The Mongol Empire had a quality that was not characteristic of the other empires built by nomadic khans: it continued to expand after the death of its charismatic founder (Chinggis Khan) and almost doubled its territorial possessions under the rule of his successors.¹ But, one attribute it did share with the other nomadic empires was the problem of securing a peaceful succession to the throne. The elective nature of the Mongol succession often created periods of interregnum between the death of a ruler and the reunion of the assembly of notables (quriltai) in charge of designating the new ruler.² This became more problematic as the empire expanded, since bringing together all the royal family members scattered across Eurasia in order to elect a new ruler took a long time and opened up periods of power vacuum that created instability in the empire. The first occasion on which a regent was needed in the Mongol Empire occurred immediately after the death of Chinggis Khan in 1227. Although, according to the sources, the heir to the throne – Ögetei Khan (d. 1241) – had been designated beforehand by the Great Khan,³ the Mongol succession tradition made it necessary to wait for two years until all the relevant members of the royal family had reunited and elected – or rather confirmed – the new ruler.⁴ Some sources have speculated that Chinggis Khan’s wife Börte was the regent in this period;⁵ however, it seems clear that Börte died before her husband.⁶ A biennium without a ruler would have been a dangerous political move for an empire in expansion. Tului (the youngest son of Chinggis Khan) was therefore named regent until his brother was confirmed on the throne in 1229,⁷ a move that followed a questionable tradition of ultimogeniture among the Mongols.⁸ As we discover, in particular moments in the history of the Mongol Empire, these power vacuums created by the Mongols’ elective system would often be filled by women.

Although, as we have seen in Chapter 1, women did wield influence in Mongolia before the rise of Chinggis Khan, it was necessary to wait more than a decade after Ögetei’s accession in 1229 to see the first woman take charge of the empire’s affairs and be recognised as an empress of...
the realm. Then, for twenty years, the fate of Mongol world domination rested in the hands of women who were different from each other in terms of their status, their influence and the outcomes of their political adventures. This chapter looks at the history of the Mongol Empire during this period of special prominence of women in politics by looking at the lives and deeds of a number of powerful Mongol ladies. First is explored the reign of Ögetei Khan’s wife, Töregene Khatun (r. 1241–6), first empress regent of the Mongols. Second, the role of Sorghaghtani Beki (d. 1251/2), wife of Tolui and arguably the power behind the throne, is considered vis-à-vis the reign of the second Mongol regent Oghul Qaimish (r. 1248–50). Finally, our attention is focused on the extensive reign of Orghina Khatun (d. 1266) in Central Asia as an example of the continuity of this practice of female rule in a Mongol khanate. All these cases show how a nomadic tradition of women’s rule was adopted, implemented and exploited in the Mongol Empire during the mid-thirteenth century.

Töregene Khatun: Empress of the World Empire

Like many other Mongol women prior to 1206, Töregene Khatun’s (d. 1246) incorporation into Chinggis Khan’s royal family was the result of the military defeat of her tribal group by followers of the expanding Mongol confederacy. Belonging to a subjugated group of people did not prevent these women from becoming powerful figures in the developing Mongol Empire. Originally, Töregene was the wife of Tayir-Usun, chief of the Uhaz clan of the Merkits, which had a long history of rivalry with Temüjin over the possession of women. After the defeat of the Merkits, the future Chinggis Khan decided to give Töregene in marriage to Ögetei, his third son by his chief wife Börte. She was not the eldest wife of her new husband, but gave birth to five of the seven sons of the Mongol Empire’s second ruler. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the position of women within the family structure was fundamental to their being able to influence the affairs of state. So, when Ögetei died in 1241, it seems that it was not only her position as wife of the deceased ruler, but also her role as mother of Ögetei’s eldest sons, that gave legitimacy to Töregene assuming the regency of the empire on behalf of her son.

But this succession to the throne of the Mongol Empire was not a straightforward process. According to Rashid al-Din, the heir chosen to succeed the Khan was his third son Köchü (also a son of Töregene), but he had died before his father. In preparation for his succession, Ögetei ‘brought up [Köchü’s] eldest son, Shiremün, who was exceedingly fortunate and intelligent, in his own ordo and decreed that he was to be his
Figure 2.1 The Great Khans and empresses of the Mongol Empire
heir and successor’. Yet, when Ögetei died in the year 1241, Töregene and a group of amirs objected to the election of Shiremün and interceded in favour of Güyük (her eldest son) with the argument that the eldest of the sons should succeed the father. The argument is given in the sources as a self-explanatory statement, but it was not in accordance with either Chinggis Khan’s succession or the wishes of Ögetei. Possibly motivated by the dislike of some Persian sources to women’s rule, Töregene’s political ascension is presented as an act of vengeance by Rashid al-Din: ‘having been offended by certain persons during Qa’an’s reign, and these feelings of resentment [having been] rooted in her heart, she resolved, now that she was absolute ruler, to wreak vengeance upon each of those persons’.

The impact of Töregene’s reign and its recognition as a noteworthy period in Mongol history is reflected in the uncommon description of her appearance and capacities left by the chroniclers of the time. Rashid al-Din described Töregene as being of ‘no great beauty but of a very masterful nature’, and Juvayni wrote that she was ‘a very shrewd and capable woman, and her position was greatly strengthened by this unity and concord’. These two authors were more sympathetic to the Toluid branch of the Chinggisid family, but both recognised Töregene’s capacity to rule, a view that can also be found in the Christian and Chinese sources. Her accession to the throne was not, however, as smooth as it may appear. Juvayni’s account reveals a much more complex scenario regarding the access of women to the regency, mentioning that because Güyük had not returned from his campaign in the west by the time of his father’s death, the assembly of people (quriltai) ‘took place at the door of the ordu of his wife, Möge Khatun, who, in accordance with Mongol custom, had come to him from his father, Chinggis Khan’. Möge Khatun is one of the neglected women in the Mongol Empire. She was given to Chinggis Khan by a chief of the Bakrin tribe and he loved her very much … but he had no children by her.” When Chinggis died, she passed to Ögetei, who quickly married her to prevent his brother Chaghatai from claiming the khātūn.

An indication of her high status can be observed in the fact that Möge was taken on the royal hunting expeditions under Ögetei Khan while no other woman is mentioned as having been part of the expeditions. It seems that she quickly became the favourite wife of Ögetei and that ‘he [Ögetei] loved her more than his other wives – so much that they were jealous of her’. So, if the position of women in relation to the ruler was the fundamental factor in the election of a regent, then all the signs would point towards Möge being the ideal regent after Ögetei’s death. However,
the chroniclers explain Töregene’s election by reference to her position as the mother of the Khan’s eldest son and Juvayni seems to suggest that it was Töregene’s diplomatic and political ability that took her to the throne. Möge was a former wife of Chinggis Khan, the favourite of Ögetei and preferred by other influential members of the royal family, but, despite these attributes,

Töregene Khātūn was the mother of his eldest son and was moreover shrewder and more sagacious than Möge Khātūn, she sent messages to the princes … and said that until a Khan was appointed by agreement someone would have to be ruler and leader in order that the business of the state might not be neglected nor the affairs of the commonweal thrown into confusion … Chaghatai and the other princes sent representatives to say that Töregene Khātūn was the mother of the princes who had the right to khanate. Therefore, until a quriltai was held, it was she who should direct the affairs of state.25

Möge died shortly after her husband and did not present any opposition to Töregene’s regency. Although Juvayni mentions the fact that Töregene was the mother of the eldest son of the dead Khan, he puts the emphasis for her election on being the result of her diplomatic skills and the support given her by other members of the royal family, especially the Chaghataid branch of Mongols. But to what extent did this recognition as empress and legitimate ruler of the empire allow Töregene to have real control over the government? In other words, did she really have the chance to develop a political agenda of her own? Her accession to the throne was not as peaceful as the transition from Chinggis Khan to his son Ögetei. She had to deploy diplomatic and political skills in order to tackle pockets of resistance to her reign by viziers who rejected her authority and ruled their districts in rebellion.26 Members of her own family also contested her authority because of her political decision to replace several governors appointed by Ögetei such as the Yelü Chucai (Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai) and Mahmud Yalavach in Northern China, Mas‘ud Beg in Central Asia and Körgüz in the western territories.27

Yelü Chucai (d. 1243) and Mahmud Yalavach sought refuge with Ögetei’s son Köten,28 who welcomed and protected them in the Tangut territories under his control, consistently rejecting the empress’s requests that he hand over the refugees.29 Unhappy with this insubordination, the empress regent seems to have exercised her right to administer justice when she ordered the arrest of Körgüz. He was put on trial in Töregene’s ordo and executed by the Chaghataids after being found guilty.30 The case of Mahmud Yalavach illustrates the ability with which Töregene played her cards in the political arena. This amir had confronted Chaghatai while Ögetei was still alive, forcing the Khan to relocate Yalavach from the
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administration of Central Asia to that of China. When Töregene came to power, one of her first measures was to try to capture the amir while also obtaining Chaghatai’s support.31

Despite her attempts to exercise a firm control over the growing number of dissident officials and members of the royal family, the number of upheavals grew during Töregene’s reign. Chinggis Khan’s brother Otchigin Noyan (Temüge) ‘thought to seize the throne by force and violence. With this intention he set out for the ordo of Qa’an at the head of a large army and with much gear and equipment’,32 marching towards the Mongol capital in Qaraqorum.33 The revolt failed, and the reasons given for this by the sources vary. On the one hand, Rashid al-Din draws attention to Töregene’s diplomatic skills, giving them as the main reason why Otchigin’s advance was stopped; Juvayni, on the other hand, emphasises the role played by one of Chinggis Khan’s grandsons (Mengli Oghul, a son of Ögetei Khan) in stopping Otchigin from attacking the Mongol capital. Both authors, however, note that this event coincided with the arrival of Güyük (r. 1246–8), Töregene’s son and heir to Ögetei, from the battlefront, which might have calmed the tensions among the royal families and given a certain legitimacy to Töregene’s regency. Yet, despite his arrival, ‘when Güyük came to his mother, he took no part in affairs of state, and Töregene Khâtûn still executed the decrees of the Empire although the khanate was settled upon her son’.34

The direct intervention of the empress regent in all these matters suggests that Töregene’s reign was not a simple female interregnum between male rulers. On the contrary, she took an active role in protecting her reign from internal opposition and actively promoted a restructuring of the empire’s administration. The already-mentioned removal of governors in China and Khurasan was accompanied by Töregene’s unprecedented decision to name a woman as her highest counsellor.35 The appointment of Fatima to this office throws light on some interesting aspects of female rule in the Mongol Empire. First, Fatima’s origins underline the importance of the ladies’ ordos in the political development of Mongol internal politics. She was captured during Chinggis Khan’s expeditions in Khurasan (in the vicinity of the city of Mashhad) and was gifted to Töregene Khatun with the status of slave. A close relationship developed between the two women, which eventually led to Fatima being catapulted to a position of considerable power in the administration, since, as Rashid al-Din mentions, she became ‘the confidant of the Khâtûn and the repository of her secrets’.36 Second, Fatima’s appointment highlights the notion of female rule among these nomads as something that could not only be achieved by marriage but also through inter-female relationships, without
any apparent intervention by a male member of the family. In fact, Juvayni claims that Töregene placed most of her political authority in Fatima, who was in charge of removing the previous amirs and governors and carrying out the transformation of the administration. The nomination of Fatima as high counsellor caused fierce opposition among members of the royal family. Yet, the discord does not seem to be rooted in an opposition towards the women’s rule *per se* but rather towards their political agenda. Among contemporary and later sources, both women (Töregene and Fatima) are described as being competent, shrewd and capable in the affairs of state. The rebellions against them are described without any particular emphasis being placed on the fact that they were women, and it seems that the royal family’s discontent arose because of the political measures adopted by Fatima (namely, the removal of the amirs) or because of the succession procedures in the Great Khanate (Otchigin’s rebellion). The conspiracy of the deposed amirs and the return of Güyük to Mongolia from the western front mark the end of this period of female rule in the Mongol Empire. Fatima was accused of sorcery for causing the death of Köten (the protector of the deposed amirs) and was cruelly executed: ‘Her upper and lower orifices were filled; she was wrapped in a carpet and thrown into the water’. For some historians of the period, the accusation of sorcery was nothing more than a political move by the ousted amirs to remove Fatima from office and regain their role in the administration. Simultaneously, it provided Güyük with an opportunity to distance himself from his mother and Fatima’s policies, which may have helped to appeal for support from some rebel members of the royal family. Töregene tried to avoid handing over Fatima for trial, but her fate was sealed and, ‘when the inquisitors were investigating Fatima Khatun, they kept her hungry and naked for a while, threatening her with violence until the poor woman admitted to and paid the price for acts she had not committed’. The regency of Töregene Khatun has not been seen as an important period in the history of the empire and is generally overlooked by historians. However, this *khâtûn* succeeded through her skill in the art of diplomacy to secure her position of power for a period of six years. Furthermore, she managed to resist the attempts of members of the royal family to seize power. She carried out important political reforms in an attempt to break the dependence on administrators rooted in Chinese imperial tradition such as Yelü Chucai by reinstating the Khwarazmian ʿAbd al-Rahman. This has been seen as a struggle between two different conceptions of empire based on the taxation of agricultural lands. On the one hand, reforms in an attempt to break the dependence on her husband’s administrators such as Yelü Chucai – of Khitan origin – proposed light taxation of
the sedentary population and respect for the property of the landowners of Northern China. This approach was mostly backed by the Toluid branch of the royal family, which had extensive appanages in the region. On the other hand, an approach based on high taxation of the sedentary population was represented by ʿAbd al-Rahman during the later years of Ögetei Khan. Töregene’s reinstatement of ʿAbd al-Rahman and the appointment of Fatima should be seen in this context, together with the strategy to gain Chaghatai’s support by exploiting his enmity with Mahmud Yalavach. The opposition and hostility that her reign provoked seems, in both the Chinese and Persian sources, to have been based on her commitment to her model of empire and a clear agenda for political reform, rather than on the fact that she was a woman. Töregene died in 1246, but not before she had exercised her authority to secure the enthronement of her son Güyük Khan (r. 1246–8), whom she favoured and ‘most of the emirs were in agreement with her’. She died, but the institution of female regency in the empire had been established and it would remain a succession option for as long as the Mongols stayed united under the control of a globally recognised Great Khan.

Women as Protagonists of Dynastic Change: Female Involvement in the Toluid Coup d’État

The Toluid-orientated sources like to emphasise the role of Sorghaghtani Beki (d. 1252) as that of not only a very influential woman but as Töregene’s alter ego. Although she never acquired nominal recognition as empress, Sorghaghtani Beki is portrayed in the same sources as the defender of a model of empire based on light taxation of the sedentary population. She is regarded as the protector of a line of succession from Chinggis Khan that the Ögeteids had broken when Töregene took control of the realm and championed her son Güyük as ruler of the Mongols to the detriment of Shiremün. However, this idyllic representation of Sorghaghtani in the sources cannot be taken literally. Rather than simply being a champion of the right causes, this formidable woman was doing the same thing as Töregene, that is exercising her political will in pursuit of her own – and her dependants’ – interests. She was the daughter of Jagambo, the brother of the Kerait ruler in the early years of Chinggis Khan. The alliance between Chinggis Khan and the Ong Khan of the Kerait against the Merkits was sealed and consolidated by a marriage between the eldest (Jochi) and youngest (Tolui) sons of Chinggis Khan and two of the Kerait ruler’s nieces (Bek-Tutmish and Sorghaghtani Beki respectively). Little is known about the relationship between
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Sorghaghtani Beki and her husband but Tolui was one of the most active generals of the Mongol army and spent most of his adult life on campaign, leaving Sorghaghtani in charge of the education of their sons and having himself little or no influence over his offspring.\(^{50}\)

Sorghaghtani Beki achieved exceptionally high status across the empire. Most of the available sources, both Christian and Muslim, agree on the amount of power and influence she wielded.\(^{51}\) The *Tartar Relation*, a Western source written by an Eastern European cleric who met Piano de Carpini on his return to Europe from Mongolia, states that she was ‘next in precedence among the Tartars to the Emperor’ s mother [Töregene]’.\(^{52}\) The same text gives us another indication of the status of the *khātūn* when the author cannot recall the name of Tolui but clearly acknowledges the influence exercised by Sorghaghtani Beki.\(^{53}\) Her position in the family structure of the Mongols was established by her marriage to a son of Chinggis Khan, but also, when Tolui had died in 1233, she received his dependent territories (*ulus*) and *ordo*, which represented people and territories in Mongolia and Northern China.\(^{54}\) The revenues and support inherited from her husband allowed her to oppose Ögetei when he tried to arrange a marriage between her and his son Güyük. Sorghaghtani preferred to remain unmarried and sent a message of rejection to the Khan in the following terms:

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How is it possible to alter the terms of the *yarlig* [royal decree]? and yet my thought is only to bring up these children until they reach the stage of manhood and independence, and to try to make them well mannered and not liable to go apart and hate each other so that, perhaps, some great thing may come of their unity.\(^{55}\)
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This statement is interesting for two reasons. First, it illustrates that Sorghaghtani was strong enough to oppose the wishes of the Great Khan, benefiting from her kinship and marriage connections. And, second, it could be interpreted as an intelligent long-term political strategy, since remaining single left her free to develop a diplomatic network, which in the end promoted her son Möngke to the khanate. During the reign of Töregene Khatun, Sorghaghtani had kept a low profile and begun to ‘cultivate the goodwill of the nobles through gifts and beneficence’.\(^{56}\) Muslim sources also regard her as highly influential; Khwandamir even affirms that the election of Güyük Khan was decided by Töregene Khatun and Sorghaghtani, with whom all the other amirs and officials agreed.\(^{57}\)

She showed great diplomatic skills by maintaining good relations with the Ögeteids whilst gaining the support of Batu Khan, the eldest living member of the Chinggisid family. She waited for the right moment to
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exploit the enmity between Batu and Güyük when in 1247 the latter moved westward with an army to apparently attack Batu in Russia. When this news reached Sorghaghtani, she sent a message to Batu saying, ‘be prepared, for Güyük Khan has set out for those regions at the head of a large army … Batu was grateful and made ready for battle with him’, but the battle never occurred. When Güyük’s expedition arrived in Samarqand, he died and a new dynastic struggle started in the empire.

Since, strictly speaking, Sorghaghtani never acquired nominal recognition as an empress or regent of the empire, the next woman to occupy the role of regent in the empire was the wife of Güyük Khan, Oghul Qaimish (r. 1248–50). Once again, with the death of a Great Khan in 1248, the Mongols had to deal with a succession crisis and, as was the case when Ögetei died, a woman had to deal with the internal conflict between the various parts of the Chinggisid family. In this case, the diplomatic strategies carried out by Sorghaghtani had brought the Toluids onto the political map and, thanks to the fruitful relationship cultivated by Tolui’s wife with Batu, this branch of Chinggis Khan’s descendants became key political actors in the development of the empire. The alliance created by Sorghaghtani precipitated the confrontation between, on the one hand, the Toluids and the Jochids and, on the other, the Ögeteids and Chaghataids.

If we trust Rashid al-Din’s account, Oghul Qaimish’s appointment is presented as the consequence of a ‘tradition’ among the Mongols of making a woman regent of the empire after the death of the khan. He mentions that Batu suggested that ‘Oghul-Qaimish continue, as heretofore, to administer affairs in consultation with Chinqai and the [other] ministers, and let her neglect nothing, for on account of old age, weakness, and gout I am unable to move, and you, the inis [junior Mongol Princes], are all there’. However, the only precedent is Töregene Khatun, and consequently this ‘tradition’ mentioned by Rashid al-Din should therefore be understood not as a ‘Mongol tradition’ but rather as a ‘nomadic’ tradition stretching back to the time of the Qarakhitai. Besides, while Töregene had enjoyed both nominal and real power in state affairs, the new female head of the empire only gained nominal recognition, whilst the real power in the empire lay in the hands of Sorghaghtani Beki. Sources are unclear about the political moves taken by Oghul Qaimish. Some suggest that she tried to counteract the diplomatic network built up by Sorghaghtani by appointing Ögetei’s grandson Shiremün as candidate to the throne, but the possibility of supporting one of her own sons can not be ruled out. The Toluids proposed to elect the new khan within Batu’s homeland and to have a quriltai in Central Asia, going against the Mongol custom of holding the elective assembly in Mongolia. The Ögeteids boycotted the
meeting for a while, but Sorghaghtani’s perseverance influenced Batu’s final decision, who, according to Rashid al-Din said: ‘Set him [Möngke Khan] on the throne. Whoever turns against the yasa [code of Chinggis Khan], let him lose his head’. ⁶⁶

Despite the weak position in which Oghul Qaimish found herself after the death of her husband, she issued commands so that ‘roads were closed and a yasa[q] was issued to the effect that everyone should halt in whatever place he had reached, whether it was inhabited or desert. And at Oghul-Qaimish’s command, Güyük Khan’s tomb was transferred to the Emil, where his ordo was’. ⁶⁷ It seems that Sorghaghtani recognised her rule and even sent ‘words of advice and consolation and sent her clothing and a boqtaq’. ⁶⁸ The two years of Oghul Qaimish’s reign are difficult to assess because the sources are either fiercely critical of her rule or fail to mention her entirely. ⁶⁹ Among those who did dedicate part of their chronicles to the period, Rashid al-Din mostly followed Juvayni’s account, by describing her reign as one in which ‘little was done, however, except for dealings with merchants. Most of the time Oghul-Qaimish was closeted with the qams [shamans or witch-doctors], carrying out their fantasies and absurdities’. ⁷⁰

Oghul Qaimish was not alone in this succession struggle, though sometimes those who were supposed to be her closest allies propagated division and discord among the Ögeteids. It seems that her sons played an important role in the struggle for succession. Khoja and Naqu, the sons of Güyük Khan and Oghul Qaimish, are mentioned as those who entrusted Batu with the task of deciding who should be elected Great Khan, probably expecting him to choose one of them or at least their nephew Shiremün who, after all, had the support of Ögetei and was backed by the empress regent Oghul Qaimish. ⁷¹ Batu, however, decided to appoint Möngke, the son of Sorghaghtani Beki and Tolui, after he himself had been offered – and rejected – the throne. ⁷² At the same time, it might be argued that the role played by Sorghaghtani in alerting Batu of a possible attack by Güyük, and her now outspoken promotion of her son for the khanate, might have made the difference, leading to the appointment of Möngke – Batu’s choice – to the throne. ⁷³

Various quriltails were held and divisions arose among the descendants of Chinggis Khan. Some sources suggest that there were efforts to reach an agreement and persuade the Ögeteids to accept their fate, but in the end Möngke Khan was elected and the Toluids carried out a bloody purge of their opponents. ⁷⁴ The descendants of Ögetei tried to put their differences aside and resist the Toluid usurpation, but it was too late and the Toluid coup supported by the Jochids suffocated the Ögeteids and
those Chaghataids who had allied themselves with them in their appanages in Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan. As for Oghul Qaimish, she was sent together with Qadaqash Khatun (Shiremün’s mother) to Sorghaghtani Beki’s ordo, where they were both cruelly executed. Thus, Oghul Qaimish’s reign seems to have had repercussions – albeit negative ones – on the Mongol nobility and it marks the end of an era in the history of the Mongol Empire. William of Rubruck comments on the impact she had when describing an encounter with the new Mongol ruler: ‘Mangu (Möngke) told me with his own lips that Chamus [Oghul Qaimish] was the worst kind of witch and that by her sorcery she had destroyed her whole family’.

After Oghul Qaimish’s death and the coronation of Möngke Khan (r. 1251–9), the empire entered a new period in which the Great Khanate was in the hands of the Toluids. The idea of a united Mongol Empire would not survive Möngke Khan himself, and its division into territorial units in China, Central Asia, Russia and Iran would trigger constant disputes and conflicts over territory and influence. From 1251 the Mongol empire became divided into two main spheres of influence controlled by the Jochid and Toluid branches of Chinggis Khan’s descendants. A Great Khan would remain in China until the fourteenth century with the proclamation of Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–94), but the Toluid approach to the institution of female regency would be very different from that of their Ögeteids predecessors. While the Ögeteids held on to their appanages in the eastern regions of Central Asia and Mongolia, the Toluids progressively shifted the empire’s centre of gravity to the south, into more sedentarised Chinese territories. Though the sources do not reflect any particular disdain for the gender of the empresses of the 1240s, a woman would never again be in charge of the entire empire. Yet, this nomadic institution, derived from the Qarakhitaids, would be maintained, discarded or transformed in the newly established khanates.

The Continuation of a Nomadic Tradition in Central Asia: Orghina Khatun and the Rule of the Chaghataid Khanate

The Chaghataid ulus, which included the territories in West Turkestan, had fiscal control over the rich Fergana Valley and was ruled by a woman called Orghina Khatun (r. 1251–60) for almost a decade after the accession of Möngke Khan. According to Rashid al-Din, she was the daughter of Töralchi, one of the sons of Qutuqa Beki, the ruler of the Oyrat people in the time of Chinggis Khan and Chächäyigän Khatum, a daughter of Chinggis Khan. She moved to Central Asia when she married Qara-
Hülegü, grandson of Chaghatai by his son Mö’etüken (d. 1221) and the named heir of the realm during Chaghatai’s lifetime. She certainly enjoyed a high status by being a granddaughter of Chinggis Khan and was well connected to members of the Tuluid branch of the Mongol royal family. Actually, she was a half-sister to Öljei Khatun and sister of Güyük Khatun, who were wives of Hülegü Ilkhan. Furthermore, she became the niece of Möngke Khan when he married Orghina’s aunt Oghul Qoymish, a daughter of Qutuqa Beki. We only have scant information about Orghina Khatun’s life prior to her accession to the throne. However, she played an important role in the turmoil that shook the Chaghatai ulus after Chaghatai’s death in 1244 and the subsequent struggles for the Great Khanate during the rules of Töregene, Güyük Khan and Oghul Qaimish.

Allegedly, Orghina Khatun was held in high esteem by the founder of the ulus (Chaghatai), by whom she was ‘loved very much and called Orghina Bäri (bäri meaning daughter-in-law)’. When Chaghatai passed away, her husband became ruler of his grandfather’s territories and maintained this position during Töregene’s regency. Once on the throne, Güyük Khan decided to replace Qara-Hülegü with his friend and fellow drinker Yesü Möngke (son of Chaghatai). Apart from friendship, Rashid al-Din gives another reason for explaining Qara-Hülegü’s replacement and suggests that it was enmity between Yesü Möngke and Möngke Khan that precipitated the displacement of Orghina’s husband from the throne. Without denying the rivalry between these two princes, Rashid al-Din’s explanation seems to me to be somewhat counterfactual and at odds with the political context of the period. Qara-Hülegü’s removal appears to accord with the struggle occasioned by the two different conceptions of imperial rule personified by Sorghaghtani and Töregene. Fatima Khatun’s policy of replacing amirs such as Yeh-lü Ch’u-ts’ai, Mahmud Yalavach, Mas’ud Beg and Körgüz, as mentioned above, had the support of Qara-Hülegü and Orghina Khatun. In fact, they are credited with having been in charge of dispatching Qur-Buqa and Arghun Aqa to Khurasan to capture, kill and replace Körgüz. Bearing this in mind, the removal of Qara-Hülegü was not simply a question of affinity, but can also be seen as a measure taken by Güyük to give an image of an independent ruler making decisions of his own after the death of his mother Töregene. Similarly, the replacement could, at least in part, have been a way in which Güyük could seek to bring some internal peace after the succession, following the upheavals that had occurred under his mother’s reign, and search for a stability of political balance within the royal family. In sum, Yesü Möngke became the ruler of the Chaghatai ulus in Central Asia and a supporter of the Güyük (and Ögeteid) line of succession from 1246 until Möngke Khan’s accession to the Great Khanate.
Figure 2.2 The *khātūns* of the House of Chaghatai
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in 1251. With these credentials and the enmity that Yesü Möngke supposedly felt towards Möngke Khan, it is not surprising that ‘when Möngke Qa’an became Qa’an, he gave Qara-Hülegü a yarligh commanding him to put Yesu-Möngke to death and, as heir-apparent, become the ruler of that ulus’. We do not know much about Orghina’s actions in this period. Rashid al-Din is unclear whether she accompanied her husband when he was replaced by Yesü Möngke or if she remained in Central Asia while her husband went into forced exile. However, Qara-Hülegü died on his way back to Central Asia with Möngke’s orders to put his uncle to death, and, consequently, it was Orghina Khatun who had to step in and ‘put Yesu-Möngke to death in accordance with the yarligh and ruled herself in her husband’s stead’. With Qara-Hülegü’s death in 1252, the Chaghataid Khanate was once more without a head. Orghina Khatun assumed control of the realm in the name of her son, Mubarak Shah (r. 1266), in accordance with Möngke Khan’s command. Consequently, the institution of female regency seems to have remained strong in the same area as where the Qarakhitai dynasty had once ruled and very close to the area where Töregene and Oghul Qaimish had had their appanages. This marks an interesting continuation of this practice and further reinforces the nomadic precedent of women’s regency in the area.

Orghina Khatun was the regent of the Mongol khanate of Central Asia for ten years. This period is generally described as having been quiet in terms of political turmoil and we have no reports of upheavals in the region for most of her years in command. Certain hints suggest that during these years she was fully recognised as the ruler of the region. Some sources mention that at the time that Hülegü started his campaign to the west and his armies ‘arrived in the vicinity of Almaliq, Orghīna Khātūn came out to greet them as the ruler of Chaghataid territories and hosted a round of banquets, presenting them with suitable gifts’. An interesting detail can be found in Rashid al-Din’s account, which mentions that the chief wives of Hülegü were travelling with him. One of them was Orghina’s half-sister Öljei Khatun, the mother of Möngke Temür. The reception laid on by Orghina for the convoy was certainly a sign of her role as ruler of the Chaghataid Khanate, but also her family connections to the wives of Hülegü might have given an extra reason to hold the event.

Some controversy has also been drawn from a passing reference made by the Christian friar William of Rubruck during his travels to meet the Great Khan Möngke in the 1250s. He states that, while travelling in Central Asia,
we came across one large town there called Cailac in which there was a market, and many merchants flocked thither. We rested in this town for twelve days while awaiting one of Baatu’s scribes who was to assist the leader of our party in the business to be settled at Mangu’s [Möngke] court. That country used to be called Organum and used to have its own language and script but now it has all been seized by the Turcomans. Also the Nestorians of those parts used to perform their services and write books in that script and language; and it may be that they get their name Organa from the fact that they used to be very fine musicians or organists; so I was told.100

The city of ‘Cailac’ was known as ‘Quayaligh’ or ‘Kayalig’ and seems to correspond to the modern town of Qapal in Eastern Kazakhstan. What is interesting about this story is that the toponym of the area where Rubruck was staying bears striking similarities to the name Orghina Khatun, who was the ruler of this territory at the same time that the friar was in the area. There is disagreement among scholars on the question of whether ‘Organa’ refers to the regent of the Chaghataid Khanate. One of the modern translators of Rubruck’s work, Christopher Dawson, has no hesitation in connecting the two words and suggests that the word ‘Organum’ is a clear reference to Orghina Khatun.101 However, other translators of the work disagree with Dawson. For example, Peter Jackson claims that the origin of the term is a corruption of the word ‘Urgench’, the name of the capital of the Khwarazmshah Empire, while William W. Rockhill reads this as a reference to the Uyghur people who lived near the city of Kuldja in Eastern China.102 In fact, Rubruck himself expressed doubts about the origin of the term (and was not entirely sure about his own attribution of the name to the skills of musicians) and, consequently, the issue might still be open to discussion. Having said that, if the word Organum did only refer to musicians, or to the city of Urgench or the land of the Uyghurs, its similarity in terminology with Orghina’s name would be a remarkable historical coincidence.

Before going into more depth on Orghina’s reign, a brief mention should be made of a contemporary female regency. During Möngke’s reign, there was an internal dispute over the succession of the Golden Horde khanate in Russia. When Batu died, the Great Khan Möngke issue a decree for his chief wife Boraqchin Khatun103 to be in command of the ulus on behalf of her protégé Ulaghchi, son of Sartaq son of Batu who had died shortly after being received by Möngke in Mongolia.104 Her reign appears to have been short and only lasted for a year between 1255 and 1256, when Ulaghchi died and Batu’s brother Berke removed her from the throne. Her short time in office, though, has generated some debate due to mention in the Arabic sources of an embassy sent from her to Hülegü inviting him to come to the Golden Horde and take control of the
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ulus. However, this claim has been dismissed by Paul Pelliot, arguing that there are serious problems with the chronology of the events narrated in the Mamluk sources. For our purposes, nonetheless, it is interesting to note that the regencies of Orghina in Central Asia and Boraqchin in Russia were contemporaneous and both granted directly by Möngke Khan himself. At this point in the history of the Mongol Empire, it appears that, from the point of view of the Great Khanate, female rule was considered a common practice and was implemented simultaneously in both the Chaghataid and Jochid uluses.

Back in Central Asia, the events which occurred during the later years of the 1250s reveal the importance of the position acquired by Orghina Khatun within the institution of regency in the Mongol Empire. Möngke Khan died in 1259 and, without Sorghaghtani Beki as an indisputable depositary of authority, the hitherto well-assembled line of the Toluids faced a succession struggle similar to the one they had helped create for the Ögeteids in the early 1250s. In this case, the aspirants were Qubilai and Ariq Böke, respectively second and fourth sons of Tolui and Sorghaghtani Beki. Qubilai based his strength on the armies given by Möngke to continue the war in central and southern China and on his mother’s appanages in the north of that country, while Ariq Böke had the support of the territories of his forefathers in Mongolia. The conflict reshaped once more the alliances between the different branches of Chinggis Khan’s family. If Möngke’s accession had allied the Jochids with the Toluids and provoked the decline of the Ögeteids and part of the Chaghataids, now the Jochids allied with Ariq Böke, while Qubilai gained the support of the new political entity of Hüllegü in Iran. In this political scenario, the support of Orghina Khatun’s territory became critically important for both Qubilai and Ariq Böke.

According to Rashid al-Din, Qubilai sent Abishqa (grandson of Chaghatai) to marry Orghina Khatun and rule Central Asia in support of his aspirations to the throne. However, Abishqa was intercepted on the way and killed by Ariq Böke’s supporters. At this early stage in the conflict, Orghina Khatun is credited with not taking a direct part in the conflict between the brothers. However, after they had both proclaimed themselves as Great Khan, Ariq Böke too tried to secure Chaghataid support for his cause and gave to Alghu, another grandson of Chaghatai, control over the Chaghataid Khanate in order to organise the dispatch of supplies from Central Asia to the troops fighting in the struggle against his brother. Orghina, in her position as ruler of the Central Asian territories, decided to go to Ariq Böke’s ordo, where she complained about her removal, vindicated her right to rule and stayed for a time with the youngest son of Sorghaghtani Beki. Meanwhile, Alghu betrayed his
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patron and decided to keep the supplies he was ordered to collect for Ariq Böke, rebelled against his authority and changed sides, now giving his support to Qubilai.111 Interestingly enough, Alghu’s rebellion was not in itself enough for him to be recognised as ruler: he was only recognised as the legitimate ruler of the Chaghataid Khanate when he then married Orghina Khatun, who allowed him, according to Rashid al-Din, to secure ‘absolute possession of the throne of the ulus of Chaghatai’.112

Qubilai triumphed in the succession struggle and was proclaimed Great Khan in 1264. He confirmed Alghu and Orghina as rulers of the Chaghataid ulus, but Alghu passed away in 1265–6.113 Orghina Khatun now made her last royal decision: ‘in agreement with the emirs and viziers’ she elevated her son Mubarak Shah to the throne of the Chaghataid Khanate.114 There is no further information about her in the sources after the coronation of her son, which suggest that she possibly died shortly afterwards (c. 1266).115 During more than fifteen years of female rule in Central Asia, she had emerged successfully from two civil wars by playing her cards wisely, in favour of the Toluids first and then supporting Qubilai later. She had effectively ruled Central Asia peacefully for nine years, during which period she was recognised as the supreme authority of the realm. She was portrayed as the depositary of legitimacy in the region as proven by the fact that Alghu, although a direct descendant of Chaghatai, needed to marry her to be fully recognised as ruler of the ulus. Even though this union could have undermined her political authority, rather it seems that the opposite occurred, for she succeeded in gathering the support she needed to promote her son to the throne, which indicates that right up to her death she remained a fundamental political figure in Central Asia.

Notes

4. On the quriltai or assembly of nobles in charge of the election of the new khan, see Chapter 3.


6. ‘Börte must have been born in 1161 … The year of her death is not known, but she must have died after 1206/7 and almost certainly before her husband. … She is only briefly mentioned among the imperial consorts in YS 2 114, 2869.’ See de Rachewiltz’s comments in The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century, trans. I. de Rachewiltz, 2 vols (Leiden and Boston, 2004) (hereafter, SH), I, pp. 333–4.


10. SH, §198.


Juvayni even justifies the decision, making a link between primogeniture and ability to rule: ‘he [Güyük] was the eldest of the brothers and had had most practice in the handling of difficult matters and most experience of weal and woe’. See TJG, II, p. 206/Boyle, p. 251.
28. There is some confusion regarding Köten’s mother. According to Rashid al-Din, Köten is supposed to be a son of Töregene; however, a more reliable family link seems to be indicated by some scholars who mention him as a half-brother of Güyük and, therefore, only a stepson of Töregene. See Kim, ‘Reappraisal of Güyük Khan’, p. 326.
32. JT, II, pp. 801–2/Successors, p. 178; see also TJG, II, p. 199/Boyle, p. 244.
34. TJG, II, p. 200/Boyle, p. 244.
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35. In Persian sources, her name appears as خاتون فاطمه.


37. TJG, II, pp. 200–1/Boyle, p. 245.


39. Regarding Otchigin’s revolt, Kim suggests that the considerable number of soldiers and territories (in Manchuria and Korea) allotted him by Chinggis Khan gave Temüge the considerable military and political strength to challenge the Güyük’s succession, but no specific mention is made of any opposition towards a female regent for the empire. See Kim, ‘A Reappraisal of Güyük Khan’, p. 328.


41. THS, III, p. 56/Khwandamir, p. 32.


43. Yuan Shih 2/39–40, quoted in Kim, ‘A Reappraisal of Güyük Khan’, p. 311; it is worth mentioning here that the only hostile reference to Töregene based on her being a woman is to be found in Juzjani’s account where he says the khātūn ‘displayed woman’s way, such as proceed from deficiency of intellect and excess of sensuality’. See Minhaj Siraj Juzjani, Tabaqāt-i Nāṣīrī, ed. ʿA. Habibi, 2 vols (Kabul, 1342–3/1963–4) (hereafter, TN), II, p. 167/Raverty, p. 1144.

44. JT, II, p. 806/Successors, p. 181.

45. Sorghaghtani Beki was the wife of Tolui (fourth son of Chinggis Khan) and mother of Môngke Khan (r. 1251–9), Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–94), Hülegü Ilkhan (r. 1260–5) and Ariq Böke. She is referred to as belonging to the Kerait people and professing the Christian faith. See JT, II, p. 823/Successors, p. 200.


47. She is portrayed by Rashid al-Din as being the person who influenced Batu to put forward Môngke as successor in 1251. See JT, I, p. 725/Successors, p.121.

48. Jagambo or Jakambu is the title given to the father of Sorghaghtani Beki when, after being defeated by Chinggis Khan, he fled and found refuge with the Tangut. See Dunlop, ‘Keraits of Eastern Asia’, p. 283, fn. 6.

49. JT, II, p. 962/Thackston, p. 471. On the intermarriages between Chinggisids and Kerait women, see Figure 4.1. in Chapter 4.
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53. Skelton *et al.*, *The Vinland Map*, p. 76.


56. *THS*, III, p. 58/Khwandamir, p. 33. See also *Chronography*, p. 417.


60. The date of Güyük’s death is missing from Rashid al-Din, but Chinese sources mention that he died in the third month (27 March–24 April) of 1248. See Pelliot, *Les Mongols et la Papauté*, III, pp. 195–6, who suggests that Güyük died in Qum Sengir in Eastern Turkestan.


64. Oghul Qaimish received Batu’s blessing, probably having it in mind that she would not last long, see *TJG*, II, p. 217/Boyle, p. 262.


68. *TJG*, II, p. 217/Boyle, p. 262; *JT*, II, p. 810/Successors, p. 185. The *boqtaq* was the hat used by wealthy Mongol women as a sign of royalty in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This headdress was still used by Mongol women in the Timurid court in the fifteenth century. See S. Cammann, ‘Mongol Costume: Historical and Recent’, in D. Sinor (ed.), *Aspects of*
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69. In his account of the period, Khwandamir does not mention Oghul Qaimish at any point, placing all the responsibility for the Ögeteids in the hands of Guyük’s sons Khoja and Naqu. See THS, III, pp. 58–61/Khwandamir, pp. 33–5.


71. There appears to have been disagreement among the descendants of Guyük over who had the right to rule. Oghul Qaimish, Khoja and Naqu seem to have created parallel courts, which generated confusion among the Ögeteids followers. See JT, II, p. 810/Successors, p. 186; TJG, II, p. 219/Boyle, p. 265. On the other hand, Juzjani does not mention the regency of Oghul Qaimish in his account, only the name of Möngke as Batu’s choice to rule. See TN, II, pp. 178–80/Raverty, pp. 1176–87.

72. On the role played by Batu in the enthronement of Möngke, see Allsen, Mongol Imperialism, pp. 21–30.

73. Chronography, p. 417.

74. TJG, III, pp. 23–4/Boyle, p. 563. It is interesting to note that Juvayni mentions the presence of the sons of Temüge Otchegin, Köten and Kölgen in the quraltai that proclaimed Möngke as Great Khan. Those who rebelled against Töregene Khatun in the early 1240s were now on the side of the Toluids. See TJG, III, p. 31/Boyle, p. 568. See also JT, II, p. 839/Successors, p. 215.

75. TJG, II, pp. 219–20; III, p. 28–9/Boyle, pp. 265, 566.


77. Dawson, Mongol Mission, p. 203.


79. The appanage of Oghul Qaimish and Guyük Khan was in the region of Dzungaria or Dzungaria in the northern part of today’s Xinjiang in China. See E. Bretschneider, Medieval Researches from Eastern Asiatic Sources, 2 vols (London, 1910), I, pp. 160–1. On Qubilai, see Rossabi, Khubilai Khan, p. 131.

80. The name can also take the forms Orghana and Orquina among others. In the Persian sources, she is referred to as خاتون اورقينة in JT, p. 801. Vassaf uses the name خاتون اورغنه in TV, p. 335. In Juwayni, her name is spelled خاتون کهینه in JTG, III, p. 97. Here I refer to her as Orghina. An extended version of this section has been published in B. De Nicola, ‘The Queen of the Chaghatayids: Orghīna Khātūn and the rule of Central Asia’, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 26:1–2 (2016), pp. 107–20.
In *JT*, p. 100, the name appears as تورالچی.


Like in the case of Orghina, the mother of Güyük Khatun was Chächäyigän Khatun, daughter of Chinggis Khan himself by his chief wife Börte; see *SH*, §239. She is also mentioned by Vassaf as having a sister who was married to Batu, though her name is not given. See *TV*, p. 13. On her and her offspring, see A. F. Broadbridge, ‘Marriage, Family and Politics: The Ilkhanid-Oirat Connection’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26:1–2 (2016), pp. 123–9.

*JT*, I, p. 100/Thackston, p. 55.

On the Chaghataid family, see Figure 2.2.

*JT*, I, p. 100/Thackston, p. 56.


*JT*, I, p. 760/Successors, p. 143. Vassaf mentions the replacement without giving particular reasons for it; *TV*, p. 335.

See *JT*, II, p. 801/Successors, p. 177. Also Raverty, p. 1149, fn. 7. In Juvayni’s account, it is Töregene who sends Arghun Aqa to Khurasan to replace Körgüz. See *TJG*, II, p. 274/Boyle, p. 538.


See, for example, *Successors*, p. 143.

*JT*, I, p. 767/Successors, pp. 149–50. One of Yesü Möngke’s wives, called Toqashi Khatun, was brutally executed by Qara-Hülegü; see *TJG*, III, 59/Boyle, pp. 588–9. In *JT*, II, p. 839/Successors, p. 213, the story is also narrated but the lady is mentioned as the wife of Yesunto’a (brother of Qara-Hülegü).


She ruled from the city of Almaliq in Eastern Turkestan; see Bretschneider, *Mediaeval Researches*, I, p. 161, fn. 440. On the city of Almaliq, see V. V. Barthold, ‘Almaligh’, *EI2*.


Her name appears transliterated as Ölja[i] or Oljei. The Persian sources read اولجای خاتون.

It is worth mentioning a later source: Mustawfi takes note of the banquets offered to Hülegü in Central Asia but does not mention the presence of any women. Since Mustawfi had access to Rashid al-Din and Juwayni’s accounts, it seems to me an intentional omission by Mustawfi. See L. J. Ward, ‘*Zafarnāmah* of Mustawfi’, doctoral dissertation (Manchester University, 1983), p. 17.


108. It is not clear whether Hülegü’s first choice for the Great Khanate was Qubilai at the beginning, but once the Golden Horde supported Ariq Böke, the Qubilai alternative seemed the most appropriate way to gain legitimacy for the establishment of a new khanate in Iran. See D. O. Morgan, *The Mongols* (Cambridge, MA, 1986; rev. edn 2007), p. 104.

109. The person who killed him was Asutai, one of Möngke Khan’s sons; see *JT*, I, p. 754/Successors, pp. 138–9.

110. Probably until around 661/1262–3 according to *JT*, I, p. 768/Successors, p. 150.


112. *JT*, I, pp. 767–9/Successors, pp. 150–1. Orghina seems to have remained loyal to Qubilai during the civil war and therefore is represented as the depositary of the legitimacy of the Chaghataid Khanate.

