasties at the Yuan court of the fourteenth century (Shane McCausland). Patronising juridical code-books, adding extensions to existing shrines and devotional structures, or even building palaces according to the conventions of the conquered people were means to link the ruling dynasty with the guilds, religious leaders, and bureaucratic families who helped the Mongol Empire to function (Sheila Blair). These new edifices were not simple reproductions of static cultural models, but in many cases reflected the
interests of the patrons themselves. The depiction of the Persian kings in the Great *Shahnama* of Abu Sa'id (commonly known as the Demotte *Shahnama*) as Mongols or the preponderance of animals — especially horses — among some late Yuan artists are examples of how the experience of Mongol rule dramatically influenced the type of art being produced.\(^{17}\) Further research into the material culture of the Mongol Empire is still needed, nowhere more so than in the steppe and Mongolia itself, where the physical legacy of Mongol rule is still being unearthed (Ulambayar Erdenebat, Jargalan Burentogtokh, and William Honeychurch; and Daniel C. Waugh).

Trade was critical to provide the Mongols with the necessary material to carry out their grand artistic and engineering projects. From the earliest phase of its development, the unification of the *Yeke Monggol Ulus* placed stress upon the resources and productive capacity of the Mongolian Plateau. Increased traffic across old pasture grounds in the Orkhon River Valley, the Onon River Valley, and the Sa’ari Plains, followed by the construction of the imperial capital Qaraqorum in 1238, would have concentrated more people in already crowded grazing grounds. Add to this a growing number of diplomats, missionaries, supplicants, and vassals, and the resources of the steppe would have been stretched to breaking point. Chinggis Khan compensated for these pressures by enticing traders to Mongolia to provide the food, clothing, tools, and luxury items needed to placate his followers. Juvayni explains how Chinggis and then Ögödei competed for a share of the trade from East and Central Asia by offering improved prices, which would have lured merchants away from their old markets in the south towards the emerging power in the steppe.\(^{18}\)

Indeed, the construction of Qaraqorum, with its separate quarters for Muslims and Chinese, may have been in part a means of providing the merchants with such a market. The amenities afforded to merchants were only grown further by later generations of Mongol rulers. Marco Polo’s travelogue provides extensive detail on how Qubilai incentivised merchants to come to Daidu by giving them free accommodation in fine hostels, comfort-women in state-run brothels, and security through prohibitions on carrying weapons in the inner city.\(^{19}\) Trade was a serious issue for the Mongols, who acquired a great deal of their revenue from sales tax (*tamgha*; István Vásáry and Judith Kolbas).

The unification of much of Eurasia in a single empire (the *Pax Mongolica*) opened new possibilities to foreign traders, who entered lucrative partnerships with their Mongol patrons. The extent and timeframe for this exchange has been debated widely by modern historians and must be weighed against a number of factors. The decimation caused to large swaths of Eurasia almost certainly had an impact on the volume of goods being traded, which would have only marginally been compensated for through the construction of new infrastructure (e.g. roads, caravanserais, and passports). Yet many of the core agricultural producers in southern China, India, and Egypt escaped significant damage, and old maritime hubs in the Moluccas Straits, Constantinople, and the Persian Gulf likewise seem to have expanded their footprint in the second half of the thirteenth century. Indeed, though the conquests were destructive, they did contribute to the creation of new fortunes and the expansion of some older industries. From the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries, the Mongol Empire became a focal point of the slave trade across the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Hindu Kush, among other places. The displacement and, in some cases, deliberate relocation of other populations saw the exchange of skills and
technologies, resulting in the increased production and sale of cotton in East Asia, the spread of new citrus fruit from the Middle East to China, and the sale of porcelain in West Asia. These exchanges were undoubtedly disrupted to some extent by the disintegration of the unified empire after 1259 and the subsequent internecine wars between the Mongolian successor states. Nevertheless, political divisions never created unsurmountable barriers for intrepid merchants. Maritime trade provided an outlet for the Yuan and the Ilkhanate, bypassing their often hostile neighbours in the Middle Empire (Colleen C. Ho and Paul D. Buell). A steady traffic of grain and slaves from the Jochid Ulus to the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt via Anatolia also suggests that ways could be found to subvert embargoes on commerce with hostile powers.

The resulting trade produced what Timothy May has described as the ‘Chinggis Exchange,’ in which new ideas, technologies, and goods were transmitted from one end of Eurasia to the other. Medical knowledge and materia medica were among the most notable fields of exchange during this period as the low average lifespan of the later rulers of the empire prompted increased interest in health and well-being (Paul D. Buell). At the time that the Yuan emperor Temür Öljeytü (r. 1294–1307) was funding a translation of a Chinese manual on pulse-medicine into Mongolian, Khudabanda Öljeytü (r. 1304–1316) was doing the same thing (into Persian) in the Ilkhanate. Indeed, the Ilkhan court reputedly played host to physicians from all over Eurasia, including Indian yogis, Chinese physicians, as well as Islamic experts in Galenic medicine. We may imagine that these doctors collaborated and exchanged information far beyond the translations which have survived for posterity. These exchanges made the Mongol court a theatre for spirited and highly entertaining debates between advocates of different schools of thought. Such debates, which the khans deliberately staged, were most common on the subject of religion, for which we have a number of examples from the Ilkhanate during the reign of Arghun (1284–1291) and again under Öljeytü.

Such collaborations were not unheard of prior to the arrival of the Mongols – the collaboration between Christians and Muslims in the kingdom of Sicily being one of the other notable near-contemporary examples. Yet the sheer scale of the Chinggisid Exchange certainly was revolutionary and, in some cases, too much of a radical departure for its subjects. In the Ilkhanate, for example, the exchange of medical texts saw knowledge of Chinese pulse-medicine spread to the Middle East, yet it was not until the seventeenth century that this expertise was widely utilised, when it was reintroduced again in the Ottoman Empire. The Ilkhanate’s experimentation with paper currency in 1293 likewise proved to be more disruptive than helpful to the Iranian economy. Nevertheless, the use of a token currency loosely copied from Qubilai’s Yuan Empire did find imitators in South Asia, and other ideas proved to be far more durable. For example, the expansion of the Mongol Empire across Eurasia led to the production of new, far more detailed maps than had ever been produced (Hyunhee Park). The Map of Integrated Regions (1402), produced in Korea from earlier Yuan models, built upon existing cartographical traditions to incorporate major cities and topography of the Middle East and Africa. At the same time, knowledge of East Asia spread across the Middle East, with some of the earliest references to Korea (Ko-lai) appearing in the Collected Histories of Rashid al-Din. The anonymous author of the Travels of Sir John Mandeville, like other contemporaries in
Europe, fed off the European fascination with the territories of the Mongol Empire to pen his fictional travelogue throughout Asia, with extensive detail afforded to the realm of the Great Khan. These revolutionary discoveries played no small part in reshaping conceptualizations of space and identity on the cusp of the modern era.

NOTES

1 Buell and Kolbas 2016, 47; Pochekav 2016, 183; Humphrey and Hürelbaatar, 25–26; Togan 1998, 148.
3 RDT, 61.
4 Uno 2009; Broadbridge 2016.
6 Pfeiffer 2012, 373; Lane 2003, 108–117 & 131–133.
7 Rossabi 1987, 16.
8 Birge 2017, 214.
9 Rubruck, 120.
10 TMM, 85.
11 Budge 1928, 221–222; Lane 2018, 3.
13 The papal envoy Ascelin refused to kneel before the Mongol commander Baiju and was instead asked how the Roman Catholics might show reverence in their own fashion. The incident might have cost Ascelin his life if not for Baiju’s wife’s intercession. Pow 2019; Ayalon 1971, 119–120; Aigle 2004, 994.
15 HWC, 203–236.
17 Blair and Grabar 1980, 25; Soudavar 1996, 97; Rossabi 2015, 220.
18 HWC, 78 & 201–231.
20 Allsen 2001, 124; Brook 2010, 206.
22 Lane 2006, 141; Atwood 2013, 223.
23 Lane 2006, 141.
24 Lane 2016; Amitai 2013.
25 Lane 2006, 141; Atwood 2013, 223.
26 Prasad 1936, 102; Husain 1938, 133.
27 Kauz 2013; Park 2018.
28 Rashid al-Din 1953, II, 900, 909, 911, 974; Rubruck, 203; Polo 1958, 118.

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HWC, See List of Abbreviations.


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**Note:** The text above is a list of references formatted according to a specific style guide. Each entry includes the author's name, publication year, title, and relevant publication details. This style is typical for academic bibliographies, ensuring proper documentation and acknowledgment of sources used in a research paper or study.


Rubruck, See List of Abbreviations.


TMM, See List of Abbreviations.


PART V

FAMILY AND ROYAL HOUSEHOLDS
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CONSORT FAMILIES IN THE SUCCESSOR KHANATES

Anne F. Broadbridge

Consort houses in the Mongol Empire were families with whom the Chinggisids intermarried over several generations. Typically a house was composed of multiple lineages, which ranged in status depending on the prominence of their female or male ancestors. Within houses and lineages, individual consorts were men or women who wedded Chinggisids in any generation. In all consort houses, members of different lineages seem to have cooperated with one another to varying degrees. Different houses enjoyed different levels of political influence, military and marital opportunities, and economic power.

Certain consort families dominated elite marriage politics across the Empire. One reason for this was the nomadic preference for exchange marriages, in which a man and woman from two different lineages would wed and have children. Then, when it came time for the children to marry, some would wed the offspring of their mother’s siblings (i.e., their own maternal first cousins) or the offspring of their mother’s other relatives (i.e., their maternal second or third cousins) in “exchange” for their mother’s earlier marriage to their father. Such was the case of Chinggis Khan’s senior wife, Börte, who hailed from a Qonggirat lineage. Three of her nine children (Princess Temülün, Princes Jochi and Chaghadai) married the offspring of Börte’s brother (Alchi) or cousin (Qata). The descendants of Jochi and Chaghadai were considered to be Chinggisids like their fathers, not Qonggirat like their mothers. Meanwhile the descendants of Temülün were Qonggirat because of Temülün’s husband, but the overall high status of this lineage across the Empire derived from Temülün’s position as a major Chinggisid.

Another option was a sister-exchange, where grooms from two lineages “exchanged” sisters. Thus Börte and Chinggis Khan married a daughter and a son, Princess Chechiyegen and Prince Tolui, to the son and daughter of Quduqa Beki, ruler of the Oirats, which meant that the grooms – the sons – “exchanged” sisters. Some children from sister-exchange unions then married back into their mother’s family in typical exchange pattern. After joining the Oirat ruling family, therefore, Princess Chechiyegen wedded six of her seven children to her brothers’ offspring, that is, “back into” the Chinggisids.
This exchange system demonstrated an important loophole in the Mongols’ strict preference for exogamous marriage. Because lineage was defined by fathers, not mothers, certain marriages were acceptable to the Mongols even though they would be considered consanguineous by modern standards. Thus Chinggis Khan and Börte could marry their son Prince Jochi to Börte’s niece (Öki, her brother Alchi’s daughter), even though Börte and Alchi were siblings, and therefore Jochi and Öki were first cousins. This was possible because the fathers in question (Chinggis Khan, Alchi) were not related by blood. This preference could lead to generations’ worth of consanguineous marriages between first cousins. Although we now know that consanguineous marriages can increase risks for certain genetic disorders, the Chinggisids did not, and furthermore they saw these cousin marriages as desirable because they conferred social, political and economic benefits on both families. Whether the biological complications that might arise from generations of consanguinity had any direct effect on Mongol history is an unresolved question.

Patterns of exchange marriage in the empire began with the nine children of Chinggis Khan and Börte, the senior royals: Princess Qojin; princes Jochi, Chaghadai and Ögödei; princesses Chechiyegen, Alaqa and Temülün; Prince Tolui and Princess Al Altan. The same patterns continued with the junior royals, meaning children from Chinggis Khan’s other wives and concubines. Marriages for all Chinggisids reflected the status of the mothers: children from senior wives married higher-ranking partners, while offspring from junior wives or concubines married lower-ranking ones. In any generation, some children engaged in exchange marriages with their mothers’ families, while their siblings contracted strategic marriages with partners from other consort families, members of the bodyguard (keshig), military commanders, vassal rulers and so on.

The senior consort houses appear most frequently in the historical sources. These families included key lineages from the Qonggirat, Oirats, Ikires, Önggüds and Uyghurs, and they became “senior” when one of the five daughters of Börte and Chinggis Khan married into them. The single most influential consort house was that of the Qonggirat, which contained multiple lineages of greater and lesser status. The first lineages descended either from Börte’s male kin (her brother, cousins) or from the offspring of Börte’s daughter Temülün, who married Börte’s nephew Chigü (possibly adopted from another Qonggirat line). Additional Qonggirat lineages existed: Jochi’s senior wife hailed from one, while others arose from Qonggirat military commanders in the khanates who were rewarded for noteworthy military service with the opportunity to marry their daughters to Chinggisid princes.

Perhaps the second most influential consort house was that of the Oirats, which also contained several lineages: the descendants of Princess Chechiyegen and her Oirat princely husband; the children of that same husband and women other than Chechiyegen; descendants from the husband’s extended Oirat family; the offspring of Chechiyegen’s niece, who married into the family at the same time; and children of the Oirat administrator Arghun Aqa. This last line intermarried with the other lineages when possible.

The Önggüt consort house was also prominent. Princess Alaqa married into the Önggüt ruling family, then remarried several times within it through the levirate before assuming autonomous rule as regent for her son. Similarly, Princess Qojin wedded the Ikires commander Butu, a follower of her father and widower of
her aunt Temülün, which helped elevate this Ikires lineage and its subjects. Finally, Princess Al Altan married into the Uyghur ruling house. This lineage formed another consort family, but the history of the princess and the Uyghur royals was partially obscured and falsified after political scandals, including the execution of the princess in the 1240s and a purge of Uyghur leadership in the 1250s.11

Junior consort houses existed alongside the senior ones and can be so called because of their origin from junior Chinggisids, i.e., those with lower-status or unfree mothers. They make infrequent appearances in the historical sources and perhaps possessed less wealth or influence. They included lineages from the Jajirats, Oghuz, Qipchaqs, Ushin, Suldus and Togolas, among others. A few junior houses were anomalous, among them the Kereits and the Alchi Tatars. These were “reconstituted” houses, that is, restored from the survivors of a partially destroyed lineage through exchange marriage with the Chinggisids. Typically, their subjects had been atomized among the Mongols. The Kereit consorts began with a senior lineage that descended from sons of the Kereit royal family (i.e., the offspring of the Kereit leaders Ong Khan and Jaqa Gamba, who were killed in 1203 and 1204 respectively). Later, junior lineages arose from Kereit officers in the Mongol armies who married Chinggisid princesses as a reward for military service. However, no Kereit consort men commanded troops composed of Kereit subject people, since those had already been redistributed across Chinggis Khan’s armies. Similarly, the Alchi Tatars sprang from even fewer royals than the Kereit because Chinggis Khan brutally purged the men of their ruling family, and their male subjects, in 1202. It may have been the intervention of his two Tatar wives, both conquered in 1202, that helped the remnants survive and later make a few marriages with Chinggisids.12 These reconstituted houses thus differed from houses that boasted a daughter of Börte as a maternal ancestor and controlled troops composed of their own subjects.

The Chinggisid family was also linked to nomadic and non-nomadic vassal houses through marriage. Such marriages could be instigated by either side and could affect policies at both the Chinggisid and the vassal courts. A Chinggisid princess could marry a vassal prince, which gave the Chinggisids a princess-agent in the vassal’s court. Early examples include three of Börte’s above-mentioned daughters, who wedded vassal rulers or their sons (Princesses Chechiyegen and the Oirats, Alaqa and the Önggüt, and Al Altan and the Uyghurs). At the same time, junior Chinggisid princesses made similar matches with the Qarluq rulers of Almailiq and Qayaliq.13 These unions gave Chinggis Khan indirect control over new territories and over the military services of his sons-in-law and their armies. The princesses gained wealth, status and the opportunity to manage their husbands’ flocks, possessions and people, or even rule in new lands (like the frequently-widowed Alaqa in Önggüt territory). Nomadic or semi-nomadic vassal rulers gained the privilege of commanding their own subjects as troops, not the atomized troops of Chinggis Khan’s main army. Sons-in-law could enjoy military opportunities during campaigns and the privilege of marrying their children “back” into their wives’ Chinggisid lineage at the top of the political hierarchy through exchange marriage. Similar marriage policies were later used actively with non-nomadic rulers, most prominently the Wang royal family of Koryo, which initiated a long-standing in-law relationship in 1269.14 Additional, yet occasional, marriages also connected the Chinggisids with the ruling houses of the
Armenians in the 1250s and Georgia in the 1280s, Russian princes in the 1270s and 1300s, and the Mamluks of Egypt in 1320. Marrying “out” by a Chinggisid princess was one political strategy modeled by all five of Börte’s daughters. Alternatively, a daughter from a vassal house could marry a Chinggisid prince and join the Mongol court, although such wives rarely enjoyed senior status. A vassal wife might lobby at court on behalf of her family and people, depending on her savvy, skill and talent; the epitome of this was the highly influential Korean-born Empress Ki (d. after 1368), although few vassal wives matched her extraordinary achievements. Vassal dynasties whose women wedded the Ilkhanids included the Artuqids of Mardin, the Salghurids of Fars, the Byzantine Palaeologus family, the Seljuks of Anatolia and the Qutlugh-Khanids of Kirman. The Palaeologus and Seljuks also married among the Jochids, while the Qutlugh-Khanids formed additional unions with the Chaghadaids. At the other end of Asia, the Yuan royal family also enjoyed marital links with non-nomadic vassals, most notably the above-mentioned Wang family of Koryo.

**ACTIVITIES**

The intermarriage of consort houses with Chinggisid royals over generations conferred political, social and economic benefits on all parties, but the specifics varied by gender. Consort women enjoyed the greatest opportunities for wealth, status and power. After marrying a Chinggisid prince, a wife could become a royal child-bearer, which meant becoming and staying pregnant, surviving birth and producing live children. None of these could be taken for granted in the pre-modern world, since pregnancy was a potential killer of women and infants. The historical sources are populated with young, married women who suddenly vanish from view (like Chinggis Khan’s sister Temülün), and death from complications of pregnancy is one possible cause. Furthermore, royal babies had to survive infancy and childhood. But if a royal child-bearer and her offspring surmounted these obstacles, she could become a full-fledged royal mother, with authority over her children’s upbringing, training and eventual marriages. Some women did foster the children of others or send their own out for periods of fostering, but the extent of this practice requires further study. A senior wife’s sons in particular were eligible for the throne, and her daughters could expect high-status marriages, while in general children provided a kind of human capital for their mothers, which women could use to wield significant powers.

It is likely that royal mothers had a say in the strategic marriages of their daughters and sons, especially those with the mother’s own close relatives from the consort family. In the successor khanates, consort families were usually established early on when wives traveled with their Chinggisid husbands to the new territory, often accompanied by the wife’s brother and a contingent of the consort family’s troops. Thereafter the wife married some of her royal children to her brother’s children, which established the local branch of their house. Related lineages might also arise from lesser commanders in the consort family’s lineages. Over time, most royals married into these local consort houses, especially in the far Western regions, which were perhaps too distant from the Mongolian heartland for regular marriage negotiations.
In addition to roles as royal child-bearers and royal mothers, certain wives became managers of property, which meant the several, moveable camps of a royal household, each of which was administered by a wife, her staff and the royal bodyguard or, particularly in China, by designated bureaucratic offices. Additional property might include territories and their human, animal or natural resources, sometimes acquired through spoils, which khans could assign irregularly as gifts. As managers, royal wives routinely oversaw the administration of these entities’ economic, financial and logistical needs to a greater or lesser degree. Like all Chinggisids, royal wives received tax monies and also engaged in long-distance trade.17

Wives from consort families engaged in many activities. They regularly hosted banquets and meetings. They received foreign ambassadors and engaged in correspondence, either with their husbands or alone. To use Jochid territory as an example: The Jochid queen Boraqchin joined her husband Batu Khan (r. 1242–55) to receive both Franciscan friars, John of Plano Carpini in 1245 and William of Rubruck in 1253.18 Ten years later the next Khan, Berke (r. 1257–67), and his senior wife received Mamluk ambassadors, then handed them over to a secondary wife, Chichek, who fed them, housed them overnight and gave them robes of honor.19 In 1280, the same Chichek, now married to Möngke-Temür (r. 1267–80), received part of an enormous load of Mamluk gifts.20 Meanwhile Kelmish Agha, grandmother of the Jochid Toqta (r. 1290–1312), corresponded with interlocutors in the Ilkhanate and possibly Yuan China about Chinggisid politics in the 1280s.21 Thereafter in the Ilkhanate, Princess El-Qutlugh, a daughter of the Ilkhan Abaqa, corresponded with Mamluk officials.22

Royal women also routinely patronized a range of religious institutions and personnel, whether of their own religion or additional ones.23 In China, Qubilai’s wife Chabui was instrumental in supporting the Tibetan Buddhist Phags-pa Lama.24 Later both Empress Ki, the Korean wife of the Yuan Emperor Toghan-Temür (r. 1333–70), and Queen Irijinbal, the Chinggisid wife of King Chung’suk in Korea (second r. 1332–39), patronized Buddhism extensively in Korea.25 Meanwhile in the Jochid grasslands, the wives and daughter of Özbek Khan (r. 1313–41) received the Muslim scholar Ibn Battuta (d. 1357) and organized a religious gathering that he attended.26 Later Taydula, senior wife of Özbek’s son Janibeg Khan (r. 1342–57), corresponded with Pope Benedict XII in 1340 (1334–42) and the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan in 1357.27 In the Ilkhanate, the queens Nuqdan and Örüg, mothers of the Ilkhans Gaykhatu and Öljeitü respectively, received a missive from Pope Nicholas IV (1288–92).28

As for politics: a royal wife could wield a voice in politics in general and at quriltais in particular. She could advise her husband or son on personnel and policy or could set policies herself if she was a regent. Such influence frequently continued or intensified in widowhood because of the Mongol respect for seniority. That said, royal wives and widows in the Mongol system did not generally rule on their own behalf, but rather on behalf of a son.

Consort family men also enjoyed opportunities through their marital connections to the royal family. They worked as military commanders for the Chinggisids, and like other commanders, they could have a voice in politics in general and at quriltais in particular. But unlike regular commanders, consort family men might enjoy the prerogative of commanding fighting men who came from among their family’s own subjects, not Chinggis Khan’s atomized troops. Furthermore, the consort family’s
marital connections could provide men with extra opportunities for military advancement and promotion to higher positions like governor, which might include grants of land and income, although these also depended on the success of royal wives from that family. Finally, consort family men could try to put “their” prince on the throne, with attendant benefits to be expected if he attained rule.

CONSORT FAMILIES ACROSS THE KHANATES
THE JOCHIDS

The Jochid khanate was established between 1236 and 1242 and included many Russian princedoms, the Pontic Steppe and swaths of Central Asia. It is difficult to discern royal marriage patterns among the Jochids since the sources are few and tricky: The single best source is a complex and propaganda-laden history written outside Jochid territory by the minister Rashid al-Din (d. 1318) in the rival Ilkhanate. Although individual wives appear in the histories, we learn little about their families. Nevertheless, some general comments can be made.

Among the Jochids the Qonggirat consorts dominated early, perhaps because Jochi’s two Qonggirat wives bore his two most important sons (of fourteen or more). The senior wife was Sorghan, a Qonggirat from one particular lineage who became mother of the eldest son, Orda, and possibly also bore a daughter. Then Jochi married into his mother’s lineage by wedding his first cousin, Öki, who gave birth to Batu. The career differences between these two sons are noteworthy. Since Jochi died before Chinggis Khan, it was Chinggis Khan who chose Jochi’s heir: He selected Batu, the younger, but gave Orda the eastern half of Jochid territory. It is worth wondering whether maternal rank affected Chinggis Khan’s decision to favor Batu over his older half-brother as khan: Orda’s mother, Sorghan, was the senior wife and her son should therefore have been favored, but she was not from Börte’s family. Meanwhile Öki was Börte’s niece and thus hailed from the single most favored consort lineage in the Empire, and it was her son who was chosen.

Orda himself married three Qonggirat women, who bore all of his sons (daughters are unrecorded). Thereafter the Qonggirat family provided Orda’s sons, grandsons and great-grandsons with senior wives for generations. By contrast, only one of Batu’s wives is known, and she was not a Qonggirat but an Alchi Tatar, Boraqchin, mother to the heir, Sartaq. We cannot discern whether Batu also married among the Qonggirat; nor do we know much about Sartaq’s wives. But Sartaq’s brother, Prince Toqoqan, had a senior wife from the Oirat consort family, Köchü, one of the four daughters of Princess Chechiyegen and her Oirat husband. Although Toqoqan never ruled, Köchü’s two sons did: Möngke Temür (r. 1267–80) and Töde Möngke (r. 1280–87). Nevertheless, since none of Köchü’s brothers served militarily in Jochid realms, and since her male descendants married Qonggirat senior wives, not Oirats, the Oirat consort family may not have been well-established there.

Other known consort families among the Jochids included the Kereit, Jajirat, Jedei Bay’ut, Oghuz, Merkit, Naiman and Suldus. The Jochids also deployed the policy of marrying princesses to Russian, Seljuk, Byzantine and Mamluk vassals. These included Princess Urbay, daughter of Berke (r. 1257–67), who married the exiled Seljuk prince ‘Izz al-Din Kay Kaus perhaps in the 1250s; a Chinggisid princess who wedded prince Gleb Vasilkovich of Belozer in 1257; Princess Konchaka
(a.k.a. Agatha), who became wife to the Grand Prince Yuri Danilovich of Moscow in 1317; and Princess Tulunbay, who married the Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in Egypt in 1320.33

THE CHAGHADAIDS

The Chaghadaid khanate was in Mawarannahr and Ferghana, bordered by the Amu Darya on the southwest and Uyghuristan on the northeast. Its history has often been under-studied, in part because of the paucity of reliable material. Although the wives of Chaghadaid princes appear in works by Rashid al-Din, the Timurid-era Mu’izz al-Ansab, and the Baburnama of the Mughal Emperor Babur (d. 1530), information remains scant. The history of consort families is thus as ill-known as the rest of Chaghadaid history and can only be described preliminarily.

Depending largely on Rashid al-Din, we can posit that the familiar Qonggirat consort family dominated in Chaghadaid territory as elsewhere, at least during Chaghadai's lifetime, since he married two Qonggirat sisters in succession as senior wives. Both were his second cousins (i.e., the children of Börte's cousin); both controlled the senior wifely camp, and together they produced most of Chaghadai's sons.34

But the initial Qonggirat position was offset by a woman from the Oirat consort family, Orqina, another of Princess Chechiyegen's four daughters, who married Chaghadai's heir and grandson, Qara-Hülegü. Qara-Hülegü took over after Chaghadai's death in 1242, then was deposed in 1246 by the new Ögödeid Grand Khan, Güyük (r. 1246–48). At some point thereafter Qara-Hülegü and Orqina transferred their allegiance to the Toluid-Jochid alliance against the Ögödeid family, along with Orqina's mother, Princess Chechiyegen, and Orqina’s three sisters, all of whom were married to either Jochids or Toluids. The coalition supplanted the Ögödeids in 1251 with a new Grand Khan, the Toluid Prince Möngke (r. 1251–59), who immediately restored Qara-Hülegü as Chaghadaid Khan. After Qara-Hülegü died en route to his territories, Orqina ruled for at least ten years with Möngke’s approval. Her reign was technically a regency on behalf of her son Mubarak Shah, but she seems to have made her decisions independently for years. Together Orqina and Chaghadaid’s widows welcomed Möngke’s brother Hülegü in 1253 as he crossed their territory to invade Iran. He was accompanied by his wife Öljei (Orqina’s half-sister) and the commander for his Oirat troops, Buqa Temür (Orqina’s brother).

During the civil war between the brothers Ariq Böke and Qubilai (1260–64), Orqina sided with Ariq Böke, who was the husband of her sister Elchiqmish (i.e., yet another daughter of Princess Chechiyegen). Orqina also struggled with a new candidate for Chaghadaid rule, Prince Alghu, who eventually married her with (or without) her consent. But Ariq Böke was dead by 1264, and Alghu died of illness in 1266. Orqina’s son Mubarak Shah enjoyed a brief reign before being unseated and fleeing to Ilkhanid territory. During this period, Orqina herself vanished from historical view, either through death or exile – the details are unknown.35

After Orqina our view of Chaghadayid consort families grows dim, and we resort to collecting names. These included the Uyghurs; families of Chaghadaid commanders like the Dörben, Jalayir and Baya’ut; the Qipchaqs; and lineages of the
Dughlat and Saghrichis. The Chaghadayids also married into Muslim Turkic lineages like the Qutlugh-Khanids of Kirman and later wedded the Timurids in Mawarannahr and the rulers of Badakhshan.  

**THE YUAN DYNASTY**

In China as elsewhere, the Qonggirat consorts dominated. Their preeminence began with Börte’s niece Chabui, who married Qubilai (r. 1260–94) as a secondary wife, then became the favorite through her intelligence, skills, high morals and personality. She controlled a wifely camp and bore four sons (and possibly some daughters). Her sons were the only ones considered for rule. Before her demise in 1281, Chabui chose a Qonggirat relative named Nambui to take over as Qubilai’s most favored wife. Then after Qubilai’s death in 1294, authority moved into the hands of another Qonggirat lady, Kökechin, senior widow of the Crown Prince, who became regent until her son was enthroned as Grand Khan Temür (r. 1294–1307). Thereafter the Chinggisids continued to intermarry with this favored lineage: At least seventeen imperial wives, most of whom were senior wives, came from Qonggirat lineages during the Yuan period (1260–1368), while Chinggisid princesses married Qonggirat men just as regularly.

Traces of other nomadic consort houses do emerge in the Yuan context, although they ranged in status and influence. Male descendants of Princess Qojin from the Ikires house worked in the Yuan military, while the family also intermarried with other eastern Chinggisids – Möngke’s senior wife was Qojin’s granddaughter. The Önggüt intermarried among the Toluids in general, especially the descendants of Chinggis Khan’s junior son Kölgen. The Uyghurs also intermarried with eastern Chinggisids, at least until their house was purged in the 1240s and 1250s. But perhaps one of the more consequential of the consorts to the Yuan was the Wang royal family of Koryo, which asked to become in-laws in the 1260s and remained so for decades through a long progression of Chinggisid brides for Koryo kings. However, it was another Koryo family, the Ki family, that produced the anomalous, wildly successful and highly influential Empress Ki, wife of the last Yuan emperor and mother of the heir.

**THE ILKHANIDS**

The Ilkhanate in Iran, Khurasan, Iraq and Anatolia (1256–1335) was established by Hülegü in the 1250s. Three consort houses dominated the marital scene: the Oirats, Qonggirat and Kereit. Later two newer houses arose: the Chobanids and the Jalayirs. Additional Ilkhanid consort houses included Jedei Baya’ut, Eljigin, Alchi Tatar and Suldus lineages, although information on them is limited. The Ilkhans also wedded vassals, including the Seljuks, the Artuqids, the Palaeologus, the Qutlugh-Khanids, the Salghurids and the Georgian royals.

The Oirat consorts enjoyed a preeminent position because Hülegü’s senior wife was Güyük Khatun (not to be confused with the Grand Khan of the same name), another daughter of Princess Chechiyegen. Güyük managed the senior wifely camp and gave birth to the senior prince, Jumghur, and princess, Bulughan. But after Güyük’s early death in Mongolia, her assets were split: Her senior position went
to a new wife, the elderly Kereit princess Doquz, widow of Hülegü’s father, who married Hülegü through the levirate; while the senior camp went to a Qonggirat wife, Qutui, who stayed in Mongolia until she brought the camp to Iran in the mid-1260s. The Oirat consort presence was then maintained by a second Oirat wife, Güyük’s half-sister Öljei (a daughter of Chechiyegen’s husband). Both Öljei and her half-brother Buqa-Temür, commander of the Oirat troops, accompanied Hülegü to Iran, and Öljei produced three daughters and a son. When it came time to marry, some children from both Güyük and Öljei wedded the offspring of Buqa-Temür in classic exchange fashion.

Despite their overall influence, the Oirat consorts suffered several near-misses when it came to rule. Their first prince, Jumghur, remained in Mongolia during the Iran campaign, and it was his half-brother Abaqa who took over after Hülegü’s death in 1265, even though he was only the son of a junior Suldus wife (Yesünjin). Thereafter Prince Jumghur died en route to Iran. The next opportunity for a Chinggisid-Oirat prince was in 1282, when the widow Öljei proposed her son, Prince Möngke-Temür, as Ilkhan at a quriltai in the Caucasus, but Möngke-Temür’s sudden, unexplained death in Iraq closed that door. Thereafter the Oirat consorts suffered a series of challenges in the late 1280s and 1290s: the death of Öljei, secret executions of several Oirat princes (descended from Jumghur and Möngke-Temür), the public execution of an Oirat princess for witchcraft and declining birthrates. The only Chinggisid-Oirat prince ever to rule was Abu Sa‘id (r. 1317–35), who hailed from one of the lesser Oirat lineages. During his reign his mother enjoyed her own camp, and his maternal uncles gained access to governorships, but their influence did not last long after his death in 1335.

Unlike in all the other khanates, the Qonggirat consort family enjoyed only a short-lived ascendance in the Ilkhanate. This was under Hülegü’s Qonggirat widow, Qutui, who managed the Ilkhanate’s finances during the brief reign of her son, Ahmad Tegüder (r. 1282–84). This family boasted several branches, from which hailed four of Tegüder’s six wives, one of them a relative of Qutui herself. However, unlike in other consort families, three of Tegüder’s five daughters married Kereit military commanders, not Qonggirat, which helped propel the Kereit’s later rise. Furthermore, Tegüder was the only Chinggisid-Qonggirat prince to rule in the Ilkhanate. After his downfall, only his youngest and least influential Qonggirat wife remarried. Although other Qonggirat wedded Chinggisids thereafter, few children emerged from these unions, and no Qonggirat line ever produced another likely prince.

As for the Kereit: Hülegü’s senior wife Doquz had no offspring, thus the senior Kereit lineage arose from the children of her brother, a commander named Saricha, who married two daughters and a son to Chinggisids. Additional Kereit lineages emerged from unions between Kereit military commanders and Chinggisid princesses, but these were junior to Saricha’s descendants. Like the Qonggirat and Oirat, the Kereit consorts enjoyed a moment of ascendance. Theirs began in the 1280s at a time of declining Ilkhanid royal birthrates and was due in part to the unusual fertility of Örüg Khatun, Saricha’s daughter. Although Örüg was a junior wife to the Ilkhan Arghun, she bore five children, more than any of her co-wives or Arghun’s concubines. One of her sons became the Ilkhan Öljeitü (r. 1304–16). Örüg’s brother was the commander Irinjin, married to a daughter of the Ilkhan
Tegüder, whose own daughter Qutlugh-Shah later wedded Öljéitü in an exchange marriage for Örüg. The Kereit lineages enjoyed wealth in the form of camps, including the one formerly controlled by Doquz (inherited by Qutlugh-Shah) and another camp for Örüg herself, access to military governorships and the ability to patronize Christians extensively. But in 1319, all the Kereit lineages cooperated to oppose the senior commander, Choban, and the Ilkhan, Abu Sa’id, with disastrous results. Most of the family was brutally purged, and the few remaining members vanished from historical view.45

Two later Ilkhanid consort families were the Jalayirs and the Chobanids. The Jalayirs traced their prominence to the Chinggisid-Kereit Princess Öljetei, a full sister of the Ilkhan Öljéitü, who married into a Jalayir lineage and produced a son, Shaykh-Hasan. After 1335, Shaykh-Hasan eventually established his own dynasty in Iraq, the Jalayirids, which lasted until 1410. He was sometimes called Öljéti (i.e., from his mother, Öljetei), rather than Jalayiri (from his father’s Jalayir lineage), in the historical sources.46

The Chobanids were the offspring of the senior commander Choban, who married three Chinggisid princesses (Sati Beg, Dolandi and Kürdüchin). But since Abu Sa’id brutally purged Choban and some of his sons in 1328, the family’s subsequent revival is best linked to the political influence of Choban’s daughter Baghdad Khatun, whom Abu Sa’id divorced from her husband and married himself. (Additional Chobanid influence came from Baghdad’s niece Dilshad, who married Abu Sa’id some years later.) The Chobanids also experimented with puppets, including Abu Sa’id’s half-sister Sati Beg (Choban’s widow), then ruled independently in Azerbaijan until the 1350s.47

CONCLUSION

To conclude, consort houses in the Mongol Empire included those families with which the Chinggisid dynasty intermarried over generations. The prominence of these consorts was fueled in part by the system of exchange marriages, which favored the formation of unions between the same two lineages over generations. Each consort house typically included multiple lineages, whose status derived from the original marriage partners at the time of the house’s entry into the ranks of consorts. This system led to the predictable dominance of key houses overall, particularly those related to Börte or her five daughters. (Lesser nomadic and non-nomadic consort families also existed, but we typically know less about their activities, with only a few exceptions.) Consort women could enjoy management of camps and the ownership of property, the possibility of royal children, the ability to patronize religions lavishly, and significant influence in politics. Consort men typically inherited command of the family’s troops, as well as additional opportunities for advancement and wealth, to say nothing of the advantages of intermarrying their offspring with the Chinggisids. All these factors positioned consorts to be significant players in the politics of the successor khanates. Nevertheless, consort families were not guaranteed dominance, but rather should be seen as a newly distinct category, who still had to jockey for authority, influence, and access to resources with the better-known guardsmen, commandery, vassals, religious officials, and bureaucrats.
NOTES

1 Uno 2009, 175–182.
3 Uno 2009, 175–182.
5 Broadbridge 2018, 241.
6 Broadbridge 2018, 227 and n. 2; Broadbridge 2016, 122.
9 Landa 2017, 23; RDRM, II, 972; RDT, 476.
10 This tradition meant that a widow remarried her deceased husband’s male relative, the levir, who could be a brother, cousin, uncle or son from a mother other than herself. Such remarriages kept widows, and the property they controlled, in the man’s family. Holmgren 1986, entire.
11 Broadbridge 2021.
14 Robinson 2009, 100.
15 Robinson 2009, especially chapters 3, 7.
18 TMM, 57; Rubruck, 117.
19 Mufaddal 1911, 459 & 461.
21 Broadbridge 2018, 234.
31 Broadbridge 2018, 232 and n. 27.
34 Broadbridge 2018, 234.
37 Broadbridge 2018, 238–239.
40 Broadbridge 2018, 251.
42 Broadbridge 2018, 281.
44 Broadbridge 2018, 274–278.
46 Broadbridge 2018, 294.
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RDRM, See List of Abbreviations.
RDT, See List of Abbreviations.
Rubruck, See List of Abbreviations.
TMM, See List of Abbreviations.