Women in Mongol Iran

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Introduction: The Study of Women in the Mongol Empire

It is, as medievalists of all kinds are aware, immensely difficult to penetrate the mind-set and thought-processes of men and women who lived centuries ago.


Introducing the Khātūns

By 1206, Temüjin, a young Mongol prince, had concluded his military campaigns in the Mongolian steppes, finding himself enthroned by his peers and rivals and renamed Chinggis (usually known as Genghis) Khan from then on. While this date marks the end of a bloody period in Mongolian history, it also symbolises the beginning of an even bloodier era in the history of Eurasia. The Mongol armies, now united under Chinggis Khan would, over the course of three generations, conquer all that lay in their path from the Yellow Sea to the Danube in Central Europe and from Siberia to the Indus. Yet, when speaking of nomadic empires, conquest does not necessarily lead to territorial unity. As soon as Chinggis Khan died in 1227, the conquered territories were divided among his four sons and their descendants, prompting the fragmentation of the empire into four khanates (China, Central Asia, Iran and the Golden Horde of Russia) that would be fighting each other only a few years after the death of Ögetei Khan (d. 1241), first successor of Chinggis Khan.

The Mongol armies did not simply pass through or conquer and withdraw from the territories they defeated, as other nomadic peoples such as the Huns had done before them. Instead, they came to stay, and their women and children followed immediately after the army to join them and settle in the places where the military had succeeded. As these women began to dwell in the growing empire, those belonging to the higher classes and who were married to members of the Chinggisid family began to be addressed by the honorific title of khātūn (pl. khawātīn; however, I will use the more common Anglicised plural of khātūns) to distinguish their higher status, and recognised union with a male ruler, from other
women in the court such as concubines. The word itself is of uncertain origin, possibly coming from old Turkic (or perhaps even the Sogdian language), but it is widely used in medieval Persian and Arabic sources alike. The meaning of the term is ‘lady’ or ‘noblewoman’ and had been used to refer to noblewomen long before the Mongols appeared in Central Asia in the early thirteenth century.

This division of class is important for this study. The particularities of the source material that we have for the period of the Mongol domination of Eurasia is conditional on the information that we can obtain about these women. On the one hand, the available sources dealing with the Mongol Empire, being mostly medieval sources, are predominantly male-orientated. This means that information about women is generally provided in a passing reference or is unreliable, because the deeds of women were occasionally used to convey a particular narrative and so any information tended to be biased and full of clichés and stereotypes. On the other hand, when women are mentioned in the sources, they are generally individuals from the highest echelons of society such as queens, princesses or other prominent women in the royal family. In other words, when we do find information about the women of the Mongol Empire, it is always in reference to the *khātūns*, that is, to the elite or prestigious women (be it from a religious, genealogical or political point of view). For this reason, considering the fact that historical chronicles pay most attention to life at court and the martial achievements of the rulers – imperial as well as local – and to the military establishment of the Turco-Mongol conquerors, little space is left for the ordinary people, unless they are portrayed as the victims of tax regimes or the ‘passage of armies’.

Consequently, there is an unbalanced representation of women in the sources that is difficult to overcome. However, if we accept this fact for now (at least until new source material sees the light of day) and focus mostly on women connected to the ruling classes, then the Mongol Empire offers a good opportunity to investigate how these women lived and how they exercised their influence over the empire in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Eurasia. Furthermore, research on women in Eurasian societies in general, and the Mongol Empire in particular, is still in its infancy if compared with the amount of research produced, for example, on women in medieval Europe or China. Hence, this book attempts to offer a view on these courtly women, while recognising the inevitable omission it makes of women from the broader society who have escaped historical record.
Introduction

Investigating the Khātūns

While much work has been done in the areas of gender studies and women’s history, the methodological approach used here, although dealing with both of these disciplines, does not situate itself exclusively within those frameworks. This is to do with the historical period being covered and the type of information that is available in the sources. An approach based on the study of the history of women in general can be useful for this research, but at the same time one has to guard against assuming similarities between women’s status in, for example, the early Islamic period in the Middle East and that of the Mongol Empire. Important scholarly contributions have been made to the field and these have helped to enrich the scope of this book. Furthermore, recent studies of women in history have developed several interesting approaches that have something to offer the methodology of the present study, such as the examination of men as husbands and sons and not only as oppressors of women. This type of approach is congruent with a guiding notion of my own research, that the investigation of the Khātūns contributes not only to the history of Mongol women, but to the general historiography of the Mongol Empire. Most of the theoretical approaches to the study of women in history centre nowadays on practices such as the hijab (veiling), polygamy, marriage, and so on, or the evaluation of prominent female figures of the Prophet Muhammad’s family (Khadija, Aisha or Fatima). Although some of these approaches may be useful, most of them cannot simply be extrapolated to the Mongol Empire. Most research on early Islamic women has been based on legal and sacred texts, which provide a different type of account from the chronicles being used in this work. Most of the theoretical frameworks used in the study of women in Middle Eastern history are confined to the modern period, so it would be inappropriate to apply them to women in the Mongol Empire, not only because of the obvious time distance but also because of the particularities of Mongol women as members of an Altaic nomadic society. Therefore, it would be methodologically inappropriate to look at the Khātūns exclusively from the perspective of gender studies.

The method selected for this research is based on cultural/intellectual history complemented by textual, socio-historical and contextual analyses of the primary source material. Our concept of culture is a broad one, including not only the intellectual products of the society in question, but also the political, religious and artistic activities of women under Mongol rule. Cultural history has been resurrected following criticism of the New Cultural History movement of the 1970s, which underlined the importance
of the individual in society, the construction of identity, the representation of gender and the ideological justification of political institutions, among other things. Though they have been criticised, many of these theoretical concepts are applicable today in historical research, with present-day cultural historians using them in much of their analysis. Although Peter Burke has suggested that the influence of New Cultural History is coming to an end in many fields, the Mongol Empire is a subject area where the study of cultural or intellectual history is just beginning. Many of the areas in which cultural history has contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the past – areas such as economic history, political history, intellectual history and social history – have not been fully explored in relation to the Mongols. It is also important to be aware of a masculine bias in the sources and to recognise the need for an exhaustive comparison of source material in order to minimise the effects of subjectivity. Such concerns have been underlined by scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Rifaat Hassan and Barbara Stowasser, who were dealing mostly with the Hadiths and Quranic literature. When approaching medieval sources, it is very difficult to avoid this masculine bias, since women are normally referred to in terms of their relationship to men: as ‘wives of’, ‘daughters of’ and so on. Therefore, the sources tend to tell us more about the male perception of women than about the women themselves. To tackle this problem, it is necessary to examine all the available sources and to be extremely careful in analysing the political, economic and social contexts in which the authors were writing. Furthermore, a comprehensive interpretation of the data obtained from diverse types of text, such as chronicles, hagiographies and accounts of travels, allows us to suggest patterns for the social perception of women in different periods and places. This framework should be complemented with textual analyses of the sources in order to clarify to whom each text was addressed, and to take into account the possible motivations of the author. Furthermore, each material obtained needs to be examined within its own socio-historical context. As John Tosh has said: ‘One of the most illuminating ways into the past is to focus on a specific source and to reconstruct how it came into being by all available means – through textual analysis, related documents from the same source, contemporary comment and so on’. Through textual analysis and the framework of cultural history, we hope to be able to achieve a better understanding of the mindset of Mongol women. This area is only recently being explored and there are important methodological and documentary limitations to be borne in mind. Nevertheless, the particularities of the Mongol Empire and the rela-
tive abundance of sources for the period do offer a good initial basis for research into the role of the khātūns in the empire’s Eurasian and Middle Eastern domains. The historiographic characteristics of the sources, such as the context in which a particular document was produced, the motivation behind the production of the text and the particular circumstances of a given author, will be considered throughout this book. Special reference in this regard should be made to the Persian material, which constitutes the greater part of the sources analysed here. In addition, although the main focus of this work is not to develop a historiographical account of the period, the characteristics of a given text and the bias contained within it will be considered when interpreting a particular event or piece of information.

**Studying Women in the Mongol Empire: a Literary Overview**

While studies on the history of women in the Middle East have been developing since the 1940s, research on this topic is a relatively new phenomenon when it comes to Mongolian studies. Despite the appearance of some recent studies, there has been little debate on the role of women in medieval Eurasian society. Historians in the first half of the twentieth century, though being, in the eyes of modern historians, ‘old fashioned’ in their approach, opened up new fields of research. This was the case with Douglas M. Dunlop, who in 1944 published an article focusing on the Kerait tribe and its relationship with Eastern Christianity and with the story of Prester John. In trying to trace the history of this nomadic tribe, Dunlop came across some of the most influential women of the Mongol Empire. The second part of his article concentrated on identifying those women and providing some observations. Dunlop was able to distinguish seven women from the sources, five of whom belonged to the Kerait tribe. However, since the article was not primarily concerned with the role of women, the paper is only useful as a first step.

Dunlop’s work was followed and expanded upon in the 1970s when two articles devoted exclusively to Mongol women were published, one in English (by Morris Rossabi) and one in French (by Paul Ratchnevsky). Rossabi’s article quickly became the most important study regarding female roles in the Mongol Empire and it has since been quoted in almost every publication on Mongol history. Both articles made an equally important contribution to the field and brought to light some relevant aspects of the role of women in Mongol society. They recognised the fundamental role played by women in the empire and agreed on the reason for this crucial position in society: gender cooperation was essential.
for survival in the ‘subsistence economy of nomadic pastoralism’. By focusing specifically on female roles, these two articles went further than Dunlop. On the one hand, the article by Ratchnevsky follows a thematic structure based on an analysis of the role of Mongol women in the domestic economy, in marriage, and in religious and political life. Rossabi, on the other hand, based his research on a chronological description of the *khātūns*. Both scholars used similar source material, with the exception of a more extensive use of Chinese sources by Rossabi. However, their use of Persian material seems to have been infrequent, since only the main chronicles written by Rashid al-Din and Juvayni are mentioned, while the majority of written testimonies left by the prolific Ilkhanid historians are neglected entirely.

The first attempt to study women in Iran under the Mongols was made by Shirin Bayani. The first part of this pioneering work focuses on women in Iran before the Mongols, followed by a chapter dedicated to marriage and family organisation. The third part is devoted to the analysis of different female institutions in order explore the place of Mongol upper-class women in Iranian society. The final chapter contains short biographies of the most significant *khātūns* of the period such as Sorghaghtani Beki and Töregene Khatun. Though this is a good introduction to the topic, it used limited new material from the Iranian regional chronicles. Ann K. S. Lambton, on the other hand, offers a more in-depth study of women under the Mongol Empire, focusing only on the Iranian and Persian-speaking territories. In one chapter of her book, on the history of Persia under the Saljuqs and Mongols, Lambton describes female participation in politics, society and religion in medieval Iran. The most valuable element of this work is the extensive identification of the *khātūns* of the ruling families of Persia from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. In addition to some references to the social role of women under these two dynasties, Lambton’s use of the sources and her recognition of the continuity of social patterns in medieval Persian society makes this book one of the fundamental secondary sources used in the development of the present study. Similar in style, Bahriye Üçok published a biographical account of some Turkic women who lived in Iran under Mongol rule. Although it mostly narrates the lives of these women, this study may be seen as another indication of the scholarly awareness of these *khātūns*’ roles in medieval times.

The decade following Lambton’s book saw Mongolian studies accepting the established picture of women under Mongol rule in Iran. However, research on women in Mongol China continued in the late 1980s and early 1990s thanks to the contribution of Jennifer Holmgren’s work on marriage practices in the Yuan dynasty. Her observations on
the levirate system and detailed study of the exchange between the Han Chinese populations and their steppe conquerors opened up a new perspective on the role of women in the Mongol Empire in China, which was followed by Bettine Birge’s work in 2002. It was not until 1998 when Gavin Hambly compiled a book on women in the Islamic world that the interest in the study of women in medieval Islamic history recovered some interest among scholars. In the introduction, he rightly points out the extensive material available in the field and the favourable possibilities for further research offered by the topic. Almost simultaneously, an article was published by James D. Ryan analysing the relationships between the Pope and the women of the Mongol court in Iran, which sheds some light on the role that women played during the period of diplomatic contact between the Mongols and Europe in the second half of the thirteenth century.

Only one year after Hambly had underlined the relevance that the study of medieval women in Iran may have for the history of the period, Charles Melville published a short but excellent work on the final years of the Ilkhanate. Although Melville’s intention was not specifically to research the role of women in Iran, he found that, during the reign of Abu Sa‘id (d. 1335), their participation in the final years of Mongol rule was a constant. Although I have suggested elsewhere differences ‘in the form’ of women’s influence in politics before and after the mid-thirteenth century, it is important to emphasise the continuity of the political influence of women across the empire from the time of Chinggis Khan until the end of the Mongol rule in Iran.

In 2003, at a conference held in Toronto, George Zhao presented a paper on the marital connections between the Yuan dynasty of China and the Koryo dynasty of Korea. He was the first to contest some of the arguments stated in the articles from the 1970s mentioned above, where Rossabi claims that the daughters of Qubilai were not as influential as his mother and wife. This claim justified, to some extent, Rossabi’s omission of the Khan’s female offspring from his 1979 article. However, Zhao challenged this argument by looking at the official history of the Korean dynasty, where references to the influence of Mongol women are recorded. This fact, together with a re-examination of the Koryosa, a well-known source among historians of Korea, are good examples of the type of further research that can be undertaken in the field of women under Mongol rule. Finally, in 2006, George Lane dedicated an entire chapter to women in his Daily Life in the Mongol Empire. This work is a good introduction to the field and constantly refers to the original sources. It is more descriptive than analytical, but it has the privilege of being the first
work since Lambton’s to dedicate an entire chapter to women, indicating a tendency in Mongolian Studies to move towards a framework of cultural history, as predicted by David Morgan.41

A number of the studies that have preceded this book have been of capital importance as the first studies to be fully dedicated to the study of women in the Mongol Empire from a more holistic point of view. First, above all others, is the pioneering work of Karin Quade-Reutter, who in 2003 submitted her doctoral research on women in Iran during the Mongol and Timurid periods. Unfortunately, this dissertation was never made into a monograph, which has limited its accessibility for scholars as well as the general public. The work is not only a good contribution to the study of the political influence of women in medieval Iran, but provides extensive use of original Persian sources. The scope of the study concentrates exclusively on Iran and, therefore, it does not engage in the general debate on the role of women in the Mongol Empire as a whole. In addition, this study brings into the picture the role of non-Chinggisid royal women from regions such as Kerman and Fars and attempts a survey of the Timurid period, where the sources are thinner on the ground, but a good number of influential women are identified. Overall, with Quade-Reutter’s meticulous scrutiny of the sources and a clear chronological presentation of the outcomes, this work prepared the ground for anyone wanting to work on women in the Ilkhanate.

Second, another dissertation was submitted more recently (2007) in Turkey by Nilgün Dalkesen, who analysed gender roles in nomadic societies in Central Asia and Anatolia from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. With regard to the Mongol period, her research focuses mainly on gender relationships and on the contradiction inherent in the coexistence of Islamic law (Shariʿah) and Mongol customary law (yasaq). Although different in approach and scope to the present study, Dalkesen’s use of Turkish literature and her focus on Central Asia and the Middle East as an integrated space are useful contributions to the field. Finally, in 2008, George Zhao published his monograph based on his doctoral dissertation on Mongol women in the Mongol Empire with a particular focus on the Yuan dynasty of China.42 The book mostly analyses the marriage alliances established by the Chinggisids with the different Mongol tribes. Zhao suggests that there were two types of marriage alliance: one-way and two-way. This classification allows Zhao to differentiate between those populations that married their women to the Mongol royal family but did not marry Chinggisid women in return (these were the Öngüt, the Uyghurs, the Koreans and the Chinese) and those that conducted marriages in both directions (the Onggirat, Ikries and Oyrat). This work is an interesting
study that shares certain topics with the present book (especially with Chapter 2), but, instead of looking at the development of the Mongol Empire in Western Asia, it focuses its attention on the East.

Since 2011, when the bulk of the research for the present study was done, a number of interesting works in this field have been published; specifically, Yonatan Brack’s article on the alleged travel of a Mongol woman to Mecca and Medina to perform the hajj pilgrimage is of utmost importance. This is the unique account of El Qutlugh Khatun, a daughter of Abaqa Khan, performing the Islamic pilgrimage in the fourteenth century. The case study not only highlights the interesting point of view provided by Mamluk sources, but also offers some interesting insights into the Islamisation of Mongol women and their religious affiliation after the conversion of Ghazan Khan to Islam in 1294. Also relevant to this short survey of the sources is the article by Hend Gilli-Elewy that appeared in 2012. Her article focuses on the final decades of the Ilkhanate and explores the relationship between the Islamisation of the Mongols in Iran, the persistence of Mongol traditional values and the fragmentation of political power in the region after the death of Abu Sa’id in 1335. In this context, she focuses on the role of women in this period, revisiting some of the issues addressed by Charles Melville in his work mentioned above. While doing the final corrections to this book, two new important publications came to my knowledge which I tried to incorporate into this work at the last minute. On the one hand, the last article by Anne Broadbridge on the intermarriage practices of the Oyrats and the Chinggisids offers a good overview of the role played by women of this tribe in the history of the Mongol Empire. On the other, I have used especially chapter 1 in the recently submitted PhD dissertation by Yonatan Brack, who investigates deeply the political succession of the Ilkhanate, where women played a fundamental role. Finally, I have published a number of academic articles on the role of women in Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia that have contributed to the field in recent years and complement the present, more in-depth study on women in Ilkhanid Iran.

Sources for the Study of Women in the Mongol Empire

Studying the history of the Mongol Empire, given the magnitude of its conquests, inevitably means investigating the history of not only the conquering nomads but also the societies that interacted with them either as allies, foes or subject peoples. The extent of the Mongol domains and the impact of conquest on the mindset of the conquered peoples make the period rich in terms of the written material available, while also presenting
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a problem over the way in which the sources present their historical narratives.\textsuperscript{51}

With the exception of the small number mentioned below, those who were defeated and conquered by the Mongols or who were at the service of a new Mongol ruler produced the vast majority of the source material on the Mongol Empire. Consequently, the information provided by the sources is extremely biased and needs to be handled with caution. In order to minimise this agency, we have tried, in the course of this research, to contextualise these works and whenever possible to look at them as products of the time, place and circumstance of the author. This section does not attempt to be a full description of the sources used in this study, but rather aims to highlight the most important references and point out the special value that certain sources had for particular areas of the research. How varied the sources are for this particular period is self-evident from the organisation of this section, and this variety provides an opportunity to compare and contrast different views and interpretations of certain phenomena. The following summary includes only those sources more relevant for the present study and, therefore, some sources, while important for the study of the Mongol Empire but with less impact regarding the role of women, have been left out of this short account.

**Persian sources**

Across the different chapters in this book, we make special use of Persian sources. In order to present them in an organised form, they could be grouped into three main categories. First, we include in this research those works that can be considered official court chronicles produced in different periods of the Mongol Empire. Despite lacking the Chinese institutional arrangements for the compilation of histories, Persian historians of the time were nonetheless able to produce an important variety of ‘official chronicles’.\textsuperscript{52} Although not the earliest to be produced, the most comprehensive account of the Mongols is given in the *Jamiʿ al-tawarikh* of Rashid al-Din (d. 1318).\textsuperscript{53} Originally from a Jewish background, the author of this book converted to Islam and had a meteoric career in the Mongol administration until he became the Grand Vizier of Ghazan Khan (r. 1295–1304).\textsuperscript{54} While not pretending to go into the historiography produced by Rashid al-Din or the legacy of his work in any depth, it is important to underline the fact that the production of this massive – and expensive – work was most probably the fruit of a collective effort rather than an individual enterprise.\textsuperscript{55} The work was commissioned by two successive Mongol Ilkhans (Ghazan and Öljeitü), which has dual consequences for this work as a source that
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needs to be borne in mind throughout this book.\(^5\) On the one hand, such proximity to the Mongol court certainly conditioned the Persian vizier’s writing with regard to the construction of a ‘Mongol past’. As we will see later on, some passages of his history clearly exhibit favouritism towards a particular Mongol faction (mostly the Toluid line) or show bias whilst evaluating the deeds of, for example, his patron Ghazan Khan. However, he is also ‘remarkably frank about the shortcomings of early Mongol rule in Persia, but he is seldom overtly judgmental, offering little by way of personal opinion’.\(^5\) On the other hand, the same proximity to the court provides this work with first-hand insights into Mongol tradition and contemporary events across the empire that are hardly present in any other contemporary account of the Mongols.

This close relationship that Rashid al-Din had with the Mongol nobles in Iran (both men and women) allowed him to include information in his chronicle that is unique in detail and scope. The knowledge contained in this work is of enormous importance for the study of the Mongol Empire as a whole, but especially for this book in particular. The author’s detailed description of women not only provides us with their names and genealogical connections – which in itself is particularly uncommon – but is also useful in elucidating the role of Mongol women in society from a Persian perspective. Moreover, the interest in genealogy expressed in the Jāmiʿ al-tawarikh can also be observed in another work produced by the same author a few years later. The Shuʿab-i panjganah is a compendium of genealogical trees describing the family links of the Franks, Mongols, Chinese, Arabs/Muslims and Jews from their origins to the contemporary time of the author.\(^5\) Perhaps because there is only one surviving manuscript of the work, it has received limited attention by historians so far.\(^5\) This work offers a valuable complement to the information in the Jamiʿ al-tawarikh, although, with regard to women, it does not add much to what we can find in Rashid al-Din’s first work. In addition, a later work also follows this tradition of genealogical record-keeping among the Turco-Mongol populations. The anonymous Muʿizz al-ansab was completed in 1426 under the Timurid dynasty in Central Asia and became fairly popular in India under the Moghuls from the sixteenth century onwards.\(^6\) Both manuscripts prove to be important complementary sources for the history of the Mongol Empire and its successor states, particularly with regard to genealogical connections and family alliances.\(^6\)

Rashid al-Din relied extensively in his account of the early empire on the work of another Persian bureaucrat, ʿAta Malik Juvayni. His work, Tarkih-i jahan-gusha,\(^6\) covers the period from the rise of Chinggis Khan up to the invasion of Hülegü in the Middle East, based mostly on the
author’s life experience at court. Juvayni’s account of women is selective, lacking Rashid al-Din’s detailed and systematic references to them. Although he was writing for the Mongols and trying to portray them as the liberators of Islam rather than, for example, the Ismailis, he has a more ‘moralising tone’ when dealing with the conquest of Iran than Rashid al-Din does. Unlike Rashid al-Din, Juvayni was at the service of the Mongols in the early stage of the empire, during the reign of Möngke (r. 1251–9) and up to the reign of Abaqa (r. 1265–82). Mostly based in Khurasan at the beginning of his career, and then in Iraq, he presumably had less direct contact than Rashid al-Din had, not only with those Mongol women who came to Iran in the thirteenth century, but also with those khātūns who were born and raised in Iran. The Tarkih-i jahan-gusha is further limited with regard to women by the fact that the account ends before the fall of Baghdad in 1258. The nature of the information is different too, in that Juvayni only mentions the ladies of the Mongol court when there is an anecdote to be told or an event to be recounted in which a given woman happens to be involved. Although fewer women can be found in the Tarkih-i jahan-gusha than in the Jamiʿ al-tawarikh, the information is nevertheless sometimes richer with regard to female involvement in society. Both authors were close to the Mongol court and participated in the administration of the Ilkhanate and, consequently, they tended to favour any specific line of descent from Chinggis Khan (the Toluids) for whom they both worked. The Tarkih-i jahan-gusha not only offers a more comprehensive description of the political events but also gives a unique insight into the transformation of Mongol society in its passage from the steppes to Iran. Juvayni’s work is of particular value for his contemporary account of the early period of Mongol rule, when the whole of the empire was united and when women were in charge of the administration of the realm. Finally, Baidawi’s short Nizam al-tawarikh somehow fills the gap between these two major historical works. However, despite being one of the main sources of the period, its information regarding Mongol women is limited.

Other chronicles of the period form an important contrast to the ‘official versions’ offered by Juvayni and Rashid al-Din. Among them, the Tabaqat-i Nasiri is an account contemporary with that of Juvayni. Composed by Minhaj al-Din Saraj Juzjani, the author’s motivation was different from that of the other two in the sense that he was a victim of the first Mongol invasion of the Middle East. Forced into exile from Iran, he did not need to emphasise or justify the presence of the Mongols; his bias came from the opposite direction, offering an alternative account of the invasion. Juzjani’s distance from the Mongol court may have limited
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the information he received about the khātūns, and so he tells us less about them.

In the early fourteenth century, the Shirazi Vassaf submitted parts of his own history of the Ilkhanate to Ghazan Khan (d. 1304) and later chapters to his successor Öljeytü (d. 1316). Although coming from a protégé of Rashid al-Din, this source adds important information about the administration of the provinces in southern Iran, which makes it relevant to any examination of the role of women in the Ilkhanate beyond the Mongol court. Similarities exist between Vassaf’s personal career and that of Hamd Allah Mustawfi (d. 1344), another productive chronicler of the fourteenth century. In this book, we focus mostly on three of his works, which include the Tarikh-i guzida and the Zafar-nama (his more historical accounts) and the Nuzhat al-qulub, chiefly dedicated to the cosmography and geography of Iran and Central Asia.

The most detailed account of the Mongol court after the death of Ghazan Khan is provided by Kashani’s Tarikh-i Uljaytu, which follows the narrative structure of Rashid al-Din’s work, making it especially interesting for its genealogical connections and for the accounts of female personalities in the court of Öljeytü. Other historical works in Persian during the Mongol period are also considered, despite the fact that some of them, such as Banakati’s history, cannot match the amount of information regarding women provided by those already mentioned. Nevertheless, together with Shabankaraʾi’s (d. 1358) Majmaʿ al-ansab, Banakati offers useful information about the Ilkhanate after 1304.

From the fourteenth century onwards, other major chronicles also incorporated information about the Mongol period. A short chronicle about the history of the Mongols in Iran also became available recently. The text appeared as part of a majmuʿa (manuscript containing different works) and has been attributed to the famous scholar Qutb al-Din Shirazi (d. 1311). The account is arranged by years including the reigns of Hulegu, Abaqa and Teguder, leaving the narrative incomplete around the year 1284. Although short in length, this new chronicle has some interesting references to women as we will see in Chapter 3. Despite the ending of the Ilkhanid dynasty in 1355, those entities emerging after the disintegration of Mongol rule in Iran and the subsequent reunification under Tamerlane looked back to the Mongols for legitimation of their rule. The information regarding women in these sources is selective and focuses on some female personages who lived in the last years of a unified Ilkhanate and in the period of political fragmentation that followed. In this context, the works of Hafiz-i Abru (d. 1430), Khwandamir’s Tarikh-i habib al-siyar and the later Central Asian Tarikh-i Rashidi are useful, not only to
contrast with the information of more contemporary accounts but also to provide some insights into the ‘legacy’ that Mongol rule left in the area.\textsuperscript{78}  
A second group of Persian sources used in this research include those chronicles produced by the Mongols’ local subject dynasties: these are generally referred to as ‘regional histories’.\textsuperscript{79} Chronicles composed in regions of Iran that were governed by women in the Mongol period are given special attention. In this regard, some local histories of Fars provide useful information on the local administration of the province and give a different perspective from that of the sources produced at the central court.\textsuperscript{80} Similarly, the province of Kerman under the Qutlughkhānīd dynasty is closely analysed, not only for its close ties with the Ilkhanid court, but also for being one of the regions ruled by women in the thirteenth century. The information provided by the anonymous \textit{Tarihk-i Shahi-yi Qara-Khita’iyan} is somehow unique in this respect, since it was commissioned by a woman to explain the history of her mother’s reign.\textsuperscript{81} Finally, local chronicles produced in other territories dependent on the Mongols, such as Anatolia, offer a good insight ‘from the sidelines’ on the history of the Ilkhanate in general and of women in particular. Interesting data about women is contained in the works of Ibn Bibi, Aqsarayi and the anonymous historian of Konya, just to mention the most famous of them.\textsuperscript{82}  
The third and final category of Persian source material provides a different type of information marked by its nature. In the thirteenth century, and particularly in the early fourteenth century, the Middle East saw the expansion of Sufism and the gradual organisation of Sufis around orders (\textit{ṭuruq}), which progressively produced a particular genre of literature not meant to be strictly historical but rather accounts of religious personalities or saints, part of a growing mystical approach to Islam in this period. The authors of this type of work, known as ‘hagiographic literature’, tried to incorporate verifiable facts in order to make themselves credible to the reader, whom they were trying to attract to a particular Sufi master.\textsuperscript{83} Such sources are particularly relevant to this research in the sense that they are instructive about the daily pursuits and individual participation of women in the religious life of Mongol Iran, facets of female life that are generally not covered in the historical chronicles. Thus, such works as the \textit{Safwat al-safa} and \textit{Manaqib al-ʿarifin} complement what we can glean from other sources with respect to the lives of women in the Mongol Empire.\textsuperscript{84} In addition, some occasional use of Persian sources produced during the Saljuq period is also included here in order to find patterns of continuity and/or transformation in Iran before and after the arrival of the Mongols.\textsuperscript{85}
Mongol and Chinese Sources

It might sound like a paradox that, in the study of the Mongol Empire, the number of sources written by the Mongols themselves is rather limited. This limited amount of written source materials of Mongol origin is related to the fact that the Mongols were a nomadic society without a written language until Chinggis Khan himself ordered that Mongolian should be written in Uyghur script. Despite this policy, the main Mongol sources we do have did not come to us in Uyghur script, but in a phonetic transcription of Mongolian into Chinese characters. This text, generally referred to as The Secret History of the Mongols, has the privilege of being the only surviving source written not only for the Mongols but also by the Mongols during the time of the Mongol Empire. This characteristic makes it especially useful in light of our attempts to examine the role of women in pre-imperial Mongolia. A later Mongol source known as the Altan Tobchi is also occasionally used here to explore the transmission of some of The Secret History’s stories among the Mongols themselves. Because it was written in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, when most of the Mongol population had converted to Buddhism, the period of Chinggis Khan and his successors is generally described through a Buddhist framework, making the account potentially prone to a particular bias.

The most valuable source of information about the Mongols composed by Chinese authors is the Yuan Shih, or ‘Official history of the Yuan dynasty of China’ (1279–1368). It was composed during the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) following the Chinese tradition, according to which each new dynasty of the empire had a duty to write the history of its predecessors. Although it is mostly limited to a description of political and family facts, the section dealing with the biographies of the princesses and empresses is the most relevant to this book. Apart from this official Chinese history of the Mongol dynasty, there are some other sources related to this period available in translation. For example, the account of the trip of the Taoist master Chan Chun from his monastery in China to Central Asia to meet Chinggis Khan, which has been translated by Arthur Waley. Further, some Chinese ambassadorial reports from the Sung Dynasty to Chinggis Khan have also arrived to us and can be found in translation. They contain limited information on Mongol women but serve as a good Eastern view on the Mongols that complement the western views left by the European travellers.
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European sources

The Mongol expansion across Eurasia triggered not only fear but also curiosity among the European kingdoms. Kings, merchants and the Pope himself all sent several embassies to the Mongol territories in order to establish diplomatic contact, forge economic enterprises, and (presumably) spy on these unknown nomads from the East. Among this group of accounts, Marco Polo’s *Il Milione* is arguably the most researched and influential among Europeans. Polo’s popularity means that different editions of his book have been available in translation and annotated by scholars since the end of the nineteenth century. Two editions of this work have mainly been used in this study: the first is Sir Henry Yule’s translation, published in the late nineteenth century, and the second is Paul Pelliot and Arthur C. Moule’s edition, which was published in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the antiquity of these two editions, they remain, in my view, the most complete and comprehensive translations and annotations to date.

Whilst Marco Polo’s main purpose was to leave an account of his adventure and suggest that the Asian continent had commercial potential, other European travellers had a different agenda. Friars and monks also ventured into the Mongol Empire and left different accounts of the lives of the nomads. The most comprehensive are those left by John Piano de Carpini and William of Rubruck, whose narratives seem orientated towards a more ‘anthropological’ perspective. The information provided by these two clerics is of special relevance to this research, since the encounters they had with Mongol women provide us with unique first-hand descriptions of these ladies. Other European accounts from a later period than that of Carpini and Rubruck also exist. For example, the report of Friar Odoric de Pordenone (between 1316 and 1330) and the associated collection of documents relating to the diplomatic exchanges between the Vatican, European kingdoms and the Ilkhanate are useful complements.

Finally, the Mongol occupation of the Middle East offered a potential ally to some European kingdoms against a common enemy: the Mamluks of Egypt. The diplomatic contacts between the Mongols and Europe and some of the letters exchanged between them provide valuable information regarding European–Mongol relations.

The accounts by medieval European travellers to the Mongol territories share certain characteristics in the sense that all of them generally carry a bias in favour of the faith of the traveller (Catholic Christian) and against that of the people they encounter (Muslims, Buddhists, Eastern Christians, shamanists, and so on). They tend to underline the ‘impure’ practices of
the ‘unbelievers’, sometimes overemphasising them, or are too quick to accord authenticity to the negative legends and stories they have been told. This is linked to the unavoidable ‘limits of perception’ of these travellers, outwardly marked by the routes they took, the people they met and the access they had (or did not have) to reliable sources of information. At the same time, it should be remembered that the target readerships were different for the ‘religious accounts’ by the priests sent out by the Pope and the ‘secular’ tales written by merchant travellers such as Marco Polo. On the one hand, the former group tried to render an image of the Mongols that was realistic (with the intention of providing reliable information to the Pope about, say, the chances of a Mongol conversion to Christianity), whilst at the same time seeking to reinforce the ‘superior piousness’ of Christianity. On the other hand, the latter group was less judgemental in religious matters but tended to highlight the business opportunities of their enterprise whilst stressing the dangers they had to go through in order to succeed in their endeavours.

EASTERN CHRISTIAN SOURCES

The Mongol invasions of the Middle East had a particular impact upon Christian communities of the region. The accounts produced by Georgian, Armenian and Nestorian clerics generally give a mixed picture of the newcomers, portraying them either as ruthless or as saviours of Christianity vis-à-vis the Muslim majority of the region. Such diverging views generated biased narrations which occasionally exaggerated the degree of Mongol sympathy for Christianity or simply invented the conversion of certain members of the royal family. Mongol women, too, were the objects of such Christian bias, sometimes being falsely portrayed as ill-treating Muslims and sometimes being depicted as Christian saints (in some Syriac iconography). Ever aware of such bias, we can nevertheless glean valuable material which complements information from other sources produced by other communities.

Some useful chronicles from these Christian communities have come down to us, which were meant either to underline the struggles or heroic deeds of a particular Christian kingdom or to serve as propaganda to attract Western kingdoms to a new crusade in the Middle East. Georgian and Russian sources can be seen as examples of the former tendency, while Armenian accounts generally reflect the latter, more covert, intention. The paradigmatic example of this propagandistic tendency is the Armenian Frère Hayton’s *Fleur des étoiles d’Orient* that appeared in Poitiers at the beginning of the fourteenth century and which contains
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an account of the Mongol invasions.\textsuperscript{100} Apart from Hayton’s book, other Armenian sources have come to us, complementing the Eastern Christian view of the Mongols and their arrival to the Middle East.\textsuperscript{101}

Finally, special mention should be made of the universal history written by the Jacobite monk Bar Hebraeus.\textsuperscript{102} This account covers the development of humankind from Adam to the death of the author in 1286. In a way, this source is remarkably different from the rest of the available Eastern Christian sources because it appears to be conceived for a broader public, borne out by the fact that the author was asked to produce an Arabic version of his Syriac chronicles.\textsuperscript{103} Bar Hebraeus’s account of Christian women at court is important to our discussion, as he provides an insight into the religiosity\textsuperscript{104} of many Mongol women, albeit coloured by his own point of view.\textsuperscript{105} As was the case with Rashid al-Din, his close relationship with the Mongols and the \textit{khātūns} at court provided him with valuable information, though at the same time it affected the objectivity of his historical writing.\textsuperscript{106} Something similar is provided by another Eastern Christian narrative about the trip from China to Europe through the Middle East of an envoy from Qubilai to the Pope and the kingdoms of Europe. The journey of the monks Rabban Markos (then patriarch Yahbalaha III) and Rabban Sauma to the West is interesting not only for his description of Europe through the eyes of a Mongol subject, but also for the detailed account he provides of the internal affairs of the Ilkhanate when he passed through Iran on his way from China.\textsuperscript{107} Altogether, Eastern Christian sources pay particular attention to Christian Mongol women, which allows us to obtain a more reliable picture of the status of these women in the Middle East, because it can be contrasted with that derived from the Persian-Muslim sources.

\textbf{Arabic Sources}

In the last few decades, Arabic sources have been used more intensively for studying the history of the Mongol Empire.\textsuperscript{108} The majority of these sources were produced by historians living in Mamluk Egypt and, as a consequence, the image portrayed of the Mongols is rather negative. However, while hostile towards the Mongols of Iran, some of these sources do provide valuable information about the Mongols of the Golden Horde, who, through sharing with the sultans of Egypt an antagonism towards the Ilkhans, became the Mamluks’ allies in the mid-thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{109} Further, for the early period of the Mongol invasions, some Ayyubid sources have been made available in translation, which generally link the history of the Crusades with the arrival of the Mongols.\textsuperscript{110}

These sources are mainly chronicles or biographical dictionaries
produced in the Mamluk territories with useful information on relations between the Ilkhanate and the Mamluks of Egypt.\textsuperscript{111} Despite the fact that some evidence suggests that a number of Mongol women went to the Mamluk realm as wives and that some Mamluk refugees in the Ilkhanate married Mongol women, the nature of the information about Mongol women is different from the information provided by Persian accounts.\textsuperscript{112} For example, some texts written or attributed to Ibn al-Fuwati provide us with a view of the sack of Baghdad that is useful in filling the gap left by Persian historiography on the matter, where the description of the fall of the caliphate is used to save the image of the Mongols vis-à-vis their Muslim subjects.\textsuperscript{113} Further, al-Furat’s account of the diplomatic relationships between the Mamluks, the Mongols and the Christian kingdoms of Europe is especially important for the early period of the Ilkhanate.\textsuperscript{114} Al-Yunini’s works on the Mongol invasion of Syria provide interesting insights into the life of Mamluk Syria on the eve of Ghazan’s invasion and the occupation.\textsuperscript{115} However, beyond the useful contextualisation provided by these sources, the amount of information specifically referring to Mongol \textit{khātūns} is rather limited; meanwhile, interesting work on Mamluk women of Turkish origin has been done.\textsuperscript{116}

Apart from those of the Mamluk kingdom, other Arabic sources are fundamental to complementing the Persian and Christian views of Mongol women. Among them, particular attention is paid to the \textit{Travels of Ibn Battuta} and its description of the Mongol territories.\textsuperscript{117} Unlike some of the Mamluk historians, who wrote their accounts without ever leaving the Mamluk territories, the Maghrebi traveller Ibn Battuta had the chance to establish a close relationship with, for example, women in the Golden Horde, leaving us an informative account about them and on their involvement in the daily lives of the nomads.

In this book, the use of Arabic sources in general, and Mamluk sources in particular, is not as extensive as the use of Persian sources. The reasons for this are mainly that the primary aim of this book is to investigate not only the status of Mongol women in Ilkhanid Iran but also the way in which they were perceived by those living in the territories that the Mongols had conquered. To look at how these Mongol women were perceived from Mamluk Egypt would be an interesting point of view, for sure, but it is one that unfortunately could not be included in this research.

\textbf{This Book}

Despite more than a century of Mongol-Persian scholarship, the topic of women in the Mongol Empire has not been investigated in any depth.
Hoping to correct this oversight, this study, organised thematically, focuses specifically on the role and status of women in the politics, economy and religions of the Mongol Empire, with special reference to the Mongol dominion in Iran (Ilkhanate) between 1256 and 1335. As each theme is examined, this book attempts to show how the status and role of women were transformed when the Mongols conquered the Middle East and Central Asia in the mid-thirteenth century.

Since the Mongol Empire originated in the Mongolian Steppe, some aspects of pre-imperial Mongolia should also be examined in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the subject. With this idea in mind, Chapter 1 focuses on three main historical periods to consider the status of women, from the point of the Mongols’ foundational myth to the period before a young Mongol prince called Temüjin was proclaimed as Chinggis Khan. The initial section in this chapter looks at how pre-imperial nomadic women are represented in early imperial Mongol sources in an attempt to identify how the Mongols understood the role of women in their own society. Next, we explore the particular role played by Temüjin’s mother and first wife during his rise to power. Finally, we dedicate the last section in this chapter to reviewing the political role of women in Eurasia before being conquered by the Mongols. All three sections attempt to provide a historical precedent that helps to understand the sudden accession of Mongol khātūns to the throne of the Mongol Empire during its period of unity (1206–60).

With these precedents established and analysed, Chapter 2 goes on to explore the period in which women’s political influence reached its peak in the Mongol Empire. It pays special attention to the regency of Töregene Khatun (r. 1241–6), suggesting that her rule was not a simple interregnum, but rather a full political endeavour with a pre-established agenda and legitimised by an important section of the Mongol nobility. The second part in this chapter considers the political involvement of Sorghaghtani Beki, a woman who did not acquire the same recognition of empress as Töregene Khatun, but who nevertheless played a fundamental role in the development of the empire as a whole. Finally, we look at other cases of politically influential women who emerged in this period, but whose influence was restricted to specific areas of the Mongol domains. In particular, the regency of Orghina Khatun in Central Asia is a subject of study.

In Chapter 3, we move our focus to the role of women in the political arena of the Ilkhanate in Iran. The first part of the chapter aims to answer the question of why no woman ruled the Ilkhanate from its establishment in 1260 until it officially ended in 1335. We explore how women were politically active and influential throughout this period, but also how this
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influence never materialised into the acquisition of the same nominal recognition as rulers that can be seen in the cases analysed in Chapter 2. In this context, the late and short rule of Sati Beg (r. 1339) is also taken into account in the context of a disintegrating Mongol state in Iran. The second part offers an alternative picture by focusing on the local subject dynasties of the Ilkhanate in the regions of Fars, Kerman and Anatolia. We look at how the women of these Turkic dynasties did acquire recognition as rulers of their territories in contradiction to their Mongol counterparts.

In order to understand the role that women may have played in government, it is necessary to explore how and to what extent they participated in the economy of the empire, whether or not they gained a degree of economic autonomy and whether or not they had any control over the empire’s means of production. How would such economic power have been achieved? To what extent did women have the capacity to decide when and where to invest their wealth? The answer to these questions may lie, at least in part, in the phenomenon of traditional Mongolian property allocation. The degree of financial independence of these women may have its roots in the endowment of cattle, slaves and goods obtained as booty; there are references in the sources to prominent women inheriting these ‘commodities’ from their husbands and parents. However, the use that these women made of such property has not so far been investigated in depth. Here, we look at how the *khātūns* accrued wealth from the taxation of the sedentary population in Iran, and from investments in commercial trading enterprises. Hence, the economy of the *khātūns* will be the main topic of Chapter 4.

Finally, this study would be unambitious if it did not tackle the role of the *khātūns* in the religious milieu of the Mongol Empire. Therefore, Chapter 5 looks at the attitudes of religious tolerance among Mongol men and women that were documented during the Mongol period. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that these women were individuals with their own religious preferences and dislikes. For this reason, it is particularly worthwhile exploring how women interacted with the variety of Eurasian religions, their participation in rituals, and their general attitudes towards the religious leaders of different confessions. This provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between the *khātūns* and religion, whilst at the same time reveals the underlying and gradual process by which the ‘faith of the conquered’ was adopted by the Mongols in different parts of the empire. The religious landscape of the Mongol territories was shaped, too, by the involvement of women in religious patronage, an important mode of influence closely related to their political and economic role in the empire.
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20. He mentions Börte, Sorgaghtani Beki, Abiqah [Ibaqa] Khatun, another unnamed *khātūn*, Doquz Khatun, Örüg Khatun and the wife of the Kerait prince Irinjin (also the daughter of Tegüder) who rebelled against Abu Sa’id Ilkhan in the fourteenth century. Only the first and the last one of these *khātūns* did not belong to the Kerait tribe.


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24. This opinion is shared by Hambly, ‘Becoming Visible’, p. 7.
27. The exception is found in Mernissi’s references to some women in the Mongol Empire, mostly based on her secondary bibliography and the Arab chronicles. See Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens*.
31. For example, ‘Apart from women and Sufis, the study of women as scholarly teachers and transmitters of knowledge has also been neglected’ (Hambly, ‘Becoming Visible’, p. 8).
39. The official history of the Koryo dynasty.
41. Morgan, ‘Mongol Historiography since 1985’.
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42. Zhao, *Marriage as Political Strategy*.
43. Weatherford published a book on the women of Chinggis Khan in 2010. Although its contents interchange history and fiction, its publication and relative editorial success indicates a rising interest in the topic among not only scholars but the general public. See J. Weatherford, *The Secret History of Mongol Queens* (New York, 2010).
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57. Melville, ‘Jâmeʿ Al-Tawârik’, *Elr*.
59. See Rashid al-Din Tabīb, *Shuʿab-i Panjganah*, Topkapi Sarayi, Istanbul, ms. 2937. I am grateful to Shai Shir for providing me with photographs of this manuscript.
61. For a comparative analysis of these sources, see Quinn, ‘The Muʿizz al-ansab’, pp. 229–53.
64. G. Lane, ‘Juvayni, ʿAlāʾ-al-Din’, *Elr*.
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70. P. Jackson, ‘Waṣṣāf al-Ḥadrat “the Court Panegyrist”’, EI2.


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potential of hagiographical material for the history of medieval Iran, see Paul, ‘Hagiographic Literature’.


86. Morgan, The Mongols, pp. 8, 45.


90. See Chih-chʿang Li, The Travels of an Alchemist: The Journey of the Taoist Chʾang-Chʿun from China to the Hindukush at the Summons of Chingiz Khan, Recorded by His Disciple Li Chih-Chʿang, trans. A. Waley (London, 1931). In addition, some ideas on government by the Khitan official Yeh-Lū Chuʿu-Ts’ai have been translated by de Rachewiltz. See I. de Rachewiltz, ‘The Hsi-Yu Lu by Yeh-Lű Ch’u-Ts’ai’, Monumenta Serica 21 (1962), pp. 1–128.

91. P. Olbricht and E. Pinks (ed and trans), Meng-Ta pei-lu und Hei-Ta shih-liēh: chinesische Gesandtenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237 (Wiesbaden 1980). I am grateful to Anne F. Broadbridge for calling my attention on this source.

92. For the interaction between the Mongols and Europe see, among others, J. Richard, La papauté et les missions d’Orient au Moyen Age (XIIe–XVe siècles) (Rome, 1977), and Les relations entre l’Orient et l’Occident au Moyen Age: études et documents (London, 1977); P. Jackson, The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410 (Harlow and New York, 2005).

93. An interesting study of Marco Polo’s account can be found in L. Olschki, Marco Polo’s Asia: An Introduction to his Description of the World Called ‘Il Milione’ (Berkeley, 1960).
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96. For a translation of several of these documents and the travels of Odoric de Pordenone, see Sir H. Yule, Cathay and the Way Thither: Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China, 4 vols (London, 1913–16).


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in La Fleur des histoires de la terre d’Orient: divisées en cinq parties (Lyon, 1585); and a Spanish version in Historia de cosas del Oriente, primera y segunda parte: contiene una descripción general de los Reynos de Assia con las cosas mas notables dellos, etc., trans. A. Centeno (Cordoba, 1595).


104. The term ‘religiosity’ in this book is used to refer to features pertaining, appropriate or related to the various aspects that constitute the religious lifestyles and creeds of the Mongol women here studied, including participation in religious rituals, financing or supporting of religious institutions, their adoption of a religion other than their own and the visiting and/or seeking advice from religious authorities and scholars.

106. A detailed comparison between the Arabic and Syriac versions of Bar Hebraeus’ work is given in Aigle, ‘L’oeuvre historiographique’, pp. 32–8.


113. See especially, ʿAbd al-Razzaq ibn Ahmad ibn al-Fuwati, al-Hawādith al-jāmiʿah, ed. M. Jawad (Baghdad, 1932), and Majmaʿ al-ādāb fi
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