De Nicola Bruno, Melville Charles (eds.)
The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran

Leiden, Boston: Brill
2016, 346 p. Maps and illustrations.
ISBN : 9789004311992

The study of the Mongols in the Middle East has branched out into many new and fascinating directions in the past few decades. In addition to fresh insights into aspects of military and political history, scholars of the Mongols have explored new avenues in intellectual history, patronage networks, and gender, as well as the Mongols' relations with various communities under their rule and in neighboring societies. Editors Bruno De Nicola and Charles Melville have brought together several strands of this recent scholarship in this collection of thirteen articles. In the Introduction, the editors frame this volume as a reassessment of issues of continuity and change in Iranian history twenty-five years after the publication of Ann K. S. Lambton's *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (1988). The contributions, many of which originated as papers presented at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES) in Barcelona in 2010, demonstrate how far the study of the Mongols in the Middle East has come since Lambton's monumental book.

The volume is divided into four parts: "The Mongol Conquest of the Middle East;" "Internal Actors: Politics, Economy and Religion;" "Culture and the Arts;" and "Relationships with Neighboring Actors." Charles Melville contributes a final article as Epilogue on the collapse of the Ilkhanate.

Timothy May and Reuven Amitai contribute articles on military matters in Part I. May addresses the question of how the Mongols were able to conquer such a vast empire, and lays out what he calls the "tsunami strategy," a process involving an initial devastating invasion, followed by a pulling back of forces from all but a small portion of the targeted region. The key to this strategy was the *tamma*, or troop unit stationed on the frontier following the conquest. The *tamma* units were separate from the regular Mongol army, and were composed of troops from various tribes and regions. Eventually the *tamma* forces would be replaced by a "civil" government and led by a *darughachi*, allowing the *tamma* force to advance into another region. May's description of the tsunami strategy thus sheds light on how the Mongols were able to conquer such large areas with relatively small numbers. The Mongol conquests were not sweeping and sudden, but incremental and gradual.

Amitai takes up the question of what degree the Ilkhanid army underwent significant transformation from the period of Hülegü to the fourteenth century. On this issue Amitai sees more continuity than change, offering a view somewhat contrary to those of scholars such as David Morgan and Arsenio Martinez. Amitai points out that the Mongols in Iran on the whole remained nomads, and thus we should not expect that their primary method of fighting, i.e. as lightly armed and armored mounted archers, should have drastically changed. He provides evidence from the Battle of Wādī al-Khaznadār against the Mamluks in 1299 to demonstrate that the Ilkhanid army was still essentially comprised of light cavalry at the turn of the fourteenth century.

Part II on "Internal Actors" deals with the social, economic, and religious relationships and ideologies that shaped Mongol rule after the conquests had ended. Esther Ravalde considers the role of the vizier in the Ilkhanate through an analysis of the career of Shams al-Dīn Juwaynī (d. 1284). Ravalde's main argument is that we must understand the vizier's role as dependent on his ability to call on patronage ties and act as a mediator between political interests and various social groups, and as less rooted in clear-cut, prescribed duties. For example, Juwaynī's investment in *khanqah*-s and *madrasa*-s, as well as economic infrastructure in Anatolia, illustrates the importance of patronage of the religious and commercial classes to help him make the Ilkhanid government run smoothly.

The role of Mongol women in the economic life of the empire is the subject of co-editor Bruno De Nicola's contribution. Elite *khatuns* in the early imperial period, such as Oghul Ghaymish and Sorqaqtani Beki, had close relationships with merchants, forming partnerships and acting as investors in and promoters of trade. De Nicola's focus on women's economic activities allows him to critically assess a common narrative in Persian sources which presents the period of Möngke Khan (r. 1251-1259) as a return to economic stability after a period of chaos. De Nicola suggests that in fact, the rule of the Ögedeyids, including the regencies of the women, can be seen as a golden age of the expansion of trade. A significant change occurred in the Ilkhanid period when taxes on women's estate property were no longer paid directly to their *ordo* (household-camp), but were collected and managed by financial officials, a development that contributed to corruption. Ghazan Khan's reforms after 1295 further limited women's economic freedom by placing their resources under the control of the central divan and its administrators.

In the final article on "Internal Actors," Florence Hodous considers the influence of various religious

BCAI 33 (2019) De Nicola Bruno, Melville Charles (eds.): The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran, recensé par Patrick Wing
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

traditions, including Shamanism, Islam, Confucianism and Buddhism, on capital punishment in the Ilkhanate. Shamanist belief in the existence of a universal life force in the blood meant that the loss of blood at execution impeded the continuation of a person's spirit as an "ancestor" after death. Thus, executions for elite Mongols included non-bloody techniques, such as breaking the back, trampling, or strangulation. Such executions continued after the Ilkhanate's conversion to Islam, and were combined with punishments proscribed by the Quran, such as crucifixion. According to Hodous, the use of these punishments is more a reflection of the Mongols' "flexibility" than a religious commitment to Islamic punishments. The Mongols also granted amnesty from execution, which Hodous describes as rooted in Confucian and Buddhist tradition. Hodous points out that Buddhist belief about the effectiveness of intervention in the form of amnesties to influence the spirit world also aligned with Shamanist belief.

Part III of the volume is dedicated to "Culture and the Arts," and begins with Michal Biran's examination of the experiences of the musician and all around polymath Ṣafī al-Dīn Urmawī (d. 1294), during the Mongol conquest of Baghdad. Through an analysis of Urmawī's account that has come down to us in 'Umarī's *Masālik al-Abṣār*, Biran is able to reach several important conclusions. One is that Urmawī's account of the conquest suggests that the Mongol forces were highly organized and disciplined, and that the campaign in Baghdad was not "a sudden outburst of barbarism" (p. 140). Biran also traces Urmawī's career in the years after 1258 and demonstrates that Abbasid musical culture continued to thrive and spread under the Mongols, and in this respect the Mongol period was far from one of cultural decline.

Judith Kolbas examines 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik Juwaynī's history *Tārīkh-i Jahān-gushā* from a literary perspective. Kolbas argues that Juwaynī's text suggests several phases of composition and revision, which correspond to the author's own coming to terms with the significance of the Mongols' conquest and rule in Iran. A close examination reveals that Juwaynī's history moves between presenting a negative image of the Mongols and the destruction they brought on the one hand, and an acceptance and even admiration for the positive aspects of their rule on the other. Ultimately, Juwaynī sought to present the Mongol conquests in terms of established Persian literary forms in order to explain the new political order to an elite Persian-speaking audience.

In the realm of the visual arts, Karin Rührdanz considers several paintings found in the well-known Diez albums, which originated in workshop albums in Istanbul, and aims to challenge the notion that the fourteenth century witnessed a narrowing of literary forms considered suitable for illustration. Rührdanz argues that in addition to commonly illustrated works such as the *Shāhnāma* and *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, popular romances, often featuring characters Rührdanz identifies as *'ayyār*-s, were also subjects for painters. These romances shared a feature with the *Shāhnāma* and *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, namely their function as advice to the Mongols on wise rule and proper behavior. Rührdanz suggests that the disappearance of popular literature, including prose romances, by the fifteenth century may be connected to the growing influence of Sufism on elite culture.

Part IV is dedicated to "Relationships with Neighboring Actors," and examines the Mongols' interactions with Persians, Armenians, Chinese, and Kurdish communities within their empire and at its frontiers. Aptin Khanbaghi considers the role of the Mongol period in the development of Persian language and culture. He emphasizes that when the Mongols arrived in Iran, Persian had been supported for three centuries by Turkic nomadic rulers, including the Ghaznavids and Saljuqs. When the Mongols arrived, they drove many Persian speakers westward into Anatolia to areas that had long been part of the Persian world. The Mongol conquests and rule helped to blur the lines between Anatolia and Iran, and contributed to the Ottomans' adoption of Persian literary culture.

Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog traces the history of the Armenian lands under the Mongols, highlighting the importance of military commanders appointed by the Great Qaghan, as well as *darughachi* officials to the administration in Armenia. The *darughachi*-s were responsible for conducting the census and collecting taxes. The tax on commercial transactions known as *tamgha* was particularly significant for Armenian cities such as Erzurum, Berkri, and Khoi, which were all connected to the wider world by caravan routes.

George Lane provides a history of the Persian community in Hangzhou, China under the Mongols through an examination of their main religious building, known as the Phoenix Mosque or Temple. The mosque was built in 1281 by a wealthy Persian merchant named 'Ala' al-Dīn, who had helped to finance Qubilay's campaigns in China. In return, he and his family were granted government posts, land, and property. The Phoenix Mosque became the center of the Hangzhou Persian community, which, as Lane demonstrates, became very influential and prosperous under the Yuan dynasty.

Part IV is rounded out by Boris James's article on the largely Kurdish region between the Ilkhanate and Mamluk Sultanate he describes as the "Kurdish

BCAI 33 (2019) De Nicola Bruno, Melville Charles (eds.): The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran, recensé par Patrick Wing
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

zone," and the different policies each empire took with regard to the Kurds. James demonstrates that while the Mongols sought to incorporate influential and/or troublesome chiefs, the Mamluks attempted to deal with the Kurds "as a people." Part of the Mamluk policy was to co-opt leadership over all the Kurds, and mobilize them under the banner of Islam against the Mongols. James argues that these developments contributed to the institutionalization and persistence of the Kurds as a distinct people.

The volume's Epilogue is provided by co-editor Charles Melville, who takes up the question of why the Ilkhanate collapsed in 1335. As Melville points out, the usual explanation for the fall of the Ilkhanate is that Abu Sa'id died without a male heir. Yet, this seems like an inadequate explanation, given that there were many other Chinggisids around who might have provided a focus for the state. Melville's argument is that the Mongol elites were not fully committed to the cultural changes that were taking place in the fourteenth century, including the adoption of Persian and Islamic institutions and culture. For many Mongols, it seemed that respect for their past and traditions were being eroded, and that government reforms had been aimed at taking away their own privileged position and economic gains made through conquest. Thus, when the crisis came in 1335, there was less commitment on the part of the powerful *noyan*-s to the dynasty than there was to their own personal interests. As Melville puts it, "the regime was neither one thing nor the other, and... old loyalties were being undermined but had not yet been replaced by new ones" (p. 321).

Although the subjects of the contributions vary widely, there are some themes that make appearances in multiple articles. For example, Ravalde, Biran, and Kolbas each deal with one or more of the Juwaynī brothers, Shams al-Dīn and 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Aṭā Malik, who had such an enormous influence on government and history writing in the Ilkhanate. In addition, Ravalde, De Nicola, Dashdondog, and James all address issues around taxation from various perspectives. Overall, the editors should be commended for bringing together such a rich variety of important contributions to the history of the Mongols. The Mongols' Middle East illustrates the wide range of approaches and modes of inquiry among scholars of the Ilkhan period, and the general vitality of the field.

Patrick Wing
University of Redlands

BCAI 33 (2019) De Nicola Bruno, Melville Charles (eds.): The Mongols' Middle East: Continuity and Transformation in Ilkhanid Iran, recensé par Patrick Wing
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net