

AIGLE Denise,  
*The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History*

Leiden: Brill,  
 2014, 393 p. Maps, genealogical tables, and illustrations.  
 ISBN : 9789004277496

Scholars and students of the Mongol Empire must contend with a seemingly paradoxical reality, that the vast majority of the sources we have for one of the largest empires in the history of the world were written by individuals who were not Mongols themselves, but who came from different social, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Although this comes as no surprise to those who study the history of the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, nevertheless the full implications of this fact for how we understand the Mongols, as well as those whom they encountered, are not always fully appreciated. In *The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History*, Denise Aigle takes the problem of how we know what we know about the Mongols seriously, and endeavours to highlight the complex layers of interpretation of the past and transmission of historical writing about the Mongol Empire, and particularly the Mongols in Iran during the rule of the Ilkhanate (1258-1335). The book stands as a major contribution to our understanding of the production of knowledge about the Mongols, and a reminder that historical sources are produced by individuals who seek to render the past and present understandable in terms that are culturally familiar.

The book is divided into four thematic parts, each comprising between two and four chapters. There are thirteen chapters in total, in addition to an Introduction and an Epilogue. Nine of the chapters are expanded and updated versions of articles previously published elsewhere between 2000 and 2011. Yet, in their present forms, these revised chapters hold together to successfully integrate the main themes of the work. In other words, the chapters do not appear as a bricolage randomly assembled from Aigle's considerable body of publications, but rather represent a coherent attempt to highlight some of the underlying themes across her scholarship on the Ilkhanate and its relations with its Muslim and Christian subjects and neighbours. In what follows, I will offer an analytic summary of the thematic parts and the chapters of the book, and try to draw attention to some of the threads that run through the work as a whole.

Part 1, titled "The *Memoria* of the Mongols in Historical and Literary Sources," examines the ways

in which cultural expectations and the forms of history writing about the Mongols by the peoples they encountered shaped historical narrative. The first chapter, "Mythico-Legendary Figures and History between East and West," provides the theoretical framework for Aigle's discussions of the relationship between myth, memory, and history in Part 1, and throughout the entire book more generally. Here the focus is on how those who create historical narrative, whether chroniclers or other kinds of story-tellers, select from the available *memorabilia* of the past what becomes *memoranda*, or that which is worthy of being remembered and recorded. Aigle's argument is that cultural and literary frameworks often serve to inform the ways in which historical events are interpreted. For example, in Iran, the *Shāh-namā*'s presentation of the heroic deeds of pre-Islamic Iranian kings often served as a model for subsequent historians' or other writers' presentations of their own periods. The Ilkhanid period was particularly rich for the number of *Shāh-nāmas* produced, as well as for works inspired by Firdawsī's epic, including the *Shāh-nāma-yi Chingizī* of Kāshānī, and the *Zafar-nāma* of Qazvīnī. Such literary works could also serve to translate expressions of identity from other cultures, as was the case of early Islamic Turkic literature under the Qarakhanids in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Turkic "mirror for princes," *Kutadgu Bilig*, was clearly influenced by Firdawsī, adopting the meter and epic style of the *Shāh-nāma*. As Aigle points out, when the Qarakhanids called themselves Āl-i Afrāsiyāb (after the Turanian hero in the *Shāh-nāma*), they were expressing their Turkic identity, but defined in terms of Iranian culture. In addition, historians commonly applied their own religious and cultural patterns to interpret legends of origin. In the story of Chinggis Khan's origins in the *Secret History of the Mongols*, his ancestor Alan Qo'a became pregnant after being visited by a ray of light. Following the Ilkhanid conversion to Islam, Muslim authors would point out the similarities between Alan Qo'a and Maryam in the Quran. The strength of Aigle's analysis lies in the ways in which she demonstrates how the writing of history is always a product of the social and cultural realities of its authors, and that individuals create meaning at the intersection of historical events and cultural expectations about how the world works, including what they understand to have come before and what they anticipate will happen in the future.

The following three chapters in Part 1 all apply this framework to deal with questions of how historical narrative was shaped during the Mongol period. In Chapter 2, "The Mongols and the Legend of Prester John," Aigle shows how historical events in Inner Asia in the 12<sup>th</sup> century blended with the hopeful Latin

Christian belief in Europe that a Christian prince in the East would help defeat the Muslims in the Middle East. Here, eschatological expectations in the West, particularly following the fall of the Crusader stronghold in Edessa in 1144, led many to understand the Mongol invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as part of the fulfilment of the legend of Prester John at the end of days. Chapter 3, “The Historiographical Works of Barhebraeus in the Mongol Period” explores a different Christian perspective on the Mongols, this time from the Syriac community in Iran and the historian Barhebraeus. Aigle demonstrates how Barhebraeus’s familiarity with Islamic sources informed his writing of history, but also the ways in which communal audience shaped different narratives. Thus, his chronicle in Arabic, *Mukhtasar Ta’rikh al-Duwal*, conforms largely to an Islamic model of history writing, while the secular part of his Syriac chronicle, *Makt<sup>e</sup>bonout Zabne*, was composed mainly as a history of the Eastern Christians in the Ilkhanate. As such, it emphasizes the religious lessons in historical events, putting it, as Aigle writes, “halfway between hagiography and historiography.” Similar to the focus on form in history writing in Chapter 3, the following chapter, “The Historical *taqwīm* in Muslim East [sic]” considers the proliferation of histories in Arabic and Persian in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries that combined graphic representation with historical narrative. Such use of tables and illustrations were applied to a range of topics, including geography, personal names, chancellery practice, and genealogy. Particularly in the Mongol world, genealogy, presented graphically, served to give shape to the historical narrative, emphasizing lineage as the primary factor driving history.

Part 2, titled “Shamanism and History,” is comprised of three chapters, all exploring the encounter between Mongol and Muslim culture, and the ways in which non-Mongol authors have interpreted Mongol religion, origins, and law. Chapter 5, “Shamanism and Islam in Central Asia. Two Antinomic Religious Universes?,” examines the similarities and differences among Inner Asian shamanism and Islam. As Aigle points out, shamanism was not mentioned in Islamic heresiological literature, and was not even considered a religion by Muslim writers. Yet, Aigle identifies some points in common between shamanist and Muslim traditions, pointing out the parallel between the spirits of shamanism and the *jinn* in Islam, as well as the symbolic importance of animals in both traditions. Chapter 6, “The Transformation of a Myth of Origins, Genghis Khan and Timur,” considers two Arabic inscriptions in the Gūr-i Mīr, the tomb of Timur in Samarqand, which link Timur both to Alan Qo’ā, the ancestor of Chinggis Khan, and to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. In the presentation of Timur’s

legacy at his tomb, he is connected both to the Mongol shamanist tradition, and to Islam, as part of his depiction as an ideal Muslim. Chapter 7, “Mongol Law versus Islamic Law: Myth and Reality,” takes up the question of the *yasa*, and its relationship to the *sharī’a*. Aigle takes a long-term critical approach to Western scholarship on the *yasa*, tracing it back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the writings of Louis XIV’s interpreter of Arabic and Turkish, Pétis de la Croix, and down through the late twentieth century. Aigle shows how Western inquiry into the *yasa* has tended to rely on Muslim sources. However, when we look closely at the *Secret History of the Mongols*, we see that Mongol law consisted of *yasa* (*jasaq*), or imperial decrees, the authority of which resided with the ruler who proclaimed them, and *yosun*, or customary rules, which were more closely tied to shamanist tradition.

Part 3, “Conquering the World Protected by the Tenggeri,” consists of two chapters, dealing with the relations between the Mongols and the Latin West on one hand, and with the Ayyubid rulers of Syria on the other. Chapter 8, “From ‘Non-Negotiation’ to an Abortive Alliance. Thoughts on the Diplomatic Exchanges between the Mongols and the Latin West” traces the changes in the Mongols’ foreign policy with Latin Christendom, examining correspondences between Mongol khans and the popes and kings of France and England. While the earliest communications from the early Mongol rulers (Güyük, Oghul Ghaymish, Möngke) tended to demand unconditional submission in accordance with the mandate of Heaven, granting the Mongols dominion over the entire world, later Ilkhanid letters tend to leave the door open slightly for a possible alliance against the Mamluks. The proposed alliance never materialized, mainly because the Latin Christians mistrusted the Mongols, as well as their Muslim subjects and Nestorian allies, whom they saw as Christian heretics. Chapter 9, “Hülegü’s Letters to the Last Ayyubid Ruler of Syria. The Construction of a Model,” analyses the “letters” sent from Hülegü to the Ayyubid ruler of Damascus, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Yūsuf, following the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258. These letters, which became models for later scribes, reflected Mongol political ideology, i.e. the obligation of all people to submit, based on Heaven’s mandate. Aigle shows that “Eternal Heaven” in the Mongol context was rendered as “Allah” in Arabic translation in order to make the concept religiously and culturally familiar to the Ayyubid audience.

Part 4, “Mamluks and Ilkhans. The Quest of Legitimacy,” deals with the ways in which the question of legitimate political authority informed the conflict between the Ilkhans and the Mamluks, from the 1260s through the first decade of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Chapter 10, “Legitimizing a Low-Born, Regicide Monarch. Baybars and the Ilkhans,” explores the ways in which the Mamluk sultan Baybars dealt with the problem of his origins and rise to power, given that he was born a non-Muslim slave who killed the successor to the last Ayyubid sultan, as well as Sulṭān Quṭuz, whom he served at the Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt. In order to overcome these seemingly shameful events, Baybars strove to enhance his status as the defender and preserver of Islam against the Crusaders and the Mongols. He did this by restoring the Abbasid Caliphate in Cairo, having his own name recited in the *khuṭba* in Mecca and Jerusalem, and attempting to link his own rule to that of the earliest Arab Muslim conquerors in Syria by building domes over the tombs of Khālīd b. al-Walīd and Abū ‘Ubayda. Baybars, thus, created a “sacred topography,” taking Syria back from the Crusaders, and affirming its history and identity as Muslim territory, under his authority. Chapter 11, “The Written and the Spoken Word. Baybars and the Caliphal Investiture Ceremonies in Cairo,” examines Baybars’ enthronement ceremonies for the first two Abbasid caliphs in Cairo following the Mongol conquest of Baghdad. Aigle demonstrates how the investiture of the first caliph in 1261 was intended primarily for a domestic audience, and particularly to gain the support of the religious elite in Cairo. The ceremony for the second caliph the following year was designed mainly to help establish friendly relations with Berke Khān, the Muslim ruler of the Golden Horde, who had the potential to claim leadership of the entire Muslim community. Chapter 12, “Ghāzān Khān’s Invasions of Syria. Polemics on His Conversion to Islam and the Christian Troops in His Army,” analyzes two documents from the period of Ghāzān Khān’s campaigns in Syria. In the first document, the amnesty decree (*amān*) given to the people of Damascus, Ghāzān presents himself as the ideal Muslim ruler, the antithesis of the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, whose troops committed atrocities against the people of Mārdīn the previous summer. In the second document, a letter sent by Ghāzān with an embassy to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, Ghāzān criticized the Mamluk sultan again for crimes against the people of Mārdīn, using forms of address that implied al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was inferior to the Ilkhan. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad responded by criticizing Ghāzān’s use of Christian troops to attack Muslim lands. From the Mamluk perspective, Ghāzān’s claims to be a Muslim were insincere and hypocritical. Chapter 13, “A Religious Response to Ghazan Khan’s Invasions of Syria. The Three “Anti-Mongol” *fatwās* of Ibn Taymiyya,” examines three *fatwās* written by Ibn Taymiyya calling on Muslims to fight against the Ilkhans during the period of Ghāzān’s

campaigns there. Ibn Taymiyya maintained that the Mongols had to be fought, even though they were Muslims, because of their collusion with Christians and Shi’is, as well as with renegade Mamluks who had joined him. For Ibn Taymiyya, the major danger for the Mamluk regime was the Shi’i population of Syria who might potentially make a deal with the Ilkhans on their own terms. Taken together, the chapters in Part 4 illustrate not only how important questions of legitimate rulership were throughout the decades-long Ilkhanid-Mamluk conflict, but also that the criteria for legitimate rulership was in flux in this period. In the polemical duel between the Ilkhans and the Mamluk sultans following Ghāzān’s conversion to Islam, demonstrating that a ruler was a just, sincere, and ideologically upstanding Muslim became the ultimate rhetorical goal.

Finally, a particularly enlightening aspect of the book deserves attention. In a work that emphasizes the significance of translation and transmission of ideas across different languages and cultures, Aigle sheds light on the often-overlooked individuals who acted as translators and interpreters between the Mongols and their subjects. The Ilkhans employed many Eastern and Latin Christians in this capacity. Among the latter were many Italian merchants who were present in Tabriz and at the Ilkhanid court camp. Mongol embassies to Europe often included European Christians in the service of the khan, and Aigle highlights the careers of some of these individuals, including an Englishman named Richard the Notary, and an Italian merchant named Ugeto. What is fascinating are the ways in which such interpreters helped to render Mongol religious and political ideas familiar to foreign audiences. For example, Richard the Notary, in crafting Abaq Khan’s letter to Pope Gregory X, presented his father Hülegü Khan as having been a “new Moses” who came to destroy the “cursed race of the Saracens.” The European Christian used a number of religious arguments to try to convince the pope to join forces with the Ilkhans to fight the Mamluks. Thus, as Aigle shows, the encounter between the Mongols and the peoples of the Middle East and Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries involved an ongoing process whereby authors placed the Mongols into cultural frames of reference that, while not entirely historically accurate, facilitated the integration of the Mongols into their communities’ narratives about the past and the future. A good example was the idea of the “Last Emperor,” the ruler who would save his religious community at the end of time, which could be found in both Christian and Muslim sources. In Mamluk literature, Ibn al-Nafis presented Mamluk sultan Baybars as the Last Emperor. In addition, a Christian

text, known as *The Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, presented Hülegü as the Last Emperor, sent by God to save the Christians from Muslims.

*The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality* will challenge scholars and students of the history of the Mongols in the Middle East to not take lightly questions of authorship, translation, transmission, and interpretation of the historical record. The space between myth and reality in Aigle's final analysis is the historical record itself, one part fact, one part memory, and sifted through an array of cultural symbols and narratives. As the author shows clearly, any attempt to understand the history of the Mongol Empire without considering these complex issues of culture and memory is bound to reveal only part of the story.

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