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## Women and Religion in the Mongol Empire

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# **Women and Religion in the Mongol Empire**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Honors Studies in History

By

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History

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## **Abstract**

Aspects of the Mongol Empire have been well studied in academia, but these analyses, like much of our recording and analysis of world history overall, have largely excluded women. This thesis seeks to contribute to the effort to restore women to Mongol history, focusing on how the relationship between Mongol women and religion impacted the development of the Mongol Empire and Eurasian religions during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With a focus on elite women due to the nature of the sources, I draw upon historical chronicles, traveler accounts, artwork, and contributions from scholars in this field to assert that Mongol women had significant influence on the development of both empire and religion. This influence is most notable in their personal, political, and patronage activities. In relation to religion, Mongol women sustained religions in the Mongol Empire through their personal religious practice and identification, their influence on those in power, their own role in administration, and through their financial support. In relation to empire, religious Mongol women aided the state in securing the support of subjects, in conducting relations with other states, and contributed to the Mongols' ability to establish stable rule of a diverse domain, all while keeping the favor of the God in the heavens. by contributing towards Mongol political religious policy. This paper opens up avenues for future research, inviting others to continue to reveal the impact of women during the Mongol Empire.

## Introduction

In 1206, tribal and clan chiefs in Central Asia assembled to declare a Mongol named Temujin as their leader, thus earning him the title Chinggis Khan.<sup>1</sup> Following this event, conquests undertaken by the Mongols and their allies soon solidified the creation of an empire that spanned most of Eurasia.<sup>2</sup> After Chinggis Khan's death in 1227, his empire dissolved into four khanates covering the regions of China, Central Asia, Iran, and the Golden Horde of Russia, which came to be ruled by Chinggis Khan's four sons and their descendants.<sup>3</sup> Women have already been shown to be an integral part of these events, although how their relationship with religion influenced this process has been given less attention.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to explore that relationship, seeking to contextualize and analyze it during the rise of the Mongol Empire, as well as its extension into the successor khanates. How did women among the Mongols interact with religion? How did this relationship impact the development of Eurasian religions? How did this relationship contribute to the development of the Mongol Empire overall? In pursuing these questions, this thesis makes a contribution towards the effort to uncover the impact of women on the making of the Mongol Empire, adding the additional element of religion in this analysis.

The scope of this paper is confined to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries for which there is more source material regarding women and religion. In addition, much of the source material is from the early Mongol Empire, as well as the Ilkhanate and the Yuan dynasty, leading to a larger focus on those areas. Due to the tendency of sources from this period to only record

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Jackson, "The Mongol age in Eastern Inner Asia," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia: The Chinggisid Age*, ed. By N. Di Cosmo, A. Frank, & P. Golden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Jackson, "The Mongol age in Eastern Inner Asia," 43.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran: the Khātūns, 1206-1335* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

the experiences of the highest classes of society, elite women will be the main focus of this paper. Lastly, a majority of these sources come from outsiders, meaning that the bias and nature of the content must be considered when drawing conclusions about the relationship between women and religion. With all of this taken into account, I do not attempt to make sweeping generalizations about Mongol women and religion, but to highlight those instances where their impacts were apparent. Through my research, I argue that women in the Mongol Empire interacted with religion in varied and distinct ways. These interactions, which took place in the personal realm, the political realm, and in the realm of patronage, had profound effects on the development of Eurasian religions and the Mongol Empire.

### **The Status of Women in Mongol Society**

The examination of the interaction between women and religion is especially interesting in the context of the Mongol Empire. Unlike the women of nearby sedentary societies who were secluded in the private sphere, Mongol women largely operated in the public sphere.<sup>5</sup> This was an integral aspect of Mongol life, seen in how it was still relevant even after Chinggis Khan's empire split into khanates. Ibn Battuta, the North African traveler, noted that both the royal and common women of the Golden Horde had "respect shown to [them]" and they were "visible" to anyone passing through the area.<sup>6</sup> This fact stands in stark contrast to the popular belief that women among the Mongols enjoyed little power over their lives due to the perceived

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<sup>5</sup> George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire* (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Battuta 'Abdallah, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta A.D. 1325-1354, Volume 2*, edited by H.A.R. Gibb, C. Defrémery, and B. R Sanguinetti (Cambridge England: Hakluyt Society, 1962), 146-147.

“masculine” nature of Mongol warfare and society.<sup>7</sup> This was a system that gave agency to women, although it must be emphasized that it benefited elite women the most.<sup>8</sup>

Mongol women held more authority and control over their lives as a result of the Mongolian nomadic lifestyle, where women could not afford to be secluded. Nomadic life in the steppes was not easy, involving intertribal warfare and the execution of many laborious tasks.<sup>9</sup> In this context, every member of the group was included in the tribe’s activities in order to ensure the group’s survival.<sup>10</sup> Women were raised to master riding on horseback, just like the men, and they even participated in warfare alongside other Mongols.<sup>11</sup> Chinggis Khan was well aware of the importance of women to ensuring a strong and stable Mongol society, having benefited from the influence and support of those women around him.<sup>12</sup> He asserted their importance by outlawing the sale and barter of women, protecting their place within the tribal system.<sup>13</sup> The work performed by women was therefore incredibly important to the family, clan, or tribe, requiring them to be active in the public sphere so they could complete these necessary tasks.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the responsibilities of steppe life were also gendered.<sup>15</sup> While traveling through the Mongol Empire from 1245-1247, The Franciscan Friar John of Plano Carpini noted that the men “[did] not make anything at all,” but hunted, practiced archery, and occasionally

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<sup>7</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Eiren Shea, *Mongol Court Dress, Identity Formation, and Global Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Morris Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” in *From Yuan to Modern China and Mongolia: The Writings of Morris Rossabi* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 327. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uark-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1877206>.

<sup>10</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 327.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission: Narratives and Letters of the Franciscan Missionaries in Mongolia and China in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 18; Bruno De Nicola, “Women’s Role and Participation in Warfare in the Mongol Empire,” in *Soldatinnen. Gewalt und Geschlecht Krieg vom Mittelalter bis Heute*, ed. by K. Klaus Latzel, S. Satjukow and F. Mausbach (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), 97.

<sup>12</sup> Bruno De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns: Aspects on the Role of Women in the Mongol Empire* (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2011), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued his Empire* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2010), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 228.



tended to herds of animals.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, the women “[made] everything,” and were tasked with loading the camels and driving the carts.<sup>17</sup> He even goes on to describe the women as “swift and energetic,” noting that they “shoot like the men,” a comment that highlights his European perspective on Mongol life.<sup>18</sup> Friar William of Rubruck was another European who wrote about the considerable tasks carried out by Mongol women, observing that they drove “twenty or thirty carts” when moving between camps.<sup>19</sup> One of the earliest known descriptions of the Chinggisid Mongols further confirms how certain tasks had a female nature to them.<sup>20</sup> A Song envoy to Mongol-held territory in Northern China described how women and children would accompany men on military campaigns, where they had the role of setting up the camp’s tents and unloading items from carts and animals.<sup>21</sup> This female task of camp maintenance was continued even when the Mongols were not at war.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, women’s work allowed the camp to run smoothly, enabling men to focus on hunting and fighting.<sup>23</sup>

Although women’s work was important to surviving nomadic life, their status in relation to other Mongol women determined their specific responsibilities and the amount of influence they had. This hierarchy of status among men and women was integral to steppe life and was largely determined by lineage and marriage, even after the implementation of Chinggis Khan’s merit-based social and military system.<sup>24</sup> The women who enjoyed the most status were the

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<sup>16</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Atwood, *The Rise of the Mongols: Five Chinese Sources* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021), 71.

<sup>21</sup> Atwood, *The Rise of the Mongols*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Frey Näf, “‘Compared with the Women the...Menfolk have little Business of their own’: Gender Division of Labour in the History of the Mongols,” in *The Role of Women in the Altaic World: Permanent International Altaistic Conference*, ed. by Veronika Veit, 44<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Walberberg, August 2001 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 71.

<sup>24</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 10.

wives of the ruling house, known as *khatuns* or “royal and aristocratic women.”<sup>25</sup> This category of elite women included those who were married to Mongol khans and nobles, whose wealth often meant they took multiple wives.<sup>26</sup>

Even with all of these women being from the upper class of Mongol society, there was another strict hierarchy among wives that was determined by marriage order.<sup>27</sup> The first wife was considered to be the “senior wife,” making her the most important.<sup>28</sup> This wife was tasked with managing the largest royal camp (or *ordo*), while a few of the junior wives that followed her controlled smaller camps.<sup>29</sup> After those wives, the remaining junior wives and concubines lived among these camps and answered to the women that ran them.<sup>30</sup> This hierarchy was reflected in the structures of the camps. Friar William noted that the senior wife’s tent was placed at the west end of the camp, with the tents of the other wives spaced out from her “according to their rank,” ending with the last wife’s at the far east end.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the senior wife asserted her status during ceremonies by her placement next to the khan on a raised platform, while the junior wives and other less noble Mongols would sit below them on the ground.<sup>32</sup>

The administration of the camps further reflected this hierarchy, as well as the importance of women to their functioning. The senior wives took on a managerial role when their husband was not present at the non-combatant camp, and they often accompanied their husbands on military campaigns in order to manage the traveling camp.<sup>33</sup> Ibn Battuta observed this in his

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<sup>25</sup> Bruno De Nicola, "Ruling from Tents: the Existence and Structure of Women's Ordos in Ilkhanid Iran," in *The Mongols and the History of Iran: Art, Literature and Culture from Early Islam to Qajar Persia*, ed. by R. Hillenbrand, A. Peacock and F. Abdullaeva (London: LB. Tauris, 2013), 127.

<sup>26</sup> Rossabi, "Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family," 330.

<sup>27</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> De Nicola, "Ruling from Tents," 128.

<sup>31</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 95.

<sup>32</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 19.

meeting with the senior wife of Özbek Khan, who was cleaning a tray of cherries while supervising numerous female servants who were also cleaning trays, indicating her position of oversight.<sup>34</sup> The presence of the imperial guard (*keshig*) in these camps, who were responsible for certain household tasks in addition to their military duties, lent even more management responsibilities to Chinggisid wives.<sup>35</sup> These guards had to answer to the wife in charge of the camp in order to complete their domestic tasks, seen in the case of Tangut Buda, a commander who answered to Chinggis Khan for military-related tasks and who also answered to Börte, Chinggis Khan's senior wife, for his domestic ones.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the wife supervised far beyond the camp commanders, and her management role involved oversight of the animals, clothing needs, and the domestic workforce.<sup>37</sup> Funding supported their management duties, seen in Ghazan Khan's decree to earmark funds for every *ordo*, which included money for "the ladies' board, provisions....for camels and pack horses, and for wages for maids, eunuchs, custodians, kitchen help, caravan drivers, muleteers, and other servants and retinue as necessary."<sup>38</sup> Left over funds would be set aside in the "lady's treasury," highlighting how the women in charge of these camps were able to use funds as necessary to run them.<sup>39</sup>

Despite these descriptions of how Mongol women enjoyed more status in comparison to women in sedentary societies at this time, Mongol women were not fully equal with men.<sup>40</sup> Mongol society was patrilineal, meaning that men were the primary owners of wealth.<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>34</sup> Ibn Battuta 'Abdallah, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, 487-488.

<sup>35</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Fadl Allah Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami 'u't-tawarikh: Compendium of Chronicles: A History of the Mongols*, 3 vols, trans. and annotated by Wheeler M. Thackston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1998-99), 746.

<sup>39</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami 'u't-tawarikh*, 746.

<sup>40</sup> Rossabi, "Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family," 329.

<sup>41</sup> De Nicola, "Ruling from Tents," 127.

theory, women were allowed to own property, but wealth and family holdings were typically passed onto the sons in an average Mongol family.<sup>42</sup> Rashid al-Din noted this custom in his description of Ilkhanate financial decisions, where Ghazan Khan endowed the *ordo* properties to “male offspring, not the females.”<sup>43</sup> Still, there was a degree of economic autonomy allowed to Mongol women, especially those of the elite class. These women often brought a dowry to their marriage, which was their own personal property that was later passed down to her children.<sup>44</sup> They were also entitled to gain control over their husband’s patrimony if widowed, allowing them to become an independent economic unit.<sup>45</sup>

More economic autonomy was allotted to women of the ruling house through their entitlement to the share of profits that emerged out of their *ordos*.<sup>46</sup> Such profits primarily came by way of partnerships between the ladies and merchants (*ortaq*), as well as from the products of the animal herds.<sup>47</sup> In being entitled to these economic advantages, elite women were able to use their status and resources to avoid certain limitations imposed on common Mongol women.<sup>48</sup> Levirate marriage, a common practice in Mongol society where a widowed woman would marry a junior member of the husband’s family in order to keep property within the lineage, was easier to avoid if you were an imperial woman who could provide for herself.<sup>49</sup> Sorqoqtani Beki, wife of Tolui Khan and mother of Möngke Khan, Khubilai Khan, Hülegü Khan, and Ariq Böke, was one such woman who was able to turn down a marriage proposal from Güyük Khan following

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<sup>42</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 329.

<sup>43</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 746.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous, *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, §43.

<sup>45</sup> Yoni Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj: The Biography of El Qutlugh Daughter of Abagha Ilkhan (r. 1265–82),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21, no. 3 (2011): 340.

<sup>46</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 745.

<sup>48</sup> Shea, *Mongol Court Dress*, 73.

<sup>49</sup> Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj,” 340.

the death of Tolui as a result of her background and resources.<sup>50</sup> With the expansion of the Mongol Empire, the economic position of elite women grew even more as they were given a share of the newly acquired wealth (or “booty”) from military campaigns.<sup>51</sup> This booty often involved captives, who were apportioned out to the male and female members of the royal family.<sup>52</sup> Chinggis Khan’s mother, Hö’elün, received 3,000 Oloqunu’ut subjects in 1206 from the spoils of battle.<sup>53</sup> The sheer amount of these individuals indicates the wide breadth of the female management role, and it further indicates their socioeconomic importance.

The motherly duties of Mongol women added more significance to their role in society, particularly in relation to the areas of succession and childrearing. The status of Chinggisid wives determined which of their children would be most likely to succeed the khan, with the children of the senior wife being the top candidates for to the throne.<sup>54</sup> This is reflected in Chinggis Khan’s decision to divide up his empire among the four sons from his senior wife, Börte.<sup>55</sup> In raising future rulers, mothers had the important task of educating their sons on Mongol values, norms, and morals.<sup>56</sup> Royal mothers taught their children to remain peaceful with each other and to direct their aggression towards outsiders, a critical lesson that helped to ensure the successful expansion of the Mongol Empire.<sup>57</sup> Sorqoqtani Beki took on such a role towards her children, grooming them to become effective rulers who “did not swerve one hair’s breath from the *yasa* and law of their ordinances.”<sup>58</sup> This educational role gained her respect as she was

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<sup>50</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 387.

<sup>51</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 745.

<sup>52</sup> De Nicola, “Ruling from Tents,” 128.

<sup>53</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 281.

<sup>54</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Anonymous, *Secret History*, §269.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert Franke, “Women under the Dynasties of Conquest,” in *China under Mongol Rule*, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 37.

<sup>57</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Alā’al-Dīn ‘Aṭa-Malik Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, trans. by J. A. Boyle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958); (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 244.

“never disobeyed” by her sons and others under her command due to her “good tactics and skill.”<sup>59</sup> Mongol women were thus integral to the transmission of Mongol cultural values and the continuation of the ruling line.<sup>60</sup>

Due to the economic resources available to these women and their notable social role as wives and mothers, they were often able to assert significant political influence.<sup>61</sup> Mongol *khatuns* and princesses were already included in the *quriltai*, which was a meeting of Mongol nobility that convened after the previous khan’s death in order to elect the next ruler of the Empire.<sup>62</sup> However, there were typically periods of regency in between khans due to deliberations and the length of time it took to assemble individuals across such a large Empire.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, there were a few instances where royal women became regents in order to prevent a power vacuum and the instability it would bring the empire.<sup>64</sup> One example of this can be found in the case of Töregene Khatun, wife to Ögedei Khan, who assumed the role of regent after the khan’s death so that “the business of the state might not be neglected nor the affairs of the commonwealth thrown into confusion.”<sup>65</sup> Her role as regent was affirmed due to the fact that she was “the mother of the princes who had a right to the khanate.”<sup>66</sup>

Even if an imperial lady was not a regent in name, she could still assert political influence. Töregene continued to have an important political role even after she installed her son Güyük Khan on the throne, emphasized in the Persian historian Juvaini’s statement: “Töregene Khatun still executed the decrees of the Empire although the Khanate was settled upon her

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<sup>59</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah’s Jami’u’t-tawarikh*, 386.

<sup>60</sup> Hend Gilli-Elewy, “On Women, Power, and Politics During the Last Phase of the Ilkhanate,” *Arabica* 59, no. 6 (2012): 720, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41727694>.

<sup>61</sup> Franke, “Women under the Dynasties of Conquest,” 37.

<sup>62</sup> Gilli-Elewy, “On Women, Power, and Politics,” 720.

<sup>63</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 329.

<sup>65</sup> Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 240.

<sup>66</sup> Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 240.

son.”<sup>67</sup> Mongol ladies were also involved in internal power struggles and their outcomes. With the help of the eldest Mongol prince Batu, Sorqoqtani convened a *quriltai* to promote her own son Möngke to become Grand Khan after Güyük’s death.<sup>68</sup> She succeeded in this endeavor due to her strong diplomatic skills, status, and connections.<sup>69</sup> They could also take on a more informal political role, serving as advisors to their husbands and sons on various issues.<sup>70</sup> Chinggis often consulted Hö’elün and Börte on matters concerning his rivals and his relationships with his allies.<sup>71</sup> Lastly, *khatuns* were an important part of the diplomatic system. Ambassadors and envoys were often received in the *ordos* of these ladies, signaling their both their social and political importance to the Mongols.<sup>72</sup> There are many examples of such interactions, seen, for instance, in how Friar Carpini met with Töregene separately from Güyük.<sup>73</sup> Töregene gave him a fox-skin cloak before he went on his journey, aiding the Mongols in their attempt to establish good relations with envoys.<sup>74</sup> Thus, women in the Mongol Empire enjoyed considerable influence and status, allowing them to have a significant impact on the realm in a variety of ways.

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<sup>67</sup> Juvaynī, *The History of the World-Conqueror*, 244.

<sup>68</sup> Fadl Allah Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, trans. by J. A. Boyle (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1971), 170.

<sup>69</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 223.

<sup>70</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 32.

<sup>73</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 69.

<sup>74</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 69.

## Religion in the Mongol Empire

Women also operated within the religious context of the Mongol Empire. The native religion of the Mongols has traditionally been described as “shamanism.”<sup>75</sup> This system involves a belief in the presence of numerous spirits that interact with the earthly world, and these spirits can be contacted with the intercession of a shaman or shamaness.<sup>76</sup> These spirits exist under the dome of “eternal heaven,” known as *tenggeri*, which has the power to protect and shape one’s destiny.<sup>77</sup> It has been debated whether *tenggeri* is conceived of as an abstract “God” or an empirical heaven, but the argument for the former is heavily based in Western conceptions of religion and there is far more textual evidence to support the latter.<sup>78</sup> In opposition to a moral heaven that promises a land of everlasting goodness often seen in monotheistic religions, the Mongol’s heaven was amoral.<sup>79</sup> This heaven was responsible for both the good and the bad, and people were treated unequally.<sup>80</sup>

Those who were treated the best by heaven were, of course, the Mongol royal family. The khan enjoyed the most favor of heaven as he hailed from a line of divine genealogy.<sup>81</sup> Chinggis Khan was the originator of this heavenly line, seen in the belief that he was born from a divine blue wolf.<sup>82</sup> To signify that they held the will of the Eternal Blue Sky, khans often wore an official medallion known as a *gergee*, visually asserting their divine status.<sup>83</sup> In having and expressing the favor of heaven, khans gained political legitimacy as they connected heaven and

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<sup>75</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 182.

<sup>76</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 182.

<sup>77</sup> Brian Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven: The Meaning of Tenggeri to the Government of the Pre-Buddhist Mongols,” *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 35 (2013): 247.

<sup>78</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 247.

<sup>79</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 246.

<sup>80</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 246

<sup>81</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 250.

<sup>82</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 201; Anonymous, *Secret History*, §1.

<sup>83</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 117.



earth under one government.<sup>84</sup> Their rule was validated by heavenly signs, and their divine nature gave them the power to control the destinies of others.<sup>85</sup> However, heaven's favor had to be maintained in order to ensure the continuation of this legitimacy. To show that the khan still possessed the blessings of heaven, prosperity had to be bestowed upon the Mongol nation.<sup>86</sup> Such prosperity required expansion beyond the Mongolian Plateau, motivating Chinggis and his allies to move beyond the steppe in search of other riches and luxuries.<sup>87</sup> In pursuing these conquests, the Mongol Empire began to form, increasing the possessions of the Mongols and their knowledge of the outside world.<sup>88</sup> The conquests thus affirmed the khan's divine nature as their success signaled divine goodwill.<sup>89</sup>

The traditional Mongol religion also included divination and ancestor worship. Divination involved religious rituals performed by male and female shamans that served to intercede with the spirit world.<sup>90</sup> In addition to other responsibilities of the shaman such as exorcism and the recitation of blessings, these divination rituals were the most important as they served to foretell the future of the tribe.<sup>91</sup> Even though the belief in *tenggeri* was important, this highlights how prayers and sacrifices were more commonly made to the spirits of the world rather than to "heaven."<sup>92</sup> Divination rituals were performed using sheep bones, and involved the ritual burning and interpretation of the cracks that formed in the bones.<sup>93</sup> William of Rubruck

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<sup>84</sup> Baumann, "By the Power of Eternal Heaven," 250.

<sup>85</sup> Baumann, "By the Power of Eternal Heaven," 250.

<sup>86</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 44.

<sup>87</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 44.

<sup>88</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 201.

<sup>89</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 201.

<sup>90</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 186.

<sup>91</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 186.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Jackson, "Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance: The Problems Confronting a Minister-Historian in Ilkhanid Iran," *Iran* 47 (2009): 113.

<sup>93</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 173.

observed these rites in his encounter with the Mongols, noting that the Mongols do nothing without consulting these bones first.<sup>94</sup>

Ancestor worship, or the veneration of Mongolian ancestors, occurred at the level of both the common people and the elite.<sup>95</sup> The average Mongol family would keep effigies of their ancestors in their yurts, called *ongghot*.<sup>96</sup> *Ongghot* were transported in special wagons under the supervision of shamans.<sup>97</sup> These important objects were honored by way of offerings and by kneeling in front of the effigies before drinking sessions.<sup>98</sup> Ancestor worship took place at a higher level as well, especially apparent in the veneration of Chinggis Khan.<sup>99</sup> This veneration manifested as the worshipping of the idols and images of the khan, and was upheld by his descendants, including Khubilai Khan who commissioned a portrait of Chinggis Khan in order to continue this tradition.<sup>100</sup> Beyond tradition, the worship of the founder of the Mongol Empire had a practical purpose as images of Chinggis Khan were thought to be invested with his *süld*, or his “vital energy and power.”<sup>101</sup> By viewing his portrait, Khubilai sought to connect with the *süld* and might of Chinggis Khan, giving him power and legitimacy in his role as Yuan Emperor.<sup>102</sup> Due to its deep ancestral meaning and power, the portrait could only be viewed by Yuan emperors.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 173.

<sup>95</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 184.

<sup>96</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 184.

<sup>97</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 184.

<sup>98</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 184.

<sup>99</sup> Uranchimeg Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan: Revisiting the Ancestral Connections,” in *Water Moon Reflections: Essays in Honor of Patricia Berger*, ed. by Ellen Huang, Nancy G. Lin, Michelle McCoy, and Michelle H. Wang (Berkeley: IEAS Publications, 2021), 42.

<sup>100</sup> Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan,” 36.

<sup>101</sup> Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan,” 38.

<sup>102</sup> Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan,” 42.

<sup>103</sup> Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan,” 53.

As indicated by the existence of male and female shamans, the native Mongol religion was foundationally based on the idea of gender balance. *Tenggeri*, associated with the sky and the mountains, was perceived as masculine.<sup>104</sup> Mutually coexisting alongside *tenggeri* was *itiigen* or “Mother Earth,” which was associated with the feminine element of water.<sup>105</sup> Both male and female spirits of the Mongol religion were allotted an equal amount of respect, demonstrated by Mongolian epic tales where women were depicted as having personalities equally as strong as their male counterparts.<sup>106</sup> The maintenance of this balance was incredibly important as it was thought to be necessary for society to achieve balance and success.<sup>107</sup> Chinggis Khan acknowledged this necessity, symbolized by his decision to form the Mongol Empire at the *quriltai* of 1206 at the Onon River near the base of the Burkhan Khaldun mountain.<sup>108</sup>

In academia, there has historically been the assumption that the religion of the Mongols was inherently “primitive” due to its basis in nature and “superstition.”<sup>109</sup> However, there has been a growing narrative that this system of belief is far from primitive, seen in how it consisted of institutionalized cults and individuals who perform religious rites with great skill.<sup>110</sup> There has also been the question of why the Mongols did not convert to the more “sophisticated” religions of the sedentary societies surrounding them before the expansion of their empire.<sup>111</sup> When examining this question closer, it becomes apparent that the Mongol religion was built to serve the social, cultural, and political needs of Mongol society, meaning there was no real need for

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<sup>104</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 17.

<sup>105</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 201.

<sup>106</sup> Julie Ann Stewart, “Wife, mother, shamaness, warrior woman: the role of women in Mongolian and Siberian epic tales,” *Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia* 5 (2002): 313.

<sup>107</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 21.

<sup>108</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 22.

<sup>109</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 244.

<sup>110</sup> Anatoly M. Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes,” *Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia* 1 (1994): 12.

<sup>111</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 12.

them to convert.<sup>112</sup> Various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries further limited the appeal and access of other religions to a majority of the Mongols during this period.<sup>113</sup>

However, this did not mean that these religions were nonexistent in the steppe. Turo-Mongol tribes such as the Kerait, Naiman, Ongut, and Merkit were converts to Nestorian Christianity, with the Kerait converting as early as 1007.<sup>114</sup> Beyond their proximity to Christianity, the Mongols were well connected to Chinese and western sedentary societies by way of trade, making them well aware of other traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, among others.<sup>115</sup> Upon the expansion of the Mongol Empire, the Mongols came into more direct contact with these faiths. Encounters with the religions of conquered populations now had more important implications, especially since the Mongols had to establish a governing policy towards these diverse domains.<sup>116</sup> One of the most important encounters occurred early on, seen in the fall of the Abbasid caliphate during the siege of Baghdad in 1258.<sup>117</sup> This event challenged the legitimacy of Sunni Islam, leading many in the Muslim community to view it as the “divine punishment of an erring Muslim community.”<sup>118</sup>

Still, despite the violence of their campaigns, the Mongols realized the most effective way to govern their domain was to take on a policy of religious tolerance towards the conquered peoples.<sup>119</sup> This decision, which was established as Mongol policy in the *yasa* of Chinggis Khan, was certainly politically motivated as choosing to not challenge a population’s religion increased

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<sup>112</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 12.

<sup>113</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 12.

<sup>114</sup> Erica Hunter, “The Conversion of the Kerait to Christianity in A.D. 1007,” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 22 (1989): 142.

<sup>115</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 263.

<sup>116</sup> De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns*, 190.

<sup>117</sup> Hunter, “The Conversion of the Kerait,” 146.

<sup>118</sup> Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance,” 110.

<sup>119</sup> Hunter, “The Conversion of the Kerait,” 146.

the chances that the population would not challenge Mongol rule.<sup>120</sup> Thus, a variety of faiths typically flourished under Mongol rule, seen in the example of the early Il-Khanate where Buddhist and Christian communities grew after the dominance of Islam was lessened.<sup>121</sup> Separate from this pragmatic approach to religion was a policy of religious favoritism, which the Mongols pursued in an effort to garner subject support, increase the blessings bestowed upon them, and shore up political legitimacy.<sup>122</sup> This was an element of Mongol religious policy established by Chinggis Khan, stemming from his granting of favors to certain religious communities or individuals on account of them proving themselves to be truly holy, making their prayers, which should include prayers for the khan, able to be received by Heaven.<sup>123</sup> Therefore, depending on the ruler and the sociopolitical context, certain religions received more benefits than others under Mongol rule, such as exemption from taxation and forced labor.<sup>124</sup> For example, Judaism was allowed to be practiced freely, but Jewish clergy rarely enjoyed state patronage or exemption from taxation.<sup>125</sup>

Therefore, the decision to maintain religious tolerance was also based in the desire of the Mongols to “keep the goodwill of whatever god was ruling in the heavens.”<sup>126</sup> In their effort to maintain heavenly favor, the Mongols were willing to court a variety of religions.<sup>127</sup> Abaqa Khan of the Ilkhanate demonstrated this through his visit to Sufi shrines and his attendance at a

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<sup>120</sup> De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns*, 191.

<sup>121</sup> Hunter, "The Conversion of the Kerait," 146.

<sup>122</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 209.

<sup>123</sup> Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty," 245.

<sup>124</sup> Christopher P. Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty: Religious Toleration as Political Theology in the Mongol World Empire of the Thirteenth Century," *International History Review* 26, no. 2 (2004): 250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2004.9641030>; Jackson, "Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance," 110.

<sup>125</sup> Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty," 247.

<sup>126</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 181.

<sup>127</sup> Reuven Amitai-Preiss, "Sufis and Shamans: Some Remarks on the Islamization of the Mongols in the Ilkhanate." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 1 (1999): 7.

Christian Easter service in an effort to gain divine aid.<sup>128</sup> State patronage was another important aspect of keeping the favor of God. Believing they all prayed to the same God that brought Chinggis Khan his victories, the Mongols focused on extending patronage to the four religions of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism in order to ensure their rule would continue to receive heavenly validation.<sup>129</sup> However, this largely excluded the support of religion in its institutionalized form in the early Mongol Empire as the Mongols knew the power that organized religion held in terms of its ability to incite politically destabilizing movements.<sup>130</sup> Tolerance was beneficial for economic reasons as well as it allowed merchants to have equal access to routes, regardless of their religion or nationality, enabling God's favor to bestow itself upon the Mongol nation through the riches that came from free trade.<sup>131</sup>

Amidst this tolerance, the Mongols did convert to other religions, although such conversions often occurred due to a number of different reasons.<sup>132</sup> On a scholarly level, there are arguments that the Mongols converted out of either political or personal reasons, with both views having adequate evidence.<sup>133</sup> This highlights the individual relationship the Mongols had with religion that varied by time and place as Mongols based their decisions off of the social context of the time. Politically, adopting other religions helped the Mongols in the realm of diplomacy. Taking on a religion different from one's enemy helped to ideologically differentiate themselves from their enemies, and it also facilitated the process of appealing to co-religionists in the fight against said enemy.<sup>134</sup> The Mongols undertook this strategy in their quest to ally with

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<sup>128</sup> Jackson, "Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance," 115.

<sup>129</sup> Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty," 252.

<sup>130</sup> De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns*, 191; Atwood, "Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty," 253.

<sup>131</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 78.

<sup>132</sup> Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies," 14.

<sup>133</sup> De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns*, 190-191.

<sup>134</sup> Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies," 21.

the Christian West, whose help they needed to defeat the Mamluks of Egypt.<sup>135</sup> They forged an alliance with the Armenians of Cilicia on the basis of their Christian sympathies and mutual desire to defeat the Mamluks, and the Armenians appealed to the rest of Europe on their behalf by claiming that figures such as Möngke Khan and Ghazan Khan had converted to Christianity.<sup>136</sup> While there is no actual evidence for these conversions, it is clear that the Mongols utilized religion in an effort to gain military aid in their war. This strategy did not succeed in convincing the papal court, but it certainly gained them Christian Armenian allies.<sup>137</sup>

The political relationship between the Mongols and religion becomes more complex when viewing the case of Ghazan Khan in the Ilkhanate, which highlights how Mongol religious policy was altered once the Empire disintegrated into khanates. Upon the division of the Empire, Mongol rulers had to reconcile their relationship with the conquered population as they came to rule over smaller areas, meaning religious policy transitioned from one of tolerance to one of adjustment.<sup>138</sup> Upon his adoption of Islam in 1295, Ghazan initially targeted Christians and Jews in the form of giving them *dhimmi* status, a change from the previous period.<sup>139</sup> As *dhimmi*, Christians and Jews had to wear emblems indicating their religious affiliation, pay poll taxes, and turn over certain buildings to Muslims.<sup>140</sup> However, these restrictions only lasted a few months, signaling that Ghazan only desired to even the playing field as Christians and Jews had enjoyed more status than Muslims at the Ilkhanate court in the period before his conversion.<sup>141</sup> This strategy, termed the “Chinggisid balancing-act,” highlights how the Mongols sought to maintain

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<sup>135</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 190.

<sup>136</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 192; Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance,” 118.

<sup>137</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 193.

<sup>138</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 27.

<sup>139</sup> Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance,” 118.

<sup>140</sup> Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance,” 117.

<sup>141</sup> Jackson, “Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance,” 118.

an overall sense of equity among their subjects.<sup>142</sup> This policy had both cultural and political consequences as it required periods of restrictive rule instead of consistent tolerance.<sup>143</sup>

The Mongols' personal relationship with religion also varied, seen in how they often did not convert "once and for all," but switched religions if they so desired.<sup>144</sup> Their open-minded attitude towards religion meant many were unafraid to try multiple, represented by Ghazan's successors.<sup>145</sup> Öljeitü, Ghazan's brother and the Ilkhan after Ghazan, was originally a Christian, then a Buddhist convert, and then a Muslim who teetered between the Hanafi and Shafi'i Sunni schools before finally transitioning to Shi'ism.<sup>146</sup> Switching religious traditions this many times in one lifetime points to the notion that not every conversion was politically motivated. He was also said to have been influenced in his conversions by certain individuals at court, such as *bakshis* (Buddhist scholars) and the Shi'i Muslim Taj al-Din Avaji.<sup>147</sup> Ghazan himself was also thought to have been personally influenced in his conversion to Islam by the conversion of Mongol elites and by moderate influential Sufis at the Ilkhanate court.<sup>148</sup>

In their relationship with religion, it is more accurate to characterize the Mongol conversions as a process of adaptation rather than adoption.<sup>149</sup> *Tenggerism* became interpreted and reinterpreted upon its contact with other religions throughout the Mongol expansion, but it was never completely left behind.<sup>150</sup> That is, despite their conversions, the Mongols were unable to fully leave behind their native religion, especially as it was so intimately connected to their

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<sup>142</sup> Jackson, "Mongol Khans and Religious Allegiance," 117.

<sup>143</sup> Amitai-Preiss, "Sufis and Shamans," 32.

<sup>144</sup> Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies," 15.

<sup>145</sup> A. Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, ed. by J.A. Boyle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 543.

<sup>146</sup> Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols," 543.

<sup>147</sup> Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols," 543.

<sup>148</sup> Amitai-Preiss, "Sufis and Shamans," 38.

<sup>149</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 200.

<sup>150</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 201.



nomadic way of life.<sup>151</sup> Successful conversion occurred when syncretism was achieved, allowing an “alien urban religion” to become nativized and thus accessible by the Turco-Mongol tribes.<sup>152</sup> Islam was successful in this way in that its less scripturalist and ritualistic strain was able to coexist with traditional Mongol beliefs, while Christianity failed to make the same strides since it required submission to far away ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>153</sup> However, Buddhist and Mongol beliefs were able to exist together, seen in the display of portraits meant for ancestor worship alongside Buddhist mandalas during the Yuan dynasty.<sup>154</sup>

Syncretism had political implications as well. The phenomenon of syncretism was politically useful in the sense that it allowed accommodation to the cultures and beliefs of the diverse areas that the Mongols governed, aiding the Mongol religious policies of tolerance and adjustment.<sup>155</sup> Further, the combination of multiple religious ideologies provided the ruler with more sources of political legitimacy.<sup>156</sup> Before the Mongols, Islamic rulers, specifically those who identified as Sunni, derived their legitimacy from their relationship to the caliph.<sup>157</sup> Upon the establishment of Islam as the Ilkhanate religion after the conversion of Ghazan, rulers were able to draw upon the two “most powerful notions of dynastic legitimacy,” Allah and the Mongol’s Eternal Heaven.<sup>158</sup> Traditional sources of Chinggisid political legitimacy were therefore still important alongside new ideologies. This was ensured by the continued adherence to Mongol policies as expressed in the *yasa*, which long survived in all of the Mongol successor

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<sup>151</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 14.

<sup>152</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 25.

<sup>153</sup> Khazanov, “The Spread of World Religions in Medieval Nomadic Societies,” 24.

<sup>154</sup> Tsultemin, “The Portrait of Chinggis Khaan,” 54.

<sup>155</sup> Baumann, “By the Power of Eternal Heaven,” 271.

<sup>156</sup> Brack, “Mediating Sacred Kingship,” 320.

<sup>157</sup> Peter Jackson, “Epilogue,” in *The Mongols and the Islamic World* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017), 389.

<sup>158</sup> Jackson, “Epilogue,” 385.

states.<sup>159</sup> This powerful combination is highlighted in one khan's issued diploma, where he justifies his decrees "in the name of Allah" and "by the strength of the Eternal Heaven."<sup>160</sup> Religion thus had a central role in the Mongol Empire, and its relationship to individuals had important consequences for both religion and empire.

## **Women and Religion**

Women in the Mongol Empire had varying and distinct relationships with religion. However, it must be remembered that the period's sources are largely limited to descriptions of Mongol women at the highest echelons of society, meaning the knowledge of the relationship between Mongol women and religion is restricted to only the elite.<sup>161</sup> This limited amount of information means that sweeping generalizations cannot be made about Mongol women and religion, and their relationships and influence vary by time, place, and individual. Regardless, these women were still able to have significant influence on the development of Eurasian religions and the Mongol Empire as a result of their high status and the economic independence that came with it.<sup>162</sup> The overall religious tolerance of Mongol rule also meant they could interact with and influence many different religions. This influence primarily occurred in the personal realm, the political realm, and in the realm of patronage.

Mongol women were often syncretic in their religious belief and practice, yet this did not make them any less devoted to religion. Their adherence to their faith, which included partaking in religious rituals and interacting with religious leaders, led them to protect and promote that

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<sup>159</sup> Brack, "Mediating Sacred Kingship," 8.

<sup>160</sup> Vasary, "Yasa and Shari'a," 78.

<sup>161</sup> De Nicola, *Unveiling the Khatuns*, 17.

<sup>162</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 340.

religion while influencing the religious outlook of those individuals close to them. Politically, religious Mongol ladies were influential in terms of what policies were implemented in relation to the governance of religious communities, which was critical for the support or non-support of those communities, as well as the survival or suppression of various religions in the Mongol Empire. They held incredibly important roles as diplomats, uniquely suited to form relationships with co-religionists from abroad. The Mongol Empire benefited from their diplomatic role in terms of being better equipped to forge alliances, establish contacts, and carry out negotiations with other states. Mongol ladies were actively involved in religious patronage as well. Those religions receiving female patronage benefited in that their religious activities were supported, allowing them to survive, and sometimes thrive, under Mongol rule. Female patronage also helped to assert the political legitimacy of the Mongols, and it served as a significant contribution to Mongol religious policy in terms of aiding in the governance of a diverse domain and helping to ensure the continuation of God's favor.

### *The Personal*

Mongol women had a manifold relationship with religion, each having their own unique approaches towards the rituals and figures involved.<sup>163</sup> Knowledge of female religious involvement varies by time and place due to what sources are available, and, although we can infer from their religious actions, little is known about their true religious beliefs due to the sources being largely accounts from outsiders.<sup>164</sup> Still, their personal religious involvement, which includes the personal promotion and protection of religion and influencing the religious views of others in power, had important effects on religion and empire.

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<sup>163</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 197.

<sup>164</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 198.

As discussed, the relationship between the Mongols and religion was often syncretic, and this extended to Mongol women as well. *Ordos*, managed by Mongol ladies, were accommodating for such syncretism, functioning as multi-faith spaces where various religious figures could be received and different rituals could take place.<sup>165</sup> Qutay Khatun, one of Möngke Khan's wives, was visited by William of Rubruck and a Christian monk in her *ordo* to receive healing for her sickness.<sup>166</sup> Although William of Rubruck called her a "pagan," which likely meant she followed the native Mongol religion, the monk had her "adore the cross," prayed over her, and had her drink a holy water concoction in an effort to revitalize her health.<sup>167</sup> She soon recovered, leading Möngke to allow William of Rubruck and the Christian monk to leave camp with the cross carried high on a lance.<sup>168</sup> The multi-faith nature of Qutay's *ordo* was reflected in its décor as well, where swords and a black stone likened to "sorcery" and "evil" by Rubruck shared space with a church chalice.<sup>169</sup> While it is not clear what Qutay's genuine religious beliefs were, this story highlights how Mongol women could be open to multiple religious practices, how orthodox religious figures viewed such syncretism, and how *khatun* interactions with religion could influence the views of their husbands.

Another important Mongol woman recorded as being syncretic was El Qutlugh Khatun. El Qutlugh, a Muslim Mongol lady, was the daughter of Abaqa Ilkhan.<sup>170</sup> She demonstrated syncretism in her combination of Islamic and Chinggisid beliefs and practices. She was recorded as having corresponded with the Mamluk Sultanate due to her desire to encourage peaceful

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<sup>165</sup> Bruno De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids? Mongol Women and Shaykhs in Ilkhanid Iran and Anatolia," *Iran Studies* 52 (2014): 145.

<sup>166</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 165.

<sup>167</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 165-167.

<sup>168</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 168.

<sup>169</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 169.

<sup>170</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 333.

relations between her Mongol family and her Mamluk co-religionists.<sup>171</sup> In this way, she subscribed to the Islamic ideal of peace between believers while also prioritizing and protecting her Mongol heritage.<sup>172</sup> Her combined Islamic and Mongol background also influenced her actions in other ways. After peace was secured with the Mamluks and official *hajj* caravans departed from Baghdad once again, El Qutlugh was the first of Chinggisid descendant to perform the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca.<sup>173</sup> Along this route, she hunted in the royal style, thus continuing the Mongol steppe tradition of using the royal hunt to communicate one's social status and political authority.<sup>174</sup> She also gave charity along the way in her completion of this pillar of Islam.<sup>175</sup> El Qutlugh therefore demonstrated her Islamic piety through religious ritual while simultaneously asserting her Mongol heritage. Other Mongol women were also recorded as going on *hajj* once Ilkhanate-Mamluk relations became peaceful, shown by artwork that depicts women in traditional Mongolian headdresses, or *boghtags*, undertaking the trip.<sup>176</sup> This was very different from other Islamic women who went on *hajj* at this time, particularly those elite Mamluk women whose *hajj* was one of the few times they appeared in public and was an event they used to assert their husband's wealth and piety.<sup>177</sup>

In the period's sources, other Mongol women were described in relation to one specific religion, although history makes it likely they had a syncretic aspect to their beliefs as well. Regardless, many Mongol ladies were recorded as having strong individual faiths. Nestorian Christianity was widespread among elite Mongol women. Sorqoqtani Beki, wife to Tolui Khan and mother to Möngke Khan, Hülegü Khan, Ariq Böke, and Khubilai Khan, was known to be a

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<sup>171</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 346.

<sup>172</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 347.

<sup>173</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 347.

<sup>174</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 350.

<sup>175</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 352.

<sup>176</sup> Hajj miniatures provided by Dr. Hammond from a personal correspondence with a colleague.

<sup>177</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 351.

Christian.<sup>178</sup> Her faith influenced personal decisions, seen in her decision to pardon individuals during the purge following Möngke's rise to power that served to eliminate his enemies.<sup>179</sup> While she initially took part in this purge, she began these pardons after she fell ill as she feared her sickness had been brought on by her role in the killings.<sup>180</sup> These pardons therefore served as an attempt to gain forgiveness from God.<sup>181</sup> Möngke Khan's wife Qutuqtay Khatun was another Mongol Christian who, while syncretic in terms of her visits to both Nestorian churches and Buddhist temples, was committed to the Christian community.<sup>182</sup> She stayed with the Christian priests present in the camp until she would climb "drunk...into a cart, while the priests sang and howled, and she went on her way."<sup>183</sup> She also had prior knowledge of and took part in religious ritual as noted by William of Rubruck, who described her participation in a church service where she followed the Nestorian custom of placing her forehead on the ground, touching the statues with her right hand, and raising that hand before entering the church.<sup>184</sup>

Christian beliefs are recorded among other Mongol women as well, especially in the case of the early Ilkhanate. The senior wife of Hülegü, the first Ilkhan, was Dokuz Khatun, who was lauded by Christians for her commitment to her faith, termed "the believing queen" by Bar Hebraeus.<sup>185</sup> This praise is further epitomized by Bar Hebraeus' statement that "great sorrow came to all Christians throughout the world" upon her death as she "made the Christian religion triumphant."<sup>186</sup> While it is unlikely that Christians everywhere mourned after her death, this

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<sup>178</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 109.

<sup>179</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 108.

<sup>180</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 109.

<sup>181</sup> Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 109.

<sup>182</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 161.

<sup>183</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 163.

<sup>184</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 161.

<sup>185</sup> Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj 1225–1286*, trans. by E. A. Wallis Budge, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1976), 444.

<sup>186</sup> Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj*, 444.

comment is a testament to her Christian piety and support of the religion. This religious dedication was apparent in her daily life as her *ordo* was described as a church, and she was often accompanied by Armenian and Syrian priests in her travels.<sup>187</sup> Rashid al-Din even links her to the reason that the Ilkhan Hülegü showed favor towards Christianity, particularly as a result of her wifely role.<sup>188</sup> During Hülegü's sack of Baghdad, Dokuz is credited with being the reason the Christian community did not experience as much damage and violence as other religions, noted as having requested immunity for them.<sup>189</sup> This was critical for the survival of Christianity through the initial violence of Mongol conquest, especially as other religious communities like Zoroastrians failed to survive the attack.<sup>190</sup> Hülegü's desire "to please [Dokuz]" also led him to build many churches, ensuring that the Nestorian and Jacobite churches thrived at this time as a result of her influence.<sup>191</sup>

Another wife of Hülegü, Qutui Khatun, also personally promoted Christianity. During a period of rivalry between Christianity and Islam in Azerbaijan, she traveled to Maragha to encourage the Christian community to revitalize the ritual of blessing water on the day of the Epiphany.<sup>192</sup> Bar Hebraeus links her intervention to the restoration of divine grace to the community, causing the cold to disappear and vegetation to grow again.<sup>193</sup> While the outcome of her intervention may be an exaggeration, this level of support from a powerful Christian Mongol woman likely aided the survival of Christianity in this region. Non-Mongol wives were also

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<sup>187</sup> Grigor of Akanc (Akner), *History of the Nation of the Archers*, ed. with an English translation and notes by Robert P. Blake and Richard N. Frye, *Harvard-Yenching Institute: Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 12, no. 3/4 (1949): 341.

<sup>188</sup> Rashid al-Din, *Rashiduddin Fazlullah's Jami'u't-tawarikh*, 963.

<sup>189</sup> Aptin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 60.

<sup>190</sup> Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross*, 55.

<sup>191</sup> James D. Ryan, "Christian Wives of Mongol Khans: Tartar Queens and Missionary Expectations in Asia," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 8, no. 3 (1998): 416/

<sup>192</sup> Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj*, 460.

<sup>193</sup> Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj*, 460.

Christian. Despina Khatun, the illegitimate daughter of the Byzantine emperor who married Abaqa Ilkhan, was an Eastern Orthodox Christian who was allowed to practice freely.<sup>194</sup> The religious beliefs of these women also influenced their roles as mothers, leading some Ilkhan wives to baptize their children as Christian as seen in the baptism of the Ilkhans Ahmad Tegüder and Öljeitü.<sup>195</sup> In addition to religious motivations, such baptisms could be politically motivated as Öljeitü's baptism under the name of "Nicholas" was also an attempt to win Christian support in the Mongol fight against the Mamluks.<sup>196</sup> Overall, the introduction of Christianity into the Mongol lineage through intermarriage and the presence of Christian wives was important for the representation of Christianity at an elite level, which further raised its status in the eyes of both Mongols and non-Mongols.<sup>197</sup>

Islam as a religion at the elite level became stronger in the later years of the Ilkhanate, as seen in the case of El Qutlugh. The adoption of Islam by the Ilkhanate in 1295 under Ghazan Khan was the result of a bottom-up process of Islamization in which women played an important role.<sup>198</sup> Tughan Khatun, another daughter of Abaqa Ilkhan and wife to the Amir Nawruz, is credited with facilitating the reconciliation of Nawruz and Ghazan in 1294 after they had a falling out.<sup>199</sup> To solidify this reconciliation, Ghazan is said to have promised to "adorn his sincere neck with the necklaces of the Islamic faith."<sup>200</sup> While this may not have been the event that caused Ghazan's conversion, as he likely did it to align with the majority and growing Islamic population, it points to how women were a part of the process of Islamization and helped to extend the religion to other converts. These converts could continue to promote the religion

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<sup>194</sup> Ryan, "Christian Wives of Mongol Khans," 416.

<sup>195</sup> Bausani, "Religion under the Mongols," 541.

<sup>196</sup> Ryan, "Christian Wives of Mongol Khans," 416.

<sup>197</sup> Hunter, "The Conversion of the Kerait," 148.

<sup>198</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 198.

<sup>199</sup> Charles Melville, "Padshāh-i Islam," 166.

<sup>200</sup> Melville, "Padshāh-i Islam," 166.



themselves, seen in Ghazan's decree that all Mongols and Uighurs had to adopt Islam.<sup>201</sup> Other significant Muslim Mongol ladies in the Ilkhanate following Ghazan's rule include Sati Beg, wife of the Ilkhan Abu Said and who was regent for a short time, and Kurdujin Khatun, a granddaughter of Hülegü.<sup>202</sup> These women were recorded as partaking in Sufi rituals, seen in their visits to the shrines of Sufi saints.<sup>203</sup>

Religiosity went beyond the Ilkhanate to the Yuan dynasty as well. Chabi, Khubilai Khan's senior and most beloved wife, was known to be a devout Tibetan Buddhist.<sup>204</sup> She gave her first son the Tibetan name of Dorji, and her second son, who had the Chinese name Chen-chin, was deeply interested in Buddhist doctrine, just "like his mother Chabi."<sup>205</sup> This points to how mothers could influence the faith of their children, thus continuing or at least promoting that religion in the Mongol lineage. Chabi had a great impact on the religious views of Khubilai as well.<sup>206</sup> She is thought to have promoted his learning in the teachings of Buddhism from Buddhist monks at the Yuan court like Hai-yün.<sup>207</sup> Khubilai's conversion to Tibetan Buddhism was also thought to be, at least partially, a result of Chabi's influence.<sup>208</sup> Converting to Buddhism was an act in line with the actions of other nomadic dynasties in China, and this form of Buddhism was the most alien to the Chinese, giving him a ideological tool that distinguished the ruler from the ruled.<sup>209</sup> However, due to his well-documented love for Chabi, her

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<sup>201</sup> Melville, "Padshāh-i Islam," 172.

<sup>202</sup> De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids," 153.

<sup>203</sup> De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids," 153.

<sup>204</sup> Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*, 238-239.

<sup>205</sup> Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times, 20th Anniversary Edition, With a New Preface*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 138.

<sup>206</sup> Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*, 16.

<sup>207</sup> Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*, 16.

<sup>208</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 200.

<sup>209</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 200.

commitment to Buddhism, and the presence of Chinggisid Buddhist monks in China, it is likely that his conversion had a personal element to it as well.<sup>210</sup>

Interactions with religious figures were another aspect of the personal relationship between Mongol women and religion. Elite Mongol women often attracted religious figures due to their political importance and economic independence, making them valuable sources of support.<sup>211</sup> Christian missionaries were one group that “targeted” Mongol Christian women due to their high position at court, although the role of female agency in this interaction must also be recognized.<sup>212</sup> These missionaries hoped to utilize Mongol female influence to initiate the conversion of Mongol khans, drawing upon the historical precedent of European holy women successfully converting pagan kings.<sup>213</sup> Once alerted of the prominence of Christian wives in the Ilkhanate by the Mongol envoy to the West, Nestorian monk Rabban Sauma, Pope Nicholas IV dispatched letters to the Christian wives of Arghun, who he urged to convert Ilkhan princes to the “true faith.”<sup>214</sup> These initial missionary efforts on behalf of the papal court eventually died off, and many Mongol women later converted to the Islamic faith of the majority Persian population.<sup>215</sup> Still, while it is unknown whether these women pursued an effort to convert the khans surrounding them, this interaction between Christian priests and elite Mongol women highlights the exalted status of Christianity in the Mongol Empire at this time and how efforts to proselytize included an important role for Christian Mongol women.

This leads us to the interactions between Islamic religious figures and Mongol women. Sufi shaykhs also recognized the importance of Muslim Mongol ladies as sources of support and

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<sup>210</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 200.

<sup>211</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 144.

<sup>212</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 415.

<sup>213</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 411.

<sup>214</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 418.

<sup>215</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 421.

as religious followers overall.<sup>216</sup> Sufi shaykhs were recorded as having close relationships with Mongol ladies, particularly in the Ilkhanate, serving as members of *ordos* and family mediators in addition to their religious roles.<sup>217</sup> These relationships occurred with both mainstream and outsider Sufis, seen in how the Sufi dervish ‘Abd al-Rahman situated himself within the class of noble Mongol ladies due to his personality and ability to perform tricks.<sup>218</sup> One of these ladies included the mother of Tegüder, which, as noted earlier, was a Christian, highlighting the syncretic nature of her practices and contacts.<sup>219</sup> Syncretism was apparent in other interactions between Sufis and Mongol women, emphasized in the case of Baghdad Khatun’s visit to Shaykh Safi al-Din alongside her husband, the Ilkhan Abu Said.<sup>220</sup> This shaykh refused to look at the unveiled Baghdad Khatun due to the scriptural Islamic belief that it was forbidden to look at the spouse of someone else.<sup>221</sup> Thus, even though Baghdad Khatun was a Muslim, this situation shows how her syncretic practice was sometimes at odds with the interpretation of Islam by other Muslims.

The mere recording of these relationships between Sufis and Mongol ladies has a political element to it, although these stories are also a testament to the commonality of these personal religious interactions. Hagiographies of Sufi saints that include anecdotes from the shaykh’s life, are the main source for information on Sufism from this period.<sup>222</sup> Such anecdotes include interactions with important individuals, such as elite men and women, in order to elevate the status of the shaykh and the Sufi order.<sup>223</sup> Mongol ladies were therefore one group mentioned

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<sup>216</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 153.

<sup>217</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 195.

<sup>218</sup> Amitai-Preiss, “Sufis and Shamans,” 30.

<sup>219</sup> Amitai-Preiss, “Sufis and Shamans,” 30.

<sup>220</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 152.

<sup>221</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 196.

<sup>222</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 150.

<sup>223</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 153.

in hagiographies, described as having a variety of interactions with shaykhs. In Safi al-Din's hagiography, Malikah Qutlugh, a daughter of Gaykhatu Ilkhan, was described as a follower of Shaykh Zahid Ibrahim, the spiritual master of Shaykh Safi al-Din.<sup>224</sup> She is said to have sent a message to the shaykh in the hands of a dervish to request relief from her state of misfortune, and the shaykh is said to have performed a miracle from afar to relieve her from this state.<sup>225</sup> While the validity of this interaction is unknown, it shows that personal interactions between shaykhs and Mongol ladies were common enough to be plausibly included in hagiographies. They further served as a way for hagiographers to connect shaykhs to the powerful Mongol dynasty, thus elevating their status. In this way, the high status and religion of Mongol women added prestige to Sufi certain orders, which likely had a positive impact on that order in terms of its growth and survival.

Although these are just a few examples from the highest echelons of Mongol society, Mongol women's personal religious views and actions were critical for the promotion and protection of religion, and often influenced the faith and actions of those around them.

### *The Political*

Another area where religious Mongol women operated was in the realm's domestic and foreign affairs, which had important impacts on religious communities under Mongol rule and the maintenance of that rule. Their political influence was largely personal, although it was institutionalized in those instances where women assumed political control. This is apparent in the domestic affairs of the empire in a variety of instances. Qutui Khatun was thought to have ruled behind the scenes under her son Tegüder, who had converted to Islam and only reigned for

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<sup>224</sup> De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids," 151.

<sup>225</sup> De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids," 152.

a short time in the Ilkhanate.<sup>226</sup> Due to her Christian background and control of the administration, she is believed to be the reason he undertook positive fiscal policies towards Christianity, which included freeing churches, priests, and monks from “taxation and imposts in every region.”<sup>227</sup> Laissez-faire fiscal policies such as this one likely aided the survival and expansion of Christianity at this time.

Mongol women’s involvement in religion and politics also included a continuation of the Mongol policy of religious tolerance, which allowed the Mongol Empire to secure a hold over its subjects. Qutui Khatun contributed to the maintenance of political stability in this way as well, undertaking policies that kept the Muslim community in close proximity to the Mongol court despite her Christian beliefs, allowing them to freely practice in order to ensure peace between this religious community and the Mongols.<sup>228</sup> Sorqoqtani, a Nestorian Christian, was another important figure that ensured this balance between religion and politics. Granted an appanage by Ögedei Khan, she prioritized religious and racial tolerance in her own governance of the land’s diverse people.<sup>229</sup> Like many other Mongols, she realized the importance of this leadership style in preventing the divisive nature of religion from arising, which would have created instability and challenged Mongol rule.<sup>230</sup> Her political methods had great influence on her sons in terms of ensuring their knowledge of and sympathy towards different religions, which they utilized when they went on to rule various parts of the Mongol Empire.<sup>231</sup> Her role in orchestrating the marriages of her sons to other diverse religious women, such as the Christian Dokuz Khatun and

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<sup>226</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 215.

<sup>227</sup> Hebraeus, *The Chronography of Gregory Abû'l-Faraj*, 467.

<sup>228</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 193.

<sup>229</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 242.

<sup>230</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 339.

<sup>231</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 339.

the Buddhist Chabi mentioned earlier, further helped to ensure this political policy was continued.<sup>232</sup>

The mere presence of religious Mongol women was important to garnering domestic support for Mongol rule. With the influx of the Mongols into Persia, non-Muslims were “culturally ‘demarginalized’” due to the lack of institutional support of Islam, and the presence of co-religionists among the Mongols, particularly the *khatuns*, motivated them to support Mongol rule.<sup>233</sup> These co-religionists included Dokuz Khatun and Despina Khatun, who served as protectors of Christians and gave them access to court, allowing them to take part in administration and assert their influence despite the growing Muslim population.<sup>234</sup> Other women interceded to aid co-religionists, seen in the case of Bulughan Khatun, chief wife of Ghazan Khan. As a Muslim woman, she personally influenced political affairs by interceding to protect other Muslims.<sup>235</sup> Her intercession to save Sadr al-Din Zanjani and Shaykh al-Mashayikh Mahmud from punishment for avoiding taxation and conspiracy against Rashid al-Din, respectively, were important actions taken to protect members of the Muslim community. These actions therefore ensured their continued support, and they also show her personal attachment to the community of Islam.<sup>236</sup>

Mongol women ensured cooperation with the religious communities of the realm in other ways as well. As an elite Christian woman, Dokuz Khatun was significant in gaining Christian support in the Ilkhanate Christian community. Following her death, the Ilkhans after Hülegü kept her *ordo* within those of the Christian faith in an effort to maintain the Christian alliances she

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<sup>232</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 339.

<sup>233</sup> Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross*, 79-86.

<sup>234</sup> Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross*, 63.

<sup>235</sup> Ann Lambton, “Women of the Ruling House,” in *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia: Aspects of Administrative, Economic, Social History in 11th-14th Century Persia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988), 290.

<sup>236</sup> Lambton, “Women of the Ruling House,” 290.

formed during her lifetime.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, even after her death, Dokuz continued to aid the Mongols in their effort to assert political legitimacy over Christians in Iran.<sup>238</sup> This was critical for khans like Öljeitü, who was Muslim and likely needed to maintain a level of Christian support, especially since he was recorded as not being particularly favorable to Christians during his rule.<sup>239</sup> Under the Yuan dynasty and the rule of Khubilai, Chabi ensured the maintenance of internal religious contacts and cooperation with Buddhist communities. One important contact was ‘Phags-pa lama, a Buddhist monk at the Yuan court who had a relationship with Chabi.<sup>240</sup> ‘Phags-pa lama and Khubilai had a dispute concerning where they held authority, which was resolved by Chabi as she helped them come to the conclusion that ‘Phags-pa lama would have precedence in matters of spirituality and Khubilai would have precedence in temporal matters.<sup>241</sup> This mediation ensured Khubilai’s favorable outlook on Buddhism, enabling cooperation between the Buddhist church and the Yuan dynasty, which garnered benefits for Tibetan Buddhism under Khubilai’s rule.<sup>242</sup>

Once again, religious Mongol women were significant in their diplomatic ability to connect with co-religionists, particularly those from abroad. The Mongols capitalized on this fact and connected their visitors to the women who shared their religion. For example, William of Rubruck was taken to “the dwelling that had belonged to one of [Möngke’s] wives,” who was the Christian Oghul Qaimish that had passed some years prior.<sup>243</sup> This again suggests that the *ordos* of Mongol *khatuns* held religious and political significance even after their death, and were likely useful tools of connection with outsiders. Mongol women also undertook diplomatic

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<sup>237</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 157.

<sup>238</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 157.

<sup>239</sup> Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross*, 71.

<sup>240</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 348.

<sup>241</sup> Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*, 41.

<sup>242</sup> Rossabi, “Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family,” 348.

<sup>243</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 154.

functions during their lifetime. The Christian Qutuqtay Khatun spent time with priests and monks from abroad, likely aiding the Mongols in forming positive connections with them.<sup>244</sup> Other female diplomatic duties included helping to build alliances with other states. In the context of growing missionary activity and increasing diplomatic contacts with the papal court, the Ilkhanate responded to a defeat by the Mamluks by seeking an alliance with the West.<sup>245</sup> Despite messages sent by several khans, the initiation of papal-sponsored contact and missionary activity did not occur until after Pope Nicholas IV had heard about the high positions of Christian wives at the Ilkhanate court.<sup>246</sup> This led him to send numerous letters to *khatuns*, urging them to convert Arghun Khan to Christianity.<sup>247</sup> While no alliance against the Mamluks came from these interactions, Ilkhanate Christian wives still served as important brokers between the Mongols and the West in this period as they motivated them to access the Mongol court, contributing to peaceful and more understanding relations between the two sides.

Thirty-five years after the papal court dispatched these letters to the East, the Mongols and the Mamluks finally achieved peace.<sup>248</sup> This development was, at least in part, due to the intervention of religious Mongol women. El Qutlugh has already been mentioned as having corresponded with the Mamluk Sultan during the Sultanate's dismal relations with the Ilkhanate. It is unlikely that her correspondence was espionage-related since she was a proud Chinggisid, seen in her rejection of a proposal from a Mamluk commander on account of him being inferior to her Chinggisid royal blood.<sup>249</sup> Instead, this communication is thought to have occurred due to her commitment to Islam and her wish to “advise faithfully the people of Muhammed” towards

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<sup>244</sup> Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 163.

<sup>245</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 413.

<sup>246</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 415.

<sup>247</sup> Ryan, “Christian Wives of Mongol Khans,” 417.

<sup>248</sup> Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj,” 344.

<sup>249</sup> Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj,” 344.



peace with the Ilkhanate.<sup>250</sup> There is no evidence that El Qutlugh was actively involved in the negotiations that led to peace between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Ilkhanate, but she was still an important member of the early “peace party” that likely expedited the process, especially on account of her influence as a fellow Muslim directly interacting with the Mamluks in order to bring benefits to both her co-religionists and Chinggisids in the Ilkhanate.<sup>251</sup> All of these actions point to how religious Mongol ladies supported and protected religious communities, as well as to how they served as important liaisons between these communities and the Mongols, which had political benefits for the Mongol Empire.

### *Patronage*

Being of Mongol heritage, elite women in the empire had enough independent economic resources and influence to be significant patrons of religion. Such patronage was not limited to one religion, and, as always, varied by individual, time, and place. Female patronage was typically a preexisting tradition in the regions the Mongol took over, so, in many instances, Mongol women were continuing the policies of those who were previously in power.<sup>252</sup> By being patrons of religion, Mongol ladies supported religious activities in the empire, which also had the effect of asserting the political legitimacy of the Mongols and buttressing the Mongol religious policy of tolerance, albeit with some favoritism, that allowed them to obtain the favor of both their subjects and the gods.

Female patronage in the history of the Mongol Empire can be found early on. Right before Ögedei’s death, Töregene Khatun was largely running the empire, seen in her issuing of

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<sup>250</sup> Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj,” 346.

<sup>251</sup> Brack, “A Mongol Princess Making Hajj,” 346.

<sup>252</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 146.

an edict in 1240 to authorize and protect the printing of the Daoist Canon that was already in progress.<sup>253</sup> This edict came during a time when Buddhists were increasingly hostile towards Daoists on account of them receiving more favors at Mongol court, which further highlights how the element of favoritism in Mongol religious policy was not always politically useful.<sup>254</sup> Töregene's edict thus served to ensure that no one would interfere with the printing of the Canon, stating that anyone who did would "be punished for his transgression."<sup>255</sup> This was a win for the Daoists as the reprinting of "such an authoritative and impressive body of Daoist scriptures" would have increased their prestige in the eyes of all in China.<sup>256</sup> Töregene patronized Daoism even when it was not politically convenient for her as well. Before she assumed control of the Empire's administration, she had donated a full set of Daoist scriptures to the leader of the Quanzhen sect in 1234, just as Lady Li, principal concubine of the Chin emperor Chang-tsung, had done twenty-seven years earlier.<sup>257</sup> In this way, she continued the female tradition of patronage already present in this part of the empire that helped to strengthen those religions, and she continued the Mongol policy of patronizing religions in order to gain support for their rule.

Sorqoqtani was another active patron of religion, and her approach is even more representative of the Mongol's political strategy of utilizing patronage to consolidate their power. In her rule over her own appanage of the Mongol Empire in China, she patronized a variety of religions.<sup>258</sup> Despite her Nestorian Christian background, Sorqoqtani was a patron of Buddhism and Daoism, which helped her to gain the favor of her Chinese subjects.<sup>259</sup> She

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<sup>253</sup> Igor de Rachewiltz, "Some Remarks on Töregene's Edict of 1240," *Papers in Far Eastern History* 25 (1981): 42.

<sup>254</sup> Rachewiltz, "Some Remarks on Töregene's Edict of 1240," 52.

<sup>255</sup> Rachewiltz, "Some Remarks on Töregene's Edict of 1240," 42.

<sup>256</sup> Rachewiltz, "Some Remarks on Töregene's Edict of 1240," 47.

<sup>257</sup> Rachewiltz, "Some Remarks on Töregene's Edict of 1240," 45.

<sup>258</sup> Rossabi, "Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family," 338.

<sup>259</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 240.

strongly patronized Islam as well, seen in her donations given to build a *madrassa* in Bukhara and to establish a *auqaf*, or religious endowment, for the Muslims of the villages surrounding Bukhara, and she also gave alms to poor Muslims.<sup>260</sup> In supporting a wide variety of religions under her rule, she ensured the continuance, and possible expansion, of religious activities while simultaneously contributing to Mongol religious policy, thus benefitting from the political value of religious tolerance.

The Yuan also benefited from the religious patronage of Mongol women. Chabi was a supporter of many religions, patronizing Islamic financial ministers, Buddhist monks, and Confucian scholars, thus aiding the Yuan in attempting to acquiesce the subjects under their rule.<sup>261</sup> One Islamic financial minister who was thought to be a receiver of Chabi's patronage was the Emir Ahmad Fanakati, who was close to Chabi before her marriage and became "in attendance at her *ordo*" upon her marriage to Khubilai.<sup>262</sup> Likely due to her patronage of him, he "acquired authority" and "became one of the great emirs."<sup>263</sup> Along with her efforts to uphold religious tolerance, she also operated in line with another element of traditional Mongol religious policy in terms of favoring one particular religion. Marco Polo describes how Buddhist activities in China required "enormous sums," and how the lamas "stood much higher than the priests of other creeds, living in the palace [of Khubilai] as if in their own house."<sup>264</sup> On account of Chabi and Khubilai's Buddhist backgrounds, this favoritism likely had a personal nature to it, although this favoritism may also be due to what sources are available.

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<sup>260</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 240.

<sup>261</sup> Rossabi, "Khubilai Khan and the Women in his Family," 351.

<sup>262</sup> Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 288.

<sup>263</sup> Rashid al-Din, *The Successors of Genghis Khan*, 288.

<sup>264</sup> Marco Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, The Venetian: Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East*, 2 vols, trans. by Sir Henry Yule (London, 1903), 319.

There are many instances of Chabi specifically supporting Buddhism. She gave ‘Phags-pa lama an expensive pearl he used to buy artifacts for Buddhist monasteries, and she funded the construction of Tibetan temples.<sup>265</sup> Her close relationship with the lamas comes to light through this patronage as the lamas conducted the Buddhist ritual of inserting *ts’ a-ts’ a* into the *suburgas* at the Peking palace garden “according to the Empress’ wish.”<sup>266</sup> And, although this may be a coincidence, her death coincided with the beginning of Khubilai’s persecution against other religions such as Islam and Judaism.<sup>267</sup> Despite these reversals after her death, the impacts she made during her lifetime were significant to supporting a variety of religious activities, and her influence on Khubilai may have been connected to the survival of those religious activities at that time and to his adherence to the Mongol policy of religious tolerance. Through all of this, Buddhist patronage appears to have been maintained as official Yuan policy. This can be seen in the existence of a Yuan dynasty mandala that was funded by Tugh Temür, great-grandson of Khubilai, and his wives, apparent from their portraits at the bottom of the mandala, thus highlighting how Mongol women continued traditions of religious patronage that benefited both religion and empire.<sup>268</sup>

In addition, the Ilkhanate had a number of Mongol women who took part in activities of religious patronage. Female financial patronage had already long been a tradition in Persia, seen in how Seljuq women supported Muslims through charitable acts and financed many religious buildings for the Muslim community.<sup>269</sup> Mongol women in the Ilkhanate therefore continued the tradition of female patronage, which helped the Mongols consolidate their rule. Dokuz Khatun,

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<sup>265</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 216.

<sup>266</sup> Polo, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo*, 319.

<sup>267</sup> Atwood, “Validation by Holiness or Sovereignty,” 251.

<sup>268</sup> *Vajrabhairava Mandala*, 1330-32, silk tapestry, 96 5/8 x 82 5/16 inches, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37614>.

<sup>269</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 146.

the Nestorian Christian, was an ardent patron of Christianity. As the wife of Tolui and later Hülegü, she acquired great social status and economic wealth, allowing her to be an influential patron of religion.<sup>270</sup> She and Hülegü are credited with commanding the Catholicus Makikha to build a church in Baghdad,<sup>271</sup> and a mural inside a Turkish church that was originally thought to be Helen and Constantine is now thought to depict Hülegü and Dokuz.<sup>272</sup> This development in the scholarly interpretation of the art is based on the adoration of Dokuz by local Christians, further signaling the impact of her patronage. Under her influence, the early Ilkhanate had more Christian buildings being financed than Islamic ones.<sup>273</sup> Marriage alliances brought in even more benefits for the Christians of Persia, especially the marriage of Despina Khatun to Abaqa Ilkhan. Upon her arrival, Despina is said to have founded a church in her *ordo*, providing a place of worship for Jacobite Christians at Abaqa's court.<sup>274</sup> As patrons, these women supported the activities of Christians by providing them with locations for their religious activities, critical for the survival of their religion and making the onset of Mongol rule more appealing to Christian subjects.

As Islamization picked up in Persia, aided by the marriage of Muslim women into the dynasty and by the growing number of Mongol converts, so too did Islamic patronage.<sup>275</sup> Abaqa Ilkhan also had a Muslim wife named Padshah Khatun from the province of Kerman at the periphery of the Ilkhanate.<sup>276</sup> It is believed that she funded the construction of the dome at a *madrassa* in Erzurum, and she continued her patronage when she returned to Kerman by ordering

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<sup>270</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 91.

<sup>271</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 214.

<sup>272</sup> Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, 243.

<sup>273</sup> De Nicola, "Patrons or Murids," 147.

<sup>274</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 215.

<sup>275</sup> Melville, "Padshāh-i Islam," 172.

<sup>276</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 219.

the construction of both mosques and *madrasas*.<sup>277</sup> Öljei Khatun, daughter of the Buddhist Arghun Ilkhan, was another patron of Islam who founded a Sufi *khanqah* on top of her father's grave.<sup>278</sup> While some saw this act as a violation of Mongol tradition as it revealed the grave's secret location, it once again highlights the syncretism that characterized the relationship between Mongol women and religion.<sup>279</sup> It is also an indicator that Sufis were gaining ground in the “‘competition’ for royal patronage” against other religions like Buddhism and Christianity in the Mongol Empire.<sup>280</sup>

Gaykhatu Ilkhan's daughter, Malikah Qutlugh, was also a patron of Sufism, recorded as sending gifts to the Shaykh Zahid Ibrahim in his hagiography.<sup>281</sup> Interestingly, he is said to have rejected them since he claimed they were of military, Turkish, and royal origin, making them impure.<sup>282</sup> This rejection was likely due to the views held by the author of the hagiography as the shaykh was later recorded as accepting an endowment from the Ilkhan Abu Said, but it does show that it was common for royal Mongol women to send gifts to shaykhs at this time, which aided shaykhs and Sufism in its functioning.<sup>283</sup> After the conversion of Ghazan Ilkhan in 1295, Islamic patronage activity in the Ilkhanate continued to increase. Bulughan Khatun, wife to Ghazan, had little record of patronage activity before 1295, but, following his conversion, she became a significant patron of Islam.<sup>284</sup> She is thought to have funded a sepulchre in an Erzurum *madrasa*, and she built a *khanqah* for Sufi dervishes in Baghdad.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 219.

<sup>278</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 148.

<sup>279</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 148.

<sup>280</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 148.

<sup>281</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 151.

<sup>282</sup> Judith Pfeiffer, “Reflections on a 'double rapprochement': conversion to Islam among the Mongol elite during the Ilkhanate,” in *Beyond the Legacy of Genghis Khan*, ed. by Linda Komaroff (Boston: BRILL, 2006). 379.

<sup>283</sup> Pfeiffer, “Reflections on a 'double rapprochement,’” 376.

<sup>284</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 149.

<sup>285</sup> De Nicola, “Patrons or Murids,” 149.

Aided by their economic and political status, women among the Mongols made important contributions in their pursuit of religious patronage. Their support, whether that be the construction of religious buildings or patronage of specific religious figures, was critical to the functioning of those religions and to the shaping of the religious landscape under Mongol rule. There was an extremely important political dimension to their work as well. Patronage of religion, particularly through the financing of religious buildings, was a way for the Mongols to assert their own political prestige to the common people. This was incredibly important for the Mongols, whose nomadic nature and consistent conquests meant physical expressions of their legitimacy were important to remind the sedentary population who was in charge.<sup>286</sup> Mongol women were integral to asserting this idea. Lastly, their overall religious patronage helped to solidify the support of their subjects and to obtain the favor of God, which was necessary for the continued stability and maintenance of Mongol rule.

## **Conclusion**

Following the peak of the Mongol Empire, the status and influence of women progressively deteriorated. Khubilai's daughters did not have near as much political influence as Chabi,<sup>287</sup> and the growing Islamization of the Ilkhanate and its eventual dissolution meant Islamic norms of female seclusion reigned once again.<sup>288</sup> By modern times, it became against social custom for Mongol women to take part in fighting and rituals, a reversal of the medieval status quo.<sup>289</sup> Despite this growing patriarchy and increasingly restrictive social expectations, the

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<sup>286</sup> Di Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran*, 211.

<sup>287</sup> Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times*, 252.

<sup>288</sup> Brack, "A Mongol Princess Making Hajj," 358.

<sup>289</sup> Stewart, "Wife, mother, shamaness, warrior woman," 319.

impacts made by Mongol women on religion and empire cannot be forgotten. Women in the Mongol Empire made significant contributions through their relationships to religion, particularly through their personal relationship to religion, their relationship with religion in the political realm, and through their religious patronage activities. In this, they supported and sustained religions in the Mongol Empire through their influence on the powerful individuals surrounding them, their personal activities, their role in administration, and through financial support. In turn, the Mongol Empire benefited greatly from their activities in terms of being better equipped to obtain the support of subjects, successfully conduct relations with other states, and to ensure stable rule over a diverse domain, all while keeping the favor of the God in the heavens. The relationship between religion and women in the Mongol Empire was thus an integral part of the development of both the Mongol Empire and Eurasian religions.



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