CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ELITE WOMEN IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

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The medieval Mongols, like their contemporary Chinese, Islamic or Christian counterparts, were organized through a patriarchal and patrilineal social system. This means that men were the depositaries of political, economic and social power, while inheritance (both economic and political) was based on descent through the male line. However, in comparison with their sedentary counterparts, nomadic Mongol women were more outspoken in politics, had larger degrees of economic autonomy and were able to freely decide their religious affiliation. Public prominence and freedom to dispose of wealth can also be observed among women of the Jurchen and the Qara Khitai, who shared a common nomadic background with the Mongols.¹ This higher status enjoyed by nomadic women is present even in the mythology shared by medieval nomadic Eurasian societies. A woman named Alan Qo’a plays a pivotal role in the myth that describes the primordial origin of the Mongols, serving as a link between myth and history.² Consequently, the high position given to women among Inner Asian nomadic societies before the rise of Chinggis Khan helps to explain the prominent role that they occupied in the Mongol Empire. Nonetheless, as the empire grew and other societies were incorporated into the Mongol domain, some of these social practices were transformed, reinforced or abandoned in a process of acculturation that took place between conquerors and conquered people.

Original historical sources are also clearly masculine, with an overwhelming majority of them being commissioned, written and read by men. Nevertheless, these sources were not exclusively about men. Indeed, women appear constantly in the historical narratives. The presence of women in the public scene is also widely documented by travel accounts written by foreigners visiting the Mongol Empire, and biographies of prominent female individuals were included in chronicles and biographical dictionaries from China to the Islamic world.³ The abundance of references to women in the sources seems to have captured, in writing, the prominent role that these women played at different stages in the expansion of the Mongol Empire across the large territory it occupied. Yet the peculiarity of this
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abundant information about Mongol women does not necessarily provide us with a full picture of the role of women in medieval Mongol society. Written sources remain highly elitist in their conception and interest and really tell us little about the life of women from the lower strata of the society. We know almost nothing about how, for example, the wives of soldiers lived or if marriages were arranged between the daughter of a blacksmith and the son of a shepherd in Qaraqorum, Tabriz or Daidu. While masculine bias in the sources can be methodologically minimized, we should trust that future research, using new sources and methodologies, will help to bridge the gap in our knowledge between elite and common women in the Mongol Empire.

As a field of study, gender dynamics in the Mongol Empire has grown exponentially in the last few decades, and yet there is still substantial research to be done. Scholarly interest in the study of women in the Mongol Empire in the West began in the 1970s with the appearance of two articles by Paul Ratchnevsky and Morris Rossabi, respectively. Simultaneously, Shirin Bayani published the first exploration of the role of women in the Mongol Empire in a single volume. Written in Persian and never translated into a European language, Bayani’s work has never been fully acknowledged for its pioneering and ground-breaking role in modern Mongol historiography. The publications emerging in the 1980s have been more widely recognized in the field, starting with the chapter dedicated to women in medieval Iran by A. K. S. Lambton and different articles by Jennifer Holmgren about women in Yuan China. During the following decade, a number of different studies highlighted the prominent role of women in Mongol society from different angles, but it was at the turn of the twenty-first century that more comprehensive studies began to appear.

Initially, there were scholars from Chinese studies, such as Betinne Birge and George Q. Zhao, who developed the first monographs on women in Mongol China, mainly concentrating their efforts on the study of marriage, inheritance practices and political legitimacy. Scholars of the Ilkhanate would soon follow, with Karin Quade-Reutter and George Lane expanding on the work done by Bayani and Lambton on the role of women in Mongol Iran. They, in turn, were followed by a number of different articles from young scholars, who in the second decade of the century began to expand the study of women in Mongol society beyond their political influence and into aspects of their economic, religious and social status. The proliferation of scholarly works on the topic for over 40 years has contributed to establishing gender studies as a pivotal area for the study of the Mongol Empire. The appearance of two monographic studies in recent years and the inclusion of the field in different collections about the Mongols – such as this one and others – speak for the general agreement among scholars as to the critical role that studying women occupies for a general understanding of the history of the Mongol Empire.

GENDER AND POLITICS IN THE MONGOL EMPIRE

From the earliest accounts we have of the Mongols, historical narratives portray women having a prominent role in politics. The Secret History contains a number of depictions of women making decisions that would define the fate of the empire. Similarly, Persian historians writing in different periods of the Mongol Empire such as Juvayni, Rashid al-Din and Hamd Allah Mustawfi, to mention but a few, include
constant references to women’s participation in political affairs across the empire. The visibility that Mongol women had in the public sphere was not a testimonial presence but an active institutional role. For example, women attended the royal assemblies (quriltai) in which new Mongol rulers were elected and appointed by common agreement. Further, they actively participated in diplomacy, with elite women playing a fundamental role in securing alliances between different Mongol factions and receiving emissaries from abroad or interacting closely with military leaders. The involvement of women in politics in the Mongol Empire comprised different layers of participation. While the outspoken role of women seems to have been widespread among elites, the political influence they exercised and the recognition of their role in the empire varied depending on the individual capability of the woman, her family connections and the historical context of the empire. Depending on these variables, some Mongol khatuns were acknowledged as official rulers of the empire or a khanate, while many exercised real political power both in their households and across the empire.

Women as political actors

Mongol khans and princes had several wives and concubines. It was customary among the Mongols, in order for the man to devote time to all of them, that he would spend alternative nights in the tent of each of his main wives. When staying in the ordo (encampment) of one of his khatuns, the man would task his wife and her servants not only with hosting him, but with facilitating the conditions for the ruler to perform his duties. Consequently, interviews with foreign diplomats, the reception of merchants and discussions of military strategies were carried out often in the presence of wives, daughters and concubines of the khan. Their presence in these meetings gave women access to crucial information on the political situation of the empire which, on occasion, could become a valuable asset for ambitious women to develop their own political agendas. In addition, their proximity to the decision-making process afforded them the possibility to intercede in front of their male relatives. The use they made of their privileged access to political information varied depending on the ability and ambition of each individual and the geopolitical circumstances in which they lived. Different anecdotes contained in the Secret History recall women serving as advisors to their male relatives. For example, both the mother (Höelün) and main wife (Börte) of Chinggis Khan intervened in particular moments during the early years of the empire to redirect his political decisions.

When they were not at the centre of political decisions, women played a vital role in advising men. This role of advisor was not limited to pre-imperial times but was a constant feature maintained through time and across the empire. Begtütümis, wife of Jochi, might have been pivotal in encouraging Jochid princes to rebel against the Qa’an and his family during the coup organized by the Toluids against the Ögödeids in the mid-thirteenth century. Similarly, Möngke Qa’an (d. 1259) recommended his brother Hülegü to “consult Doquz Khatun on all matters” before he was dispatched to conquer Iran in the early 1250s. This prominent seat given to women in the political structure of the empire placed them in a strategic position that many women used to fulfil their own political agendas.
In addition to having their say in the decisions of their male relatives, women also used their access to information for their own political benefit and, on occasion, even acted as kingmakers for their male relatives. Women had a crucial role in granting legitimacy to a male ruler at the time of succession to the point that, after the death of Chinggis Khan, the identity of the mother would regulate which of the sons was elected for rule.\(^{18}\) In principle, only the sons of the main wife of a deceased ruler had the right to inherit the throne of the father, giving that particular woman a pivotal role once her husband died.\(^{19}\) This custom placed some women in a privileged political position to influence the election of male rulers, particularly consort women coming from outside the Chinggisid line of descent.\(^{20}\) As we will see, in different periods of the empire, women plotted to promote their sons to the throne, assumed power by themselves in the name of their children and disputed with rival factions to secure the election of their descendants. Their role behind the scene as advisors, kingmakers or rulers in their own right made Mongol women crucial political actors and contributors to the construction of the empire.

### The ruling khatuns

The Mongols faced a recurrent problem shared with other nomadic empires before and after them: securing a peaceful succession to the throne whenever a khan passed away. The first instance in which the empire opened a process of succession occurred immediately after the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227. According to the sources, Chinggis Khan had designated Ögödei (d. 1241) as the heir to the throne during his lifetime.\(^{21}\) However, the *a priori* elective nature of the Mongol succession required that all members of the royal family gather in a *quriltai* and elect – or in this case confirm – the new ruler. Two years were needed for all the scattered Chinggisids to reunite, and during that period, a regent was needed to maintain the cohesion and the administration of an empire in constant expansion. Tolui, youngest son of Chinggis Khan, became the provisional ruler until his brother was confirmed on the throne in 1229.\(^{22}\) Therefore, the first regent of the Mongol Empire was a man, a military commander and the son of the deceased ruler.

The Mongols encountered a similar situation when Ögödei died in 1241.\(^{23}\) The Mongol nobility was dispersed across distant lands fighting for the expansion of the empire, commanding military campaigns in both China and Eastern Europe.\(^{24}\) A new power vacuum was created until the whole ruling family could reunite and appoint a new ruler. Once again, the Mongols needed a regent, but now the empire had changed. Firstly, Mongol armies had acquired new land in China and Russia; secondly, the Mongols had begun to delegate more power to subjects (local people), many of whom advocated for their own local agendas; finally, and perhaps more importantly, a new generation of Chinggisids was ready to take over command of the empire.\(^{25}\) Therefore, in a changing empire, the requisite qualities of the person chosen to fill the void were different from the previous time. Töregene Khatun (r. 1241–6), wife of Ögödei, was appointed regent “until the Khan [Güyük] was appointed by agreement” and was recognized as Empress of the empire. The ascension of this woman to the throne marks a turning point in the history of women in the Mongol Empire – a decade, between the death of Ögödei Qa’an (d. 1241) and the assumption of Möngke Qa’an (r. 1251–9), in
which women emerged as key political actors and conditioned the fate of the empire in the years to come.

There is debate on why the Mongols adopted the institution of female regency at this moment in time, with some suggesting that the ruling women of the Qara Khitai Empire of Central Asia could have inspired and set a similar precedent for the Mongols. Töregene Khatun was one of Chinggis Khan’s daughters-in-law, who became Ögödei’s wife after the Mongols conquered her tribe, the Merkit, during the early years of the thirteenth century. Contemporary sources describe her ascension as a common event and do not make any negative statement regarding the gender of the new ruler. However, at least two characteristics of Töregene’s life might serve to explain why she was elected as regent over other candidates. On the one hand, although Ögödei had other wives, she was the most senior among those who managed to give her husband a son, which apparently promoted her above other female contenders. On the other hand, her own personal capabilities and ambition for power played a decisive role in securing her place as ruler. She is described by Rashid al-Din, who was a fierce anti-Ögödeid writing over half a century after the events, as being of “masterful nature” in affairs of state, and by Juvayni as a “capable woman,” descriptions generally resembling those found also in Chinese and Christian sources. Töregene’s reign was not a mere interregnum between male rulers. Rather, she confronted and persecuted internal opposition posed by amirs and dissident family members, netted a network of alliances with other Chinggisids and accumulated so much power that even “when [her son] Güyük came [back], he took no part in affairs of state, and Töregene Khatun still executed the decrees of the Empire although the khanate was settled upon her son.”

The political influence of women in this decade went beyond the unprecedented acknowledgment of a woman as Empress-regent of the empire. In an unparalleled move, Töregene appointed a woman, named Fatima, as her highest counsellor, who became the person responsible for executing her commands. Her appointment, however, lasted only a few years until a group of rebellious amirs forced the Empress to depose Fatima after she was accused of sorcery, found guilty and ultimately executed. Töregene tried to intervene in favor of her counsellor, but opposition proved too fierce at this point, and her opponents managed to bend her will and forced her to abdicate in favor of her son Güyük in 1246. Güyük replaced his mother, but his reign lasted a mere two years, when he encountered his own demise en route allegedly to violently resolve some political disagreements with his cousin Batu. The Mongol response to the new vacuum of power was, once again, to place the widow of Güyük, Oghul Qaimish, as the new regent while the family decided upon the new male ruler. Although, as we have seen, there was no tradition of female regency among the Mongols before 1241, Persian chronicles refer to the new appointment as being part of the “Mongol tradition.” The appointment of Oghul Qaimish received the support of the Jochids from Russia, the Chaghadaids of Central Asia and the Toluids, which granted her at least a nominal recognition as Empress. However, unlike her mother-in-law and predecessor, she did not have much real power, and although she officially managed the affairs of state, a rebellion was already underway to remove her and the Ögödeids from power at the time of her appointment.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was another woman who instigated the rebellion against Oghul Qaimish. Despite never becoming ruler, Sorqoqtani Beki, the wife
of Tolui, played a fundamental role in the political development of the empire after the death of her husband in 1229. \(^{34}\) Sources depict her as Töregene’s \textit{alter ego}, who from the shadows managed to design and implement a whole strategy to shift the line of succession from the Ögödeids to the Toluids. \(^{35}\) During the reign of Töregene, Sorqoqtani showed herself as a loyal subject of the Empress while opening back channels to gain the favor of Batu, eldest among the surviving grandsons of Chinggis Khan, to promote her son Möngke to the throne. Her work in the shadows paid off during the reign of Oghul Qaimish, when Sorqoqtani came out in the open to challenge the legitimacy of the Ögödeids by convincing members of the \textit{quriltai} to have her son Möngke crowned in 1250. She was praised by Persian and Christian sources alike, who always try to link her with an idea of the empire based on light taxation of the sedentary population vis-à-vis the “extractive” model represented in the narratives by Töregene, Güyük and Oghul Qaimish. \(^{36}\) Similarly, these pro-Toluid sources portray her as a righteous woman, who was able to redirect the wrong dynastic direction taken by the Ögödeids. However, this representation hides the other side of Sorqoqtani’s fierce political attitudes. Immediately after succeeding in displacing Oghul Qaimish, she supervised the cruel execution of her rivals and persecuted all political opposition to clear the land for her son to rule. Like Töregene and Oghul Qaimish, she was a formidable woman in implementing her will in pursuit of her own political agenda (and that of her close relatives).

The deposition of Oghul Qaimish would close the decade of female rule in the Mongol Empire, which lasted from 1241 until 1250. Never again would a woman be recognized as Empress or rule the whole empire. However, during this period, women did not act as puppet rulers or simple grantors of legitimacy for male rulers. Rather, they acquired a status that Mongol women had never achieved before and effectively shaped the destiny of the empire by pursuing their own political, economic and religious agendas. Hence, the period of the “rule of the Khatuns” is not an interregnum but rather a decisive moment in the history of the empire, when a dynastic change was imposed and a decision was made as to what would be the economic model of the empire in the decades to come. The subsequent political fragmentation of the empire limited the possibilities for women to be candidates to a now purely nominal position of Qa’an/Empress. However, the high political status granted in Mongolian society to noble women generated new political roles for women in each of the different territories controlled by the Mongols from the mid-thirteenth century onwards.

**Women’s political role in a divided empire**

The purges on opposing family members carried out by the Toluids after the enthronement of Möngke consolidated power in the hands of this Toluid line, leaving the western territories of the empire to their Jochid allies. In the 1250s, there was still a united empire as in the prior decade, but this time, with both Töregene and Sorqoqtani Beki dead, there were no women in the central \textit{ordu} who have been noted in the sources as being comparably outspoken in terms of politics. \(^{37}\) However, the institution of regency was opened for women in the empire with the election of Töregene, and, consequently, more ambitious women managed to promote themselves to the throne in some regions controlled by the Mongols. It appears that in
the areas with a predominant nomadic population, such as Central Asia and the Russian steppes, women were initially considered to act as regents more frequently. In the territories of the Jochid Ulus, Möngke Qa’an recognized a woman as regent in 1255. Boraqchin Khatun, wife of Sartaq son of Batu, was appointed as ruler of the Ulus in the name of her son Ulaghchi, who was underage. We do not know much about her personality or if she had any ambition for power or political agenda. If she did, she seems to have been unlucky because her protégé died only a year after her appointment, and she was unable to hold on to the throne after that. She was demoted by Batu’s brother Berke (d. 1266), who became Khan of the Jochid Ulus from that year onward. Nonetheless, another well-known case of female regency occurred in Central Asia during the same period. Orqina Khatun (r. 1251–9), a granddaughter of Chinggis Khan, fought her male relatives to become regent of the Chaghadai Ulus in Central Asia in the name of her underage son Mubarak Shah (r. 1266). She ruled for nine years in Central Asia during a period in which she assumed total control of the affairs of state and secured, through diplomacy and marriage alliances, the election of her son as khan of the Chaghadaids in the early 1260s.

When Möngke died in 1259, the new regent appointed was his youngest brother, Ariq Böke, thereby omitting women from the post and emulating the procedure carried out after the death of Chinggis Khan. The division of the empire set aside territories such as Iran and China, where a greater urban population increased the presence of sedentary people in the court. Neither of these territories saw the institution of female regency continue as it did in the Golden Horde and Central Asia. Instead, those regions showed a tendency towards a patrilineal succession that encountered constant opposition and power struggles among relatives representing conflicting views on succession practices among the Ilkhans and the Yuan emperors. The reasons why there were no more women acting as rulers of the different khanates after the death of Möngke Qa’an are diverse and subject to speculation. The division of the empire conditioned women in each territory to a negotiation with local sociocultural circumstances that might have shown an opposition to accepting the rule of a woman. Further, distance between the courts and their borders receded after the division of the empire into different khanates. With smaller kingdoms, male pretenders to the throne became more available, and male candidates were less dispersed in distant lands, all of which diminished the need for women to act as regents. The only examples of women ruling in these territories occurred in the fourteenth century, when both dynasties had entered into a steady decline and were soon to collapse. In the Yuan dynasty, Empress Dowager Budashiri, widow of Emperor Toq Temür (r. 1329–32), managed to name the successor to her husband but was never appointed as Empress in her own right. In the Ilkhanate, however, a woman called Sati Beg (r. 1339), widow of the last Ilkhan, Abu Sa’id (r. 1316–35), was not only named as ruler of the khanate, but coins were struck for her reign and her name was mentioned in mosques during Friday prayers. However, her real power over the kingdom was very limited, and she was at the mercy of her male protector, Hasan-i Kuchak. Her reign lasted only ten months and her appointment appears to have been a desperate last attempt to find a legitimate Hülegüid descendent rather than a reestablishment of a nomadic tradition of female regency.

Even if they did not sit on the throne, or were not recognized as empresses or regents, Mongol women continued to play a pivotal role in the politics of the
divided empire. This is not the place to enumerate the multitude of moments in which women intervened in politics across the different khanates, but to mention some of them will contribute to provide a general picture of their political actions. Perhaps because the Persian historians who wrote about the Mongols were not used to the high role of Mongol women in politics, we find clearer examples of women’s involvement in politics coming from the Ilkhanate. However, there is no reason to believe that similar examples did not occur in the Golden Horde and the Chaghadai khanate, for which the corpus of historical sources is far less abundant. Some noble women acted as counsellors of their male relatives in crucial aspects of political life, such as the administration of justice. Doquz Khatun, wife of Hülegü, intervened in front of her husband to pardon the Seljuk Sultan Rukn al-Din (r. 1248–65) from allegations of misconduct with the Mongol governor of Anatolia. Similarly, although sources provide a less benevolent portrait of her actions, Örüg Khatun appears as a fierce prosecutor of rebels during the reign of her second husband, Ilkhan Gaykhatu (r. 1291–5). This intervention of women in affairs of state occasionally superseded a particular territory and was performed at a trans-regional level. The deeds of the Toluid princess Kelmish Aqa are symptomatic of this interaction. She was married to a Jochid prince of the Golden Horde but always maintained close ties with her cousins both in the Ilkhanate and in China. On the one hand, she performed pseudo-espionage by keeping constant communications with Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304) in Iran and informing him all about the affairs of the house of Jochi. On the other, she used her prestige and influence to save the life of the Yuan prince Nomoqan, son of Qubilai Qa’an, who had been imprisoned by Jochids in 1276.

An example of continued female involvement in politics can be seen in the Ilkhanate during the 1280s, when two women were deeply involved in the political development of the realm. Two wives of Hülegü played a leading role during the disputes between different male candidates to the throne that shook the Ilkhanate after the death of Abaqa (r. 1265–82). One was Öljei Khatun from the Oirat people, who accompanied her husband on his trip from Mongolia to Iran. She was the mother of Möngke Temür, a son of Hülegü with real aspirations to the throne. The other was Qutui, a Qonggirat woman who came to Iran only after the Ilkhanate was established in 1260 and did everything in her power to promote her son Tegüder Ahmad (r. 1282–4) to the throne of the Ilkhanate. As marked by the Mongol tradition, an assembly was held in Iran to elect the new Ilkhan in 1282. Soon disagreements arose between both women, who were trying to place their respective sons on the throne, until news arrived of the sudden death of Möngke Temür, which, in turn, paved the way for Tegüder to be named as Ilkhan while control over the political, financial and diplomatic affairs of the realm seemed to have been assumed by his mother, Qutui. However, like other women in the empire, Öljei did not remain inactive after being defeated politically by Qutui. Like Sorqoqtani Beki before her, she plotted in the shadows to promote a rebellion that ultimately had Tegüder executed together with his mother, Qutui, and promoted Arghun (r. 1284–91) to the throne of the Ilkhanate. These are only two of the influential women in Mongol Iran, but their rivalry and competition exemplify how active the political role of women remained in the post-dissolution empire even if their male counterparts did not consider them as potential rulers or regents any longer.
ECONOMIC AUTONOMY

The active role that women played in the political development of the empire can hardly be understood without considering their involvement in the economy of the empire. In order to pay soldiers under their command, secure their political position or lobby in favor of their husbands’ and sons’ aspirations to the throne, the khatuns needed, firstly, to have access to wealth; secondly, to be able to accumulate it; and finally, to dispose of this wealth at their convenience. The ability to perform all three actions was neither homogenous nor did it occur simultaneously across the empire. The distribution of wealth was not balanced but varied depending on the status of the individual. Some women appear to have been able to use their resources in pursuit of their political goals, while others either refrained from participating in politics or had no political aspirations. Sources are ambivalent regarding the economy of the Mongol Empire in general and of women in particular. No accounting documents, if they ever existed, have reached us, and we are left only with narrative sources that are generally unreliable in their account of economic figures. Despite numbers being imprecise, sources provide anecdotes that are good witness of the presence of women as grantors and donors of the growing wealth accumulated by Mongol elites as the empire expanded, evidencing how women participated in the economy of the empire. References to women accumulating and distributing wealth appear in numerous chronicles of the period.\(^49\) However, the nomadic nature of the early Mongol Empire and the later incorporation of large areas of sedentary population determine what was considered wealth in the Mongol context.

The riches of the khatuns cannot be thought of in terms of money but in a more complex structure that combined cattle, luxury products and people, all articulated within the institution of the ordo that served as the administrative centre of a khatun’s wealth.\(^50\) These camps functioned as hubs of economic, political and religious activity among elite women in the Mongol Empire. They administered the wealth of the Mongol nobility from these centres. The accumulation of properties into these ordos came through different channels. The initial way in which a woman could begin to build a personal fortune was by receiving a dowry after marriage.\(^51\) Traditionally, this consisted of livestock, cloth, jewels, household items and servants, who were under her command until she died. However, the conquests of Chinggis Khan and the expansion of the empire put a vast amount of wealth at the disposal of the Mongols. Ever since the early days of the empire, Chinggis Khan acknowledged the right of women in his family to receive a portion of the booty of war. In this early stage, women’s participation was restricted to his wife Börte and his mother, Hö’elün, and the wealth distributed consisted mainly of men and women captured during war who would serve as servants, laborers or soldiers in the appanage of these women.\(^52\) Both booty and dowry continued to be sources of income for women throughout the Mongol Empire, but the value of the assets they received increased extensively once the spoils of war obtained by the Mongol armies from the conquest of wealthy territories of China, Central Asia and Iran was added. Further, a relevant, and often overlooked, source of income for women were the gifts given to them every time a quriltai was held for the election of a new ruler.\(^53\) The tradition of present-giving had certainly the goal of strengthening diplomatic ties among members of the royal family and rewarding those who supported them, but it was
also a form of redistribution of wealth that allowed women access to portions of the royal treasury.

Women did not increase their properties only by being passive receivers of dowry, booty and gifts. Instead, they used these resources to increase their equities by investing their wealth in different mercantile activities. Trade played a fundamental part in the economy of the Mongol Empire. Merchants (ortoqs) were free to trade within the empire and obtained imperial protection to carry out their activities. Mongol women, with their expanding treasuries, played a pivotal part in the economy of the empire, developing close relationships with merchants from the early period. Women from all different factions within the royal family invested in trade and had close interaction with merchants. For example, it is suggested by Persian historians that Oghul Qaimish neglected all her activities while she was a ruler “except for dealings with merchants.” Both Juvayni and Rashid al-Din highlight this connection as a negative trait of a woman for whom they had little sympathy. However, in other cases, the same historians praise Sorqoqtani Beki for sending a trading expedition along the Angara River in Siberia in search of silver. Although some measures were introduced by Möngke to have more imperial control over trade, once the Mongols settled in different regions of Eurasia, merchants continued to interact closely with khatuns at an individual level. In the Jochid Ulus, the interaction of merchants with ladies of the court is documented, while in Iran, there is much evidence of women hosting traders in their ordos, where they could buy luxury products from them and form investment partnerships for mid- and long-distance trade across the empire.

While trade was a common economic activity among nomads of Eurasia even before the Mongols, the expansion of the empire presented them with other economic realities and new sources of income more associated with sedentary populations. The Mongols imposed taxes on agricultural land ever since Chinggis Khan had incorporated areas of Northern China into the empire. In this early period, women such as Sorqoqtani Beki were assigned portions of cultivated land from which they extracted revenues in the form of taxes. Information about this practice in Central Asia and the Jochid Ulus is limited but it has been largely documented that women of the Ilkhanate were allocated specific territories for their usufruct. During the reign of Abaqa (r. 1265–82), different khatuns such as the abovementioned Qutui and Öljei were granted districts of northwestern Iran and eastern Anatolia from where they collected taxes imposed on the sedentary population that lived in these areas. Women did not gather these taxes themselves but sent servants and officials working for their ordus as tax-collectors in their name, who were charged with bringing the revenues back to the ladies’ camps.

Through different methods (dowry, booty, gifts, trade and taxes), Mongol women accumulated considerable amounts of wealth and property. The maintenance of soldiers and officials under their own command and their investments in trading enterprises show that women had a significant degree of autonomy in the use of their riches. In fact, their influence in politics cannot be separated from the fact that these women had at their disposal important amounts of both human and capital resources. This meant that, in different parts of the empire, women’s ordus began to be seen by male rulers as both an important reservoir of wealth and a threat to political stability. For this reason, at the turn of the fourteenth century, Ghazan Khan...
(r. 1295–1304) began, with the help of his vizier Rashid al-Din, a systematic reform of the ladies’ ordu in Iran with the double objective of centralizing women’s patrimonies under the imperial treasury and simultaneously depriving opposing Mongol factions of the accumulated ladies’ wealth. Consequently, the economic status of women underwent a process of transformation that adapted to the economic situation of the empire as it expanded across Eurasia.

**WOMEN AND RELIGION**

Before the rise of Chinggis Khan, different religions coexisted in the Mongolian steppes. The shamanism professed by the Mongols lived side by side with Buddhism, Manichaeism and people who identified with the Eastern Christian Church. As the empire grew, the Mongols encountered other religions such as Islam and Daoism and a multitude of sects that would determine the imperial attitude towards religion. The approach taken by Mongols towards religion is complex and does not seem to follow one single pattern. It was marked, on many occasions, by political purpose, in which different sects were favored based solely on the potential benefit they could afford to the Mongol political agenda. On other occasions, members of the royal family expressed genuine preference towards one particular creed, but, overall, the official policy of the empire granted religious freedom in its territory and favored the expansion of a multitude of different sects and beliefs.

Mongol women interacted with religion in different ways and surrounded themselves with a diverse religious environment. There is scarce evidence for the presence of female shamans in the early empire, but several episodes of women performing rituals of divination and sacrifices appear in the sources. Christianity was widely represented by women belonging mainly to the Kereit – but also Naiman, Merkit or Önggüt – peoples, while Buddhism, and to a lesser extend Islam, were common among the religions of preference in the Mongol steppe. Despite how sources might ascribe a woman to a particular religious affiliation, this did not prevent individuals from acknowledging other religions’ practices or seeking advice or comfort in a religion other than their own in times of need. Women in pre-imperial times lived in a multi-religious milieu and enjoyed complete freedom to pick the religious affiliation of their choice. After the unification of these houses under the command of Chinggis Khan, many of these women were incorporated by marriage into the Mongol royal family, bringing their religious beliefs closer to the royal house and the Mongol emperors. Their role as consorts granted women from tribes other than the Mongols the ability to acquire a privileged position through marriage and offered them a new position of power to advocate on behalf of their religion.

The relationship between women and religion, at least during the thirteenth century, was based on practice rather than dogma. In other words, women were more interested in the performative aspects of religion, engaging with ritual, healing practices and close interaction with charismatic religious personalities, than doctrinal matters. This is the impression reflected in the accounts from different sources of the period. European travellers to the Mongol courts in the thirteenth century offer some testimonies on the close interaction between Christian priests and noble Mongol women. Marco Polo includes a witness account in which an Eastern Christian priest allegedly performed a divination ritual in the tent of one
of Chinggis Khan’s wives and predicted his victory over the Kereit Ong Khan in battle. Whether or not it was fabricated, the anecdote does typify a scenario that may very well have been possible during the time in which Marco Polo visited the empire, when religious personalities performed rituals for the satisfaction of men and women in the court. William of Rubruck (d. 1293), who visited the court of Möngke Qa’an in the mid-1250s, cites similar examples. The Franciscan missionary visited different Christian Mongol women in the court, making constant efforts to gain their trust while competing with the local Eastern Christian priests for the attention of the khatuns. On one such occasion, he was summoned to the tent of a pagan Mongol woman who was sick and was asked to intercede for her life. After reading the Gospel to her and making her prostrate in front of the cross, he gave her a drink made of holy water, and the woman recovered. Despite the miracle, there is no mention in the text that the lady had abandoned her pagan beliefs or that she embraced Christianity, suggesting that there was no contradiction, in the eye of Mongol women, between professing one religion and making use of another in times of need. When the Mongols conquered and settled in regions largely populated by Muslims such as Iran, women maintained a similar syncretic approach towards religion.

Women also developed a more institutional relationship with religions. In China, for example, Chabui, wife of Qubilai Qa’an (r. 1264–94), was instrumental in spreading Tibetan Buddhism in the court of the Yuan dynasty. She had close contact with the influential leader Phags-pa Lama and gained the ears of her husband to win the favor of the Qa’an towards this religion. As the empire grew and the Mongols settled in the conquered territories, women became active agents in the diplomatic efforts made by European powers in establishing an alliance with the Mongols. Christian Mongol women of the Ilkhanate, for example, received letters from the Pope and welcomed foreign envoys from Christian kings to their ordo. They were perceived as potential facilitators in introducing Christianity to their husbands and sons during the thirteenth century with the aim of adding the Mongols as allies in future Crusade campaigns in the Middle East. Despite the benefits of this strategy being limited to Europeans, in terms of attracting the Mongols to their cause, they were based not only on the accounts collected by missionaries such as Rubruck or Carpini but on the capacity of Mongol women to show themselves as openly Christian even in Muslim lands like Iran, Central Asia and the Jochid Ulus. For example, women such as Doquz Khatun, wife of Hülegü, adapted a Mongol ger or tent to function as a portable church that would accompany her whenever her ordo migrated from one place to another.

While initially the majority of Mongol women were attracted by Christianity and Buddhism, other women would eventually embrace Islam. We need to wait until the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century to see a clear engagement of Mongol women with Islam, but in the territories of Iran and the Jochid Ulus there is extensive evidence of the proximity of Mongol women with different members of Muslim communities. Religion among Mongol women was shaped by their encounter with the Muslim populations in the regions west of the Amu Darya River where they settled. Shaykhs from different Sufi factions often interacted with Mongol women. Similar to the Christian missionaries mentioned above, Sufi shaykhs tried to seize the opportunity to get closer to Mongol women in Iran, the Jochid Ulus and Anatolia.
In addition, the incorporation of Muslim women from local elites into the royal family in the Ilkhanate and the Jochid Ulus might also have played a role in bringing Islam closer to the royal court. The increasing number of Mongol women with Muslim names documented in this period is indicative of conversions among Mongol elites in Iran, the Jochid Ulus and Central Asia. However, without narratives of such conversions explaining the moment in which a woman (or a group of them) embraced Islam, it has been theorized that women converted to Islam through a process of Islamization that involved a multitude of different situations.

The economic and political power accumulated by women in the empire also allowed them to provide patronage for different religions across the empire, including their original Altaic beliefs, Chinese traditions (Daoism and Buddhism) and Abrahamic faiths (Christianity and Islam). The influential khatuns of the 1240s, Töregene and Sorqoqtani, both made their financial contribution to promote religion in their own terms. The former authorized and helped to complete the printing of the Daoist Canon, while the latter, despite being a fervent Christian, did not hesitate in donating 1,000 dinars to a Sufi shaykh in Bukhara to build a madrasa in the city. Buddhism received extensive patronage in China by women in the Yuan, and in the Ilkhanate, the presence of Buddhism has been re-evaluated in recent years. In Iran, Christians were the first beneficiaries of women’s patronage. After the conquest of Baghdad, some Christian accounts mention that Doquz Khatun, Hülegü’s wife, financed the rebuilding of churches in the city, initiating a close relationship between khatuns and Christianity that would last for the rest of the Ilkhanate in Iran. However, Islam would receive the majority of patronage from Mongol Ilkhans and khatuns once the Islamization of the Mongols in the region became more apparent in the decades that followed the 1280s. Women of Turkic origin belonging to subject dynasties from southern Iran and Anatolia and those incorporated into the Ilkhanid court would be fundamental in stimulating the financial support for Islamic institutions and Muslim personalities in the Ilkhanate into the fourteenth century. During the last decades of the Ilkhanate, Mongol women would openly show their appreciation for Muslim shaykhs in Iran and Azerbaijan. They paid regular visits to religious figures in search of advice and guidance while generously requiting them in the form of economic patronage and political protection.

NOTES

1 De Nicola 2017b, 53-57.
2 This idea was suggested by Allsen 1994, 330.
3 Cleaves 1979-80, 138-150; Brack 2011, 331-359.
4 Ratchnevsky 1976, 509-530; Rossabi 1979, 153-180.
5 Bayani 1974.
7 In the 1990s, several studies addressing the relevance in studying women’s history in the western Mongol empire began to emerge. See, inter alia, Hambly 1998, 3-27; Melville 1999; Ryan 1998, 411-421.
8 Birge 2002; Birge 2003, 212-240; Zhao 2004, 3-26; Zhao 2008.
9 Quade-Reutter 2003; Lane 2006, 227-256.
10 Brack 2011; Gilli-Elewy 2012, 709-723; De Nicola 2013, 116-136; De Nicola 2014a, 132-156; De Nicola 2014b, 143-156; De Nicola 2016a, 79-105; Broadbridge 2016b, 121-135.
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11 Broadbridge 2018; De Nicola 2017b.
13 De Nicola 2010, 95–112.
16 This is the case of Begtümish, wife of Jochi and sister of Sorqoqtani Beki. Broadbridge 2018, 223.
17 RDK, 977; RDT, 479.
18 Broadbridge 2018, 102.
19 In the Ilkhanate, this rule was not always respected (i.e., the enthronement of Abaqa), but the reasons for this change and the specificities of the Ilkhanid succession still need further research.
20 On the relevance of consort women, see Broadbridge 2016, 121–135; Broadbridge 2018, chapters 8 and 9.
21 Juwayni 1912, I, 143; HWC, I, 182; RDK, 618–619; RDB, 18.
22 RDK 787–788; RDB, 166.
24 Güyük (r. 1246–8) was fighting with his cousins in Eastern Europe when his father died. See Juwayni 1912, I, 196; HWC, 240. On Güyük, see Kim 2005, 309–338.
25 I am referring here to the most relevant grandsons of Chinggis Khan who would compete for power from the 1240s onward: Güyük son of Ögödei, Batu son of Jochi and Möngke son of Tolui.
26 De Nicola 2017b, 49–57.
27 On the Merkits, see HCGK, 273–274; see also SHM §55–6, §102 and §110.
28 For example, Möge Khatun had been the wife of Chinggis Khan before passing to Ögödei by the principle of levirate after Chinggis Khan’s death. She was not only senior to Töregene but also widow of the founder of the empire and the favorite of Ögödei, and yet it seems that because she had no children from the khan, she was left out of the regency.
30 Juwayni 1916, II, 200; HWC, 244.
31 De Nicola 2017b, 70–71.
32 Kim 2005, 328–332. Carpini suggests that Güyük’s campaign to the west was to continue the conquest of Europe and not to oppose Batu. See May 2018, 130–131.
33 De Nicola 2017b, 74.
34 Rossabi 1979, 12; De Nicola 2017b, 72–73.
35 The plot is explained by De Nicola 2017b, 72–76; Broadbridge 2018, 195–224.
36 On Oghul Gaimish’s rule, see May 2016, 95–100.
37 Möngke’s wives were important actors in the court as observed by the Friar William of Rubruck, but they do not appear to have had the same political ambitions as their predecessors. De Nicola 2017b, 190–192.
39 Spuler 1943, 382.
40 For the story of her ascension, see De Nicola 2016, 115–120.
41 May 2018, 170.
42 Zhao 2008, 77–78; Dardess 1994, 567.
43 Üçok, 116; Album 1985, 43–76.
44 Despite this, Persian historians recorded the political involvement of women in territories other than Iran, such as those controlled by Orda among the Jochids. See Broadbridge 2018, 230–231.

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45 RDRM, 1023; RDT, 501. Similar episodes of political interventions of women are recorded in Mongol-dominated Anatolia. See Cahen 1988, 243; Melville 2009, I, 56.
46 RDRM, 1192; RDT, 581.
47 See Lane 2006, 244–245; Broadbridge 2018, 233–234.
48 De Nicola 2017b, 96–97.
50 De Nicola 2013, 126–136.
51 Rossabi 1979, 155.
52 De Nicola 2017b, 142–143.
53 De Nicola 2017b, 150–151.
54 Chinggis Khan ordered princesses to send agents for trading with the Khwarazmshah in 1218. See Allsen 1989, 87–92; Endicott-West 1989, 134; Broadbridge 2018, 13.
55 Juwayni 1916, II, 219; HWC, 265; RDRM, 810; RDB, 186.
56 RDRM, 76–77; HWC, 43; Broadbridge 2018, 198–199.
57 Allsen 1989, 104–105; on the measures of Möngke, see Juwayni 1916, II, 79; HWC, 600; De Nicola 2017b, 148.
59 De Nicola 2017b, 146; Broadbridge 2018, 209.
60 RDRM, 1110; RDT, 541. On Qutui Khatun, see also RDRM, 1064–1065; RDT, 520.
61 De Nicola 2017b, 151–152.
64 De Nicola 2017b, 186–188.
65 Polo 1903, I, 242.
66 TMM, 165–166; Rubruck 1900, 190–195; De Nicola 2017b, 189–192.
67 The woman was Qutay Khatun, wife of Möngke. De Nicola 2017b, 191–192.
68 On Chabui, see Broadbridge 2018, 237–240.
69 Rossabi 1979, 41, 138.
71 RDRM, 963; RDT, 472.
72 De Nicola 2014, 143–156; De Nicola 2014, 132–156.
73 De Nicola 2017a, 362–363.
75 DeWeese 2009, 120–134.
76 Cleaves 1960–1, 62–75; De Rachewitz 1981, 38–63; RDRM, 823; RDB, 200; Juwayni 1937, III, 8–9; HWC, 552–553.
78 See, for example, the high role achieved by Qutlughshah Khatun, daughter of the influential amir Irinjin and a confessed Christian who lived in the initial decades of the fourteenth century. See De Nicola 2017b, 215–216.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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HCGK, See List of Abbreviations.


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RDRM, See List of Abbreviations.
RDT, See List of Abbreviations.
SHM, See List of Abbreviations.
TMM, See List of Abbreviations.