Women in Mongol Iran

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Concluding Remarks

It is an inherent shortcoming of the profession that historians end up being at least partially inconclusive in their research and unavoidably biased in their conclusions. The chronological distance from the object of study and the challenges presented by the available source materials are commonly responsible for the generally allusive conclusions that medieval historians deliver at the end of their work. This study is not an exception and, unfortunately, is subject to similar, if not greater, challenges than other surveys on the role of medieval women in general, and on the Mongol Empire in particular. The general lack of archival documentation adds further complications to this enterprise, since the history of the Mongol Empire needs to be interpreted based mostly on ‘literary sources’, be they historical chronicles, hagiographies or travel accounts, to name a few of those used in this work. In addition, this particular research has had the added difficulty of dealing with not only sources produced mostly by the conquered peoples, but also the always elusive role of women in pre-modern societies. Despite these problems, it is hoped that this book has offered some insights into the status and role of women in the Mongol Empire through the two lines of analysis that have been presented. On the one hand, this book has examined female participation in politics, economy and religion, and, on the other, it has focused on the evolution, continuity and transformation of the role of the khātūns as they moved from their traditional Mongolian environment into an empire that brought them face to face with new cultures, religions and conceptions of the role of women.

That the role of women among the medieval Mongols was a prominent one can already be inferred from the fact that a woman existed in the Mongol origin myth, linking the divine with the human. This can be viewed as symbolic of a culture in which the role of women was highly significant and carefully considered. However, this high concept of the feminine in the Mongol understanding of the divine did not prevent medieval Mongolian society from being patriarchal and patrilineal in its social organisation, though it nevertheless prepared the ground for influential women to emerge
in different areas of society. In the last decades of the twelfth century, and up until 1206, women in Mongolia influenced the political balance of the Steppe. When their husbands died, they assumed control of the extended family, took control over property and, in their roles as mothers, wives or concubines, even acted as advisors to male leaders. This was the case, if we can trust the narrative in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, with the early life of Chinggis Khan, whose mother and chief wife are portrayed as the authors of key political decisions that in many ways guided the new ruler towards his supremacy over other Mongol tribes.

The exercising of such influence was not unique to Mongol women, being characteristic also of other medieval nomadic and semi-nomadic populations. Among the Saljuq Turks, for example, women actively intervened in political affairs to the extent that they provoked reactions from Persian statesmen and religious leaders, such as Nizam al-Mulk. Further east, in Asia, the (originally Manchurian) Khitan tribe that established the Liao dynasty of Northern China recorded that women had participated autonomously in politics since the tenth century, a tradition that continued up to the thirteenth century when they moved westwards into Central Asia. Providing precedents for the Mongol *khātūns*, these Eurasian elite women also advised their husbands and sons on political matters and interceded to protect dissident amirs, officials and religious leaders. However, when we examine how the role of women in politics evolved, some consistent differences between these populations emerge. The establishment of a long-standing female regency sets the Mongol Empire apart from other societies – such as the Saljuqs of Iran – as well as from pre-imperial Mongolia. The emergence of the ruling *khātūns* in the mid-thirteenth century (in the absence of any Mongolian model for women assuming power) needs to be contextualised within the Central Asian Qarakhitai dynasty, which had provided the institutional precedents allowing Mongol *khātūns* to go one step further from having an influential role in politics to becoming recognised as rulers of the empire (*Herrschaft*).

The institution of women’s regency among the Mongols reached its apogee in the 1240s when two women were appointed empress regents for the whole united Mongol Empire. One of them, Töregene Khatun, became the first woman to be recognised as ruler, to have authority over government and to even delegate some of this authority to other women such as her advisor Fatima Khatun. The period is also marked by the interesting figure of a ‘ruler from behind the scenes’ like Sorghaghtani Beki and her political manoeuvres to promote her son Möngke (r. 1251–9) to the Great Khanate in 1250s. During Möngke’s reign, the institution continued in those areas of the Mongol Empire where the nomadic lifestyle
was predominant. Among the territories of both the Chaghataid Khanate in Central Asia and the Golden Horde in Russia, women occupied the highest political positions for a while as rulers on behalf of their sons (for example, Orghina Khatun and Boraqchin Khatun). However, once the Mongols settled in Iran, female regency disappeared from the court and women returned to their earlier role in politics, still prominent but without the nominal recognition granted to rulers of the Ilkhanate. On the other hand, towards the south of the realm in areas such as Kerman and Shiraz, local subject dynasties did promote women to the throne.

As the Ilkhanate developed into the fourteenth century, there was a process of centralisation, which progressively increased the Mongol court’s involvement in the affairs of the provinces. This in turn led to the gradual removal of women from power in these areas, a process underpinned by the acculturation and Islamisation of the Mongols. Nevertheless, when the Ilkhanid dynasty imploded and divided after the death of Abu Saʿid in 1335, the internal fights for supremacy among the descendants of the Mongols triggered the phenomenon of female rule in Iran for the first time in eighty years of Mongol dominion over the Middle East. This occurred when, in 1339, Sati Beg was named ‘Sultana of Iran’ for a short period as a puppet ruler in the hands of one of the contenders to the throne. This episode can be seen as the exception that tests the rule of female kingship in the Ilkhanate. The promotion of a woman to the throne seems to have been, in this case, a final attempt to cleave to some ‘traditional’ nomadic values as the Mongols confronted their more acculturated strata of nobility in Iran. The evolution of women’s regency in the western parts of the Mongol Empire appears to have been the result of a negotiation between the nomadic viewpoint and that of a sedentary population reluctant to institutionalise female power. The course of this regency and of women’s political influence reflect, if only partially, a process of acculturation undergone by the Mongols in the Middle East.

Looking into the role of women in other aspects of Mongol society, such as the economy, helps to understand the prominent political role assumed by the khătûns in the empire. Without their economic autonomy and control over their properties, it is difficult to comprehend how women could have reached such high positions in the Mongol power structure. With this in mind, Chapter 4 investigated certain aspects of female economic activity among pre-imperial and imperial Mongol women. We have found that the institution of the ordo in nomadic society was vitally important to the khătûns in particular, and to the empire as a whole. We have discovered that the Mongol women belonging to the royal families had under their command the administration of these camps which con-
tained not only valuable objects and cattle but also people, all of which played a fundamental role in providing women with administrative, political and military support. The ordo appears to have existed before the rise of Chinggis Khan, but it was only after the Mongol expansion that the constant flow of properties, animals and people provided these camps with the opportunity to expand – like the empire itself – in size and wealth and to become such important economic units.

We have also seen that not every noble lady was allowed to control an ordo. This privilege was, in theory, granted to the chief wives of the Mongol princes who had given their husbands at least one son to continue the line of succession. However, this rule was not always adhered to and, as the empire grew and the Mongols became a minority within it – with a considerably decreased life expectancy and a lowered fertility rate – some women acquired ordos even when they were not able to provide a male child (for example, Doqz Khatun and Bulughan Khatun ‘Bozorg’, among others). Having established how women acquired an ordo, it is also important to assess how much autonomy they had over it. The sources stress the fact that these camps were given to the women by their male relatives – husbands or sons – and, after the death of a given ḳātūn, it was again the male members of the family who had the right to reallocate the vacant ordo to a new ḳātūn. This is an important point, since it is consistent with the patriarchal and patrilineal organisation of the Mongols. Nevertheless, once a woman had received one of these encampments, she was able to keep it for life, enjoying its economic usufruct and political influence for her own benefit.

Furthermore, the wealth of these ordos has also been examined, though there are not many references to this in the sources. Women participated in at least three spheres of the Mongol accumulation of wealth. First, together with the princes, generals and amirs, women had a share of the booty from the Mongol conquest of Eurasia. As the empire grew, they incorporated cattle, people and luxury goods into their ordos, which in due course became important economic units in their own right. Second, this accumulation of wealth attracted merchants from across Eurasia who participated in business ventures involving the female encampments and distant cities of the empire. Mongol policies favoured trade, which created for merchants and caravanners a secure environment in which to carry out their commercial transactions, paving the way for enterprises which spread from China to Europe and from Russia to India. Pertinently, this boom was not engineered solely by the merchants. Women participated not only as consumers of goods, but as investors in these empire-wide commercial transactions. Unfortunately, these adventures eventually provoked

Concluding Remarks
financial chaos, which rulers such as Möngke tried to control through tax reforms and measures to control the merchants in the 1250s. Third, when the Mongols settled in Iran, a new source of income became available: agriculture. The dual tax system imposed by the Mongols on Iran tried to maximise revenues. In this new way of acquiring resources, women were once again active participants. Some of the khātūns were allocated land, which they taxed directly, using their own officials as collectors. This system of revenue exaction reached the point of exhaustion, however, and, by the end of the thirteenth century, reforms were implemented to limit what could be exacted by the khātūns from the conquered lands.

Initially, those ordos that belonged to women had to be reassigned to other women after the chief khātūn had passed away. However, when we look at the evolution of this practice, we see certain similarities between it and the development of the institution of regency. Female rule declined as a result of acculturation and the centralisation carried out by Ghazan Khan, and in certain circumstances the transmission of khātūns’ wealth between women was interrupted by male members of the royal family, who redirected the resources towards themselves. This generally occurred in the context of political conflict between aspirants to the throne. The appropriation of women’s wealth by male rulers occurred at the highest level in Iran during the conflictive decade of the 1290s with Geikhatu, Baydu and Ghazan all vying for control of the Ilkhanate. Abundant evidence is provided, especially by Rashid al-Din, on the transmission of these ordos from one lady to another. As we have seen, the Persian historian tries to justify the appropriation of property by Ghazan by claiming that Abaqa had granted him some of the wealthy ordos of his wives. However, it seems that this is yet another counterfactual story used by Rashid al-Din to justify the deeds of Ghazan, who, together with his economic reforms, political centralisation in the provinces and appropriation of ordos, was trying to secure his political supremacy.

The prominent role of women in politics and their relative economic autonomy also gave them the tools to actively participate in religious affairs throughout the empire. The khātūns’ influence over matters of religion can be seen at both the social and the personal levels. Even before the empire, women played a role in the Mongol attitude towards religious authority; Börte interceding with Chinggis Khan to displace the great shaman Teb-Tengri is one example of a woman exercising influence over the general religious context of the empire. Once the empire had expanded and the Mongols came into contact with the variety of religions in Eurasia, women acted as protectors of religious leaders, favoured policies towards one or another religion and participated as mediators between the Mongols
Concluding Remarks

and potential allies in Europe or Tibet. They maintained, within their own camps, a multi-faith environment that emulated the general religious milieu of the thirteenth century.

However, there was also an important personal component in their relationships with religion. Chapter 5 has shown how women actively participated in religious rituals in pre-imperial Mongolia and that they might even have performed as shamans leading religious practices. The presence of certain faiths such as Nestorian Christianity and Buddhism in pre-imperial Mongolia meant that these two beliefs had some adherents among women before the conquest of Eurasia began. Therefore, it is not surprising to find references to women interacting with Christian priests and Buddhist monks from the very beginning of the empire. This personal involvement in religion is attested to in the different uluses of the Mongol Empire, where women had under their protection clerics who guided them in the practice of their faith. The next generation of women, born and raised in Iran and Russia, also incorporated Islam into their religious outlooks in ways which resembled the first generation’s attitude towards Christianity and the eastern faiths. However, it is difficult to assess from the available material that we have at the moment which Mongol women actually converted to Islam in the Middle East. The scant information that the sources provide allows us only to speculate that women might have followed the same pattern as that of their male counterparts: a slow but steady process of Islamisation stimulated by different channels of conversion that included interaction with charismatic Sufi shaykhs, the incorporation of Muslim men and women into the Mongol court and the growing presence of Islam within the ‘domestic sphere’ of women in the Ilkhanate. Finally, through their economic autonomy and political power, Mongol women played a role in patronising religious buildings and sacred scriptures across Eurasia. In Iran, it seems that they were following the established tradition of Saljuq women, which was also maintained in the subject dynasties of Fars, Kerman and Anatolia. The continual incorporation of those territories into the direct control of the Ilkhanate and the conversion of the Mongols to Islam led to Mongol women lending financial support to Islamic madrasas, mosques and Sufi leaders.

Most importantly, perhaps, this book has shown that the prominent role of women in the Mongol Empire was not due simply to the skills and activities of certain rare individuals, but rather that it was a general phenomenon. The role women played in politics, the economy and religion resulted from the traditional Mongol conception of womanhood being extrapolated into the context of world domination. And this role was not static, but was rather adapted to and modified according to the regions
where the Mongols settled. From their starting point as advisors to male chiefs in the Steppe, Mongol women would become regents and rulers of the empire; from being in charge of flocks and herds in the absence of their husbands, they would become possessors of considerable wealth, enjoying the freedom to practise their own religious beliefs whilst contributing to the religious policies of the empire. The amount of data that we have about these women in the sources is rather unbalanced. While, on the one hand, they are mentioned abundantly in the sources of the period, the information provided is generally elusive and incomplete. Yet, when their role ‘becomes visible’ in the written material, it serves to illustrate the fundamental role that women played in the rise, consolidation and fall of the Mongol Empire. It is hoped that this research will lead to a better understanding of their legacy and be a further step in the ‘unveiling’ of these khātūns, so that we may come to know not only more about them and their own history, but, through them, more about the history of the Mongol Empire as a whole.

Note

1. See the introductory discussion in Chapter 3 on Quade-Reutter’s four notions, where she defines Herrschaft as ‘rule’.