In blood and fire, the kingdom of Judaea fell to the Babylonian sword, and its people were exiled to dwell in foreign lands. Centuries later, at the time of the Mongol advance, Jewish communities were to be found in the cities and countryside across the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Europe, in northern and eastern Africa, and on the maritime and land-based Silk Roads – also in India and China. Throughout the Fertile Crescent, Jewish communities are described in the texts of twelfth- and thirteenth-century travelers and historians. Baghdad, Aleppo, and Damascus were among the largest settlements; other communities were to be found in Erbil, Homs, Hama, al-Bira, and more – all lay in the path of the approaching Mongol forces.¹ Scant evidence reveals Jewish communities even farther east. A written Hebrew prayer from the ninth century, discovered in Dunhuang – one of China’s gateways to the northwest – is the sole evidence of the passage of at least one Jew on the road from Inner Asia into China. At the time of the Mongol conquest, a Jewish community was flourishing in Kaifeng, with an active synagogue built in 1163. Other communities existed farther to the northwest, in Ningxia, as well as in the southeastern ports of Yangzhou and Ningbo. Their members apparently came from India and Persia, and while gradually adopting several Chinese customs, held on to Jewish identity and rites.² This chapter will discuss several points of contact – legal, mythical and substantial – between the Mongol Empire and the Jewish communities.³ Based on these contacts, the conclusion attempts a wider statement concerning the religious attitude of the Mongols.

A NOTE ABOUT THE SOURCES

Since they had no land to be conquered and no army to subdue, Jews are not mentioned – as far as I know – in the Mongolian-language sources. Texts written by Christian and Muslim hands provide valuable information, yet because of the complex relations between the beliefs and the followers of the three monotheistic religions, these descriptions are not bereft of myth and prejudice. The Mamluk historian

DOI: 10.4324/9781315165172-53
al-Nuwayri (d. 1333), writing in Cairo, described Chinggis Khan as consulting with “one of the Jews” before his rise to power. Amitai, remarking that the story has no grounds in any other source of early Mongol history, surmised that the belief that Chinggis Khan was himself a prophet – a belief that did exist, according to certain contemporary sources – might have contributed to the creation and credibility of this story. The association of the Jews and the Mongols was also found in a negative sense, when al-Dhahabi (d. 1348) referred to the Ilkhanate as “dawlat al-Yahud”, the “Jewish dynasty”, as we shall see later in this chapter. Blunter was the attitude farther west. Mentions of a Mongol–Jewish connection appeared in European texts during the 1220s, when Mongol activity awakened the legend of the Christian Priest-King of the Orient, Prester John. One of his descendants, “David, king of the Indians” (rex Indorum), was sometimes mentioned as “David, king of the Jews” (rex Iudaeorum). As the Mongol threat drew nearer, this connection took a darker turn, as the Mongols became the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, intending to conquer the world and subjugate Christendom; Hebrew was used for secret communication between them and the Jewish communities. Vague suspicion became specific accusation during the large-scale invasion of Eastern Europe. Matthew Paris (d. 1259), writing in London, described a plot organized by “numbers of the Jews on the continent”, i.e., Europe, to aid the invading army in 1241. Preparing casks full of arms, the Jews told “the Christian chiefs” that the casks were full of poisoned wine meant for the Mongols. The plot was discovered when a keen keeper of a bridge checked the contents of the casks, and Christendom was saved. Menache, remarking that no other contemporary source mentions the tale, notes that it reflected the atmosphere of Europe at the time. The street fights that became a massacre in the community of Frankfurt, in May 1241, a short while after the Mongol victories at Liegnitz and Mohi in April, were one result of this atmosphere.

On this background, Chinese sources are blissfully refreshing, as they hardly noted Jews at all. The Chinese designation for Jews, zhu-hu (术忽), appears to bear this meaning only from the Mongol dynasty onward. Leslie surmised that prior to the Yuan era, Jews were considered a sect of the more numerous Muslims. This vagueness was aided by the Jews themselves. In the earliest of the Chinese stone inscriptions erected by the community of Kaifeng, dated 1489, Judaism is described in proper Chinese terms: God is named tian, “Heaven”; religious piety is intermingled with respect for one’s ancestors. Thus, Judaism was viewed as one of many Chinese local sects. In this mosaic, Hebrew sources are few, yet the letters, tombstones, sermons and poems form a valuable addition to the colorful and incomplete picture of the contacts between the Mongol Empire and Judaism.

THE YASA AND THE HALAKHAH

The legal system of Judaism, the Halakhah embraces personal, social and religious practices. Traditionally, it dates to Moses, who received it from God at Mount Sinai. Later generations elaborated and innovated, according to the changing circumstances. Setting it against the background of the Mongol Yasa, traditionally ascribed to Chinggis Khan, strikes immediate difference. Although the Halakhah is centuries older and its written nature is much more obvious than that of the Yasa, there are points of common ground. Both are inclusive sets of customs and laws
belonging to nomad-based societies that later came to be applied to a sedentary nation. Both legal systems form an important factor of these peoples’ identity. Now, before discussing points of contact between these two legal systems, one should ask, did the Mongols ever afford legal recognition to the Jewish communities under their rule?

This basic question can be answered by Mongol taxation. According to the order of Chinggis Khan, men of religion are exempted from paying tax. Thus wrote the Persian historian Juvayni (d. 1283): “the Jews heard of this ordinance and, not being included in this category, they became exceedingly vexed. . . [One of them] said – ‘We are not of that number. We account to nothing in either [Mongol or Muslim] worlds’.” Yet a Yuan edict, studied by Leslie, stated that “Nestorians, Jews and Dashiman [i.e., Danishmandan, Muslim scholars], except those in actual charge of temples and service”, should pay taxes. This edict, dated 1320, hints that Jews, alongside others, were misusing the tax exemption intended for religious specialists alone. Another edict, dated 1329, ordered “Buddhist and Daoist priests, Nestorians, Jews and Dashiman, who engage in trade, to be taxed according to the old regulation.” It is possible that during Juvayni’s time, Jews were not recognized by the Mongols due to their small number, yet later they evidently were and shared the same status as other religious groups. Thus, they too had faced the harsh periods during which the Mongols enforced their own customs on the entire population under their rule. The most serious clash concerned dietary laws.

“If anyone of the house of Israel . . . eats any blood, I will set my face against that person . . . and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood.” The conception of the soul as residing in the blood appears in Mongol religious belief as well as Judaism, yet while it led Jewish law to set up rigid regulations for slaughtering, among them the swift killing of the animal and draining as much blood as possible, Mongol custom required opening the animal’s chest and stopping the heart. This custom, May noted, emerged from spiritual and moral motives, as well as from the practical view of avoiding the waste. Drinking animal blood, described by foreign travelers, was mentioned in the Secret History as well, albeit only in emergencies. Jewish dietary laws, elaborated by later generations, were of vital importance in Jewish tradition. Muslim law, growing from the same root, led both Jews and Muslims to refrain from eating meat prepared by strangers. When the Mongols first rose to power, described Rashid al-Din, they enforced their custom on the entire population. Chinggis Khan’s second son, Chaghadai, was particularly known for pursuing this point. Thus, for certain periods – as late as the reign of Qubilai Qa’an – ritual animal slaughter was prohibited. The incidents described in the Muslim sources, of persons who were caught red handed and expected Mongol punishment, involved Muslims, yet in the edicts of Qubilai Qa’an, Jews were mentioned as well.

“Muslims and Jews, no matter who kills the meat, will eat it, and cease killing sheep by their own hands.” This edict was dated 1279/1280, but according to its introduction, it was Chinggis Khan who ordered it after being offended by those who refused to eat Mongolian food. In this edict, Qubilai went on to prohibit Muslims and Jews from conducting the rite of circumcision and the Muslim five daily prayers. Rashid al-Din mentioned only the ritual slaughter, remarking that these prohibitions originated in Qubilai’s own anger, stirred by merchants who refused to eat from his table. These laws, causing a decrease in foreign trade, were relaxed in 1287.
In certain places in Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Jews observed their tradition at the peril of their lives. These pogroms began during the first wave of the Crusades, in 1096, when the communities of the Rhine Valley were attacked. Many preferred to kill themselves and their families rather than obeying the demand to transgress the Jewish laws. It is not known whether Qubilai’s edicts were so obstinately opposed or enforced. It is important to note that while these edicts were promulgated by Qubilai, numerous Muslim officials served in the Mongol administration – in Yuan China and elsewhere – not to mention Qubilai’s relative, Tegüder, who ruled the Ilkhanate as a Muslim convert (r. 1282–1284). It appears that these prohibitions had no ongoing effect on the Jewish communities, even in the lands under Qubilai’s direct control. Thus, the communities of Ningbo and Yangzhou, established as early as the twelfth century, continued to observe traditional dietary laws as late as the seventeenth century, and in Kaifeng until the nineteenth.

While the Yasa and the Halakhah collided on the point of diet, in the field of marriage law there was somewhat more common ground. The Mongol custom of marrying an older brother’s widow (the levirate) was sometimes enforced on the non-Mongol population, despite contradicting Christian, Muslim and Chinese traditions. Yet a similar levirate law exists in the Halakhah: “When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family. . . . Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage.” Although marrying the widow of one’s father, allowed by the Mongols, was prohibited – and although the levirate as a whole was frowned upon by later rabbinical law – it might still have made the Mongol custom less alien. Yet, if the legal sphere forms the basic layer of the picture, the mythical sphere adds striking colors to the contacts between Judaism and the Mongol Empire.

TRACES OF THE MONGOL ADVANCE IN THE KABBALAH

Often termed “Jewish mysticism”, the Kabbalah is the search for the understanding of God and creation, whose elements are beyond the grasp of the intellect. Although nonrational in nature, it is based on deep learning of the traditional texts and combines gematria, astrology, philosophy and occasionally the events of the time. Such an event was the Mongol advance. During the thirteenth century, as the Kabbalah spread from Provence to Spain, followed by Central Europe and North Africa, the Mongols were making their way westward. Their advance was echoed in a description of an apocalyptic war found in Sefer haZohar, the most important corpus of the kabbalist texts:

(God) has given to the Ishma’elites an inheritance in the Land of Israel . . . and the Edomites will gather to wage war against them . . . . At that time, one nation from the end of the world will awake . . . . and (the Land) will fall into their hands . . . and then (God) shall arise on it.

While Ishma’el and Edom represent Islam and Christianity, the third nation referred to the Mongols. Another apocalyptic text, Sefer haOz, was written by the wanderlust kabbalist Avraham ben Shmuel Abulafia (d. 1291), who reached Acre ca. 1260. It, too, contains a description of a war, this time between three kings. Magdiel
of the north was struck down by Qedariel of the south. These names, commented Idel, commonly referred to Islam and Christianity, and at this time to Mamluks and Crusaders. Then appeared another king, whose name was not yet known, who struck Qedariel down. That was Alfiel of the east, identified by Idel with the Mongols.42 “He is not of our people”, described Abul’afia; “God has sent him to fight on our side.”43

R. Meshulam ben Shlomo de Pierra (fl. 1260), a poet and philosopher, and a part-time kabbalist in Girona, Spain, elaborated on this idea. In his poem, the Mongol advance no longer appears as a clash of mythical forces but as a campaign led in a well-defined area; all this, as part of the “wanderers’ redemption” – the redemption of the wandering Jewish people. “And how Bavel [Baghdad] and Aleppo were taken, and Damascus, laying cities to waste. . . . And my savior broke through the barrier mountains.”44 Here the Mongols are no strangers sent to fight on the Jewish side but are a part of the Jewish people – lost brothers returning.45 The European fear described earlier is now reflected in the Jewish view, for Meshulam’s expectations for his brothers’ great victory contain no sign of an intention to subjugate Christendom.

Were these expectations justified? Let’s follow the trail of the Mongols through the communities on their path.

COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS UNDER MONGOL RULE

During the harsh conquests of Baghdad and Aleppo, surmised Ashtor, Jews were one of the groups that escaped the Mongol sword. The other communities of the Fertile Crescent had either fallen or fled,46 yet later activity indicates revival. The community of Mosul exemplified this speedy recovery. Hülegü pillaged the city in 1262, and its citizens put to the sword.47 Yet later, in 1288, the Jewish community of Mosul was active in the inter-Jewish philosophical dispute, the Maimonidean Controversy.48 The Jewish philosopher Ibn Kammuna (d. 1285) continued writing in Abbasid and then Mongol-ruled Baghdad.49 Yet there were more extreme cases, where the Mongol conquest marked the community’s end – or its very beginning.

In the mountainous region of central Afghanistan, between Herat and Kabul, a lonely minaret rises 60 meters high. It is located in the junction of two rivers, Hari and Jam, and in the mid-twelfth century, there stood Firuzkuh, the capital of the Ghurid Dynasty. Ghur’s independence did not last long. In 1215, Firuzkuh was conquered by the Khwarazmshah. Four years later, Chinggis Khan fell upon the realm. In 1222, Firuzkuh apparently ceased to exist.50 Centuries later, tombstones were excavated near the minaret, the remains of a cemetery that was once built on the mountainside. The Hebrew inscriptions on the stones told of a flourishing Jewish community, including teachers, clerks and envoys that dwelled in Firuzkuh between 1115 and 1215. Fischel remarked that the Mongol advance was the cause of the community’s end.51 Yet Mongol forces only invaded the area in 1219. It might therefore be the Khwarazmian conquest that put an end to this community, although it appears that the subsequent Mongol conquest and rule did nothing to revive it.

An opposite story is that of Eghegis. In 1236, the Armenian prince Elikum decided to submit to Mongol rule. This brought gradual prosperity to his land. Eghegis, in modern-day south Armenia, became its flourishing capital.52 Excavations conducted in the present-day small village of Eghegis revealed the remains of a Jewish
cemetery – evidence of a community that was until then unknown. Amit and Stone, heading the excavations, uncovered forty tombstones, dated 1266 to 1336/1337. Parallel to the rise and fall of the Ilkhanate, the dates hint at the connection between the community and Eghegis itself, to the rule of the Mongols.

Moving from the communal to the individual level, we find contacts between Mongol commanders and Jewish experts as early as 1244. Yasa’ur Noyan, leading the attack on Melitene (Malatya), contacted the physician Aaron “the Hebrew”, the father of the future bishop and historian named Bar Hebraeus. After treating Yasa’ur, Aaron joined his retinue along with his family. The gruesome tale brought by Grigor of Akanc, of a failed attempt of a Jewish physician to heal “Xul”, may also point to the presence of Jews in the retinue of the Mongol Prince Quli. According to one source, Jewish physicians and astronomers accompanied Hulegu long before he reached Iran. One of the astronomers, Ibn al-Da’i al-Isra’ili of Irbil, was sent in 1259 by Hulegu to the Mongke Qa’an. Later, when the observatory of Maragha was established, another Jewish astronomer, Muntajab al-Dawla Dawud al-Isra’ili al-Dahistani peered through it into the stars.

A peak in these contacts occurred during the rule of Hulegu’s grandson, Arghun (1284–1291), whose physician and friend Sa’da’ al-Dawla became chief minister in 1289. His nomination led to the appointment of many of his relatives as officials and governors in Tabriz, Baghdad and Diyar Bakr. It is worth mentioning that his Mongol allies were appointed to strategic positions as well, in Baghdad, Shiraz and Fars. The impression of Arghun’s Jewish minister cast a long shadow. The Mamluk encyclopedist al-Dhahabi wrote, under the year 689 (1290), that “in this year the calamity intensified in Dawlat al-Yahud (sic!), at the hands of Sa’da’ al-Dawla al-Tabib, and people were hurt”.

Certain writers described the death of Arghun Khan and the fall of his chief minister as the disaster of all Jews throughout the land. Yet other sources reveal that the turmoil following the Khan’s death focused on the high administration, striking down Jews, Muslims and Mongols alike, similar to earlier and later political changes. In Baghdad the political purge swelled into actual fighting between the city mob and the Jewish quarter; yet two years earlier, following the fall of Arghun’s Mongol chief minister, Buqa, the political purge swelled to a fight between the mob of Mosul and the Christians of the city.

A sharper watershed was marked by the gradual Islamization of the Ilkhans, following Ghazan Khan’s conversion in 1295. Alongside the remaining Jews in the Mongol administration, convert Jews appear – the most prominent is Rashid al-Din. The change was slow but sure. In 1306, described the Persian historian Qashani, a group of eminent Jewish personalities serving at court publicly proved their conversion to Islam by openly breaking the Jewish dietary laws.

CONCLUSION – A GLANCE AT THE MONGOLS’ RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE

If the Mongol position toward Buddhism, Islam or Christianity may be explained by hopes for political or military gain, Judaism stands apart. As a religion, it had no cause to be tolerated or acknowledged, yet the Mongols accepted the Jewish communities as a distinct religious group and treated them equally, like any other sect.
The Mongol attitude toward different faiths may therefore derive not from indifference, for then they would not have bothered to recognize any; nor from toleration, for their own customs rated higher than any other; but from open-mindedness, that allowed them to believe in the existence of truth in every faith. This open-mindedness, mostly unheard of at the time, gave the Mongols the ability to contact, befriend, and surely make use of every idea and every person – thus forming a vital part of the power that thrust the Mongol advance forward.

NOTES

1 Ashtor 1939, 59 & 61–63.
2 The Kaifeng synagogue remained active until the gradual disintegration of the community during the nineteenth century. In 1849, it was damaged severely in a flood and abandoned shortly later. Eber 2008, 3–6.
3 For a general view of the two peoples, see Amitai 2007, 443–444; for Jewish political and Messianic views of the Mongols, see Arnon 2010, 151–156.
4 al-Nuwayri, XXVII, 302; translated by Amitai 2004, 603.
7 Menache 1996, 332.
11 Derives from the Persian yahūd, “a Jew”. The Chinese term is represented by several different characters of a similar pronunciation. The one mentioned above was used in the Yuan dian-zhang (Yuan statutes), in the earliest decree, that of 1280. See Löwenthal 1947, 110; Steingass 2007, 382.
12 Löwenthal, too, brings in his study no earlier source than Yuan (Löwenthal 1947, 110). According to Leslie, mentions of “zhu-bu” in the History of the Jin dynasty (Jin shi) appear to be personal names. The official history of the Song dynasty offered no mention of Jews and the meaning of “zhu-bu” as appears in sources of the Tang dynasty is questionable. See: Leslie 1995, 234; Leslie 1972, 12.
13 Leslie 1972, 11.
15 For a detailed survey see Arom, Forthcoming.
17 HWC, 272 & 599; quoted Leslie 1995, 238.
18 Yuan dian zhang. Translated in Leslie 1995, 236.
19 YS. Translated in Leslie 1995, 236.
22 SHM, II, 753.
23 Mintz-Geffen 2007, V, 651; RDB, 78.
24 May 2019, 151–177, n. 68 and 69. My thanks to the author for the access to this article.
25 SHM §151.
27 May 2019, 1 & n. 21.
Yuan Dian zhang. Translated in Leslie 1995, 235. See also, abridged, in Löwenthal 1947, 110–111; and in Leslie 1972, 14. May rejected the notion that this edict originated in Qubilai’s antagonism towards Islam – May 2019, n. 34–35. Jackson doubted that the prohibition went as far back as Chinggis Khan; Jackson 2004, 261–262.

29 RDB, 293–294; Leslie 1995, 239; May 2019, n. 29.
30 Mintz-Geffen 2007, 656.
31 For the Yuan, see May 2019, n. 39; for Tegüder, see Amitai 2001, 15–43.
33 For China, until 1276, see Leslie 1972, 13, n. 2; for China and Rus’, see Jackson 2004, 260; for Islam, see May 2019, n. 28.
34 Deuteronomy 25, 5–6.
35 Leviticus 18, 16; see Schereshewsky 2007, 574.
36 Leslie 1972, 13, n. 2.
38 Idel 1990, 4.
40 Idel 2014, 161, 165.
41 Idel 2014, 156; 153, for 1260.
44 Ben Shlomo in Schirmann 1971, 318.
46 Ashtor 1939, 61–63.
47 RDT, 510.
48 Ashtor 1939, 63, n. 98.
49 Amitai 2007, 444.
52 Amit and Stone 2002, 68–70.
54 Bar Hebraeus, 15–17.
55 Blake and Frye 1949, 331.
56 Son of Orda, who joined Hülegü’s invasion of the Middle East – RDB, 104.
57 Ashtor 1939, 55.
58 Yang 2019, 416. I warmly thank the author for this information.
59 RDT, 572; for his close relations with the Khan, according to Vassaf, see Fischel 1968, 98. For a recent study of this controversial figure, see Brack 2019. Online. Available at https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2019-0028. My thanks to the author for the information.
60 RDT, 572.
61 al-Dhahabi 2000, LIX, 43. I am happy to thank Dr. Amir Mazor for this information.
62 Bar-Hebraeus, 491; see also a poem brought by Vassaf, translated by Browne 1928, III, 35–36.
63 RDT, 575.
64 Bar Hebraeus, 491 for Baghdad, 482 for Mosul.
65 Brack 2019, 39.

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