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The Jalayirids. Dynastic State Formation in the Mongol Middle East

Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, xii, 229 p.

ISBN (hardback) 9781474402255

open access at

<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-the-jalayirids.html>

The Jalayirids are one of the lesser dynasties which arose in post-Mongol Iran after the demise of Abū Sa'īd Khan (d. 1335). Bosworth lists eleven rulers, spread over 92 years (1340-1432) (C.E. Bosworth, *The New Islamic Dynasties*, Edinburgh 1996, p. 267). This dynasty has not been the subject of a scholarly monograph before, and in general the period between the end of the Ilkhanids and the rise of Timur is only rarely in the focus of research; Patrick Wing therefore fills an important gap in the scholarly literature.

The Jalayirids ruled over much of what is today Iraq, but also parts of eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan (after they had defeated the Chobanids, another dynasty with a very similar profile). Even though Timur repeatedly defeated them, he did not succeed in putting an end to their rule; they did not fall to the Timurids, either, but to the Turkmen Qara Qoyunlu in the early 15th century.

The complex situation which prevailed in Iran in the 14th century before Timur's rise to power well deserves scholarly attention: in a situation where there is no imperial power, local and regional actors come to the fore more easily. The 14th century in particular offers itself well to the study of a number of questions: What was the military basis of attempts at (dynastic) state formation, and which economic resources had to be in hand for such attempts to be successful? Which strategies and arguments were available to legitimise power? And how did regional and local actors react to imperial projects? The book under review deals in an inspiring way with a number of these questions.

The book comprises an introduction with an overview over the sources and eight more chapters. They could be divided into two large parts, although the author himself does not do so: one on the pre-history of the Jalayir (a Mongol group or tribe) and another one on the history of the dynasty properly speaking.

The first part, roughly chapters 2 and 3, are marked by the use of the concept of "tribe" and "tribalism". The author briefly discusses the positions taken by David Sneath in *The Headless State* (published in 2007); this book has provoked a long

and heated debate which is far from finished (for an update until roughly 2013 see Sneath's rejoinder "Aymag, uyimaq and baylik: Re-examining Notions of the Nomadic Tribe and State", in Jürgen Paul (ed.), *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires*, Wiesbaden 2013, 161-85). Wing opts for a mildly positive stand: Sneath's thesis that "the names of the Mongol tribes, found in sources like the *Secret History of the Mongols*, described individuals' identities within a complex political hierarchy is useful" (p. 30). I am not sure whether Sneath would underwrite this summary of one of his major points (namely that the names scholars have taken to be names of "tribes" have nothing to do with "tribes"), and I am not sure what exactly the author means by "individuals' identities within a complex political hierarchy", but it seems clear enough that he takes the quoted names, and "Jalayir" among them, to be names for tribes. Tribes in Inner Asia, he has stated earlier, "are conceived of by their members as describing kinship relations", real or imagined (p. 29). And because he is convinced that Mongol societies were tribal, he objects to Sneath: "It would, however, be a mistake to completely discount kinship as a significant feature of tribal society" (p. 30). Sneath does not do that, however: it is quite clear to him (and to every historian of pre-modern societies worldwide) that kinship matters, and is indeed of utmost importance in an aristocratic context. Aristocratic families may deny any blood-tie with their inferiors, but they are extremely wary of their own kinship relations, and even where commoners barely know their grandparents, aristocrats may be able to trace their genealogies over many centuries. One of the major differences between a "tribalist" and an "aristocratic" view of pre-modern Inner Asian societies thus is that the former holds that there are relations of kinship between leading families and their followers whereas the latter would reject this and instead posit that these relations are hierarchical and political and in no way construed in terms of kinship. It is hard to imagine a compromise between these two views. But this compromise seems to be what Wing is working for in his theoretical introduction.

What does the concept of "tribe" and "tribalism" achieve in the book? The author thinks that the Jalayirid dynasty in post-Mongol Iran was founded by "descendants of the Jalayir tribe" (p. 35). How does that look in the historical narrative? For the first generation of Jalayir men in the Mongol Empire, he states that "[t]he Jalayir tribe, while continuing as a family identity, did not remain a coherent political category" (p. 39-40). I am inclined to understand this as meaning that there were families who identified themselves as Jalayir, but that "Jalayir" was no politically or socially relevant common denominator for

these families. On the following pages, Wing gives a useful outline of who was known as a Jalayir in the early Mongol empire, but indeed nothing indicates that this was of any importance. And when he states that “[i]ndividuals maintained their tribal identities and memories of their genealogies that traced the ties of kinship that went back many generations” (p. 43), one would like to see even a tiny fragment of such a genealogy, or a hint in any narrative or other source that there were such genealogies, written down or remembered otherwise – but it is well known that in the case of the Jalayir as well as in other cases, there are no such fragments and no such indications.

Chapter 3, on “the Jalayirs and the early Ilkhanate”, gives the biography of some important men who are identified as Jalayir in the sources. They owed their prominent position to their close association with Hülegü (and later his descendants) and not to their descent from any real or imagined tribal group; therefore it is no surprise that we do not learn anything about their ancestors as Wing makes clear himself. There is nothing to explain what makes these figures “tribal”: we are not told how they recruited their followers, for instance, and whether they were in conflict with the decimal system of the Chinggisid army. When in later periods conflicts arose within the ruling stratum of the Ilkhanate, he states that “[c]onflict occurred not between tribes, but between supporters of different royal princes” (p. 57).

Chapter 4 is entitled “From Tribal Amirs to Royal In-Laws” and marks the transition from the prehistory of the Jalayir to the history of the Jalayirid dynasty. It is shown how the descendants of an early important follower of Hülegü Khan, called Ilga Noyan, rose to ever higher positions and finally were allowed to marry into the Chinggisid family.

The following chapters (5-8) offer a good narrative of events and background for the rise and history of the Jalayirid dynasty. The author makes clear that the dynasty won legitimacy in the framework of the Chinggisid ideology, that is, that they posed as legitimate heirs of the Ilkhans even though they were descended from Hülegü only by the female line, if at all. This is one of the major achievements of the book – the Jalayirids, and the Chobanids as well, did not depart from the principle that only descendants of Chinggis Khan were entitled to rule, only they enlarged the circle of persons who counted as descendants. Another main result is the description of the increasingly regional patterns of rule; Khorassan is not part of the picture at all, and southern Iran is mentioned only sometimes: the scene is set entirely in the west, including the Iraqi lowlands and Anatolia. The author also painstakingly sorts out the intricate lines of events, rivalries opposing first the Jalayirids

and the Chobanids, later the Jalayirids and other dynasties, including the Timurids, the Muzaffarids and later the Qara Qoyunlu.

In these chapters, Wing abandons the concept of “tribe” and “tribalism” nearly completely; the only tribal unit which plays any role at all in these parts are Oyrat groups apart from an isolated “Jalayir tribesman” who probably is tribal because he is identified as Jalayir in the source (p. 165). In the conclusion, Wing seemingly avows that he has been unable to explain the history of the Jalayirids in tribal terms: Shaykh Hasan (r. 1340-56) “was not a tribal leader, but someone intimately connected to the Ilkhanid court. If he commanded the allegiance of any tribal elements, it was not the Jalayirs but the Oyrats” (p. 196). He has never shown any Jalayirs in action as a group identified that way, and he has never really asked what the military basis of amirid leaders was in the Ilkhanate. He also stated, a bit earlier (p. 195), that in the period of dynastic struggles within the Ilkhanate (1282-95), “tribal identity or allegiance did not define the conflicts between different amiral factions”. Why then take the trouble to discuss tribalism as a social factor in Mongol Iran at all? In my view, it would have been better to leave out chapter 2 (“Tribes and the Chinggisid Empire”) and to cut out the concept of “tribe” altogether in the following parts. The substance of the argument and the value of the book would not have suffered at all. The subtitle “*Dynastic State Formation in the Mongol Middle East*” reflects very well what the book is about, and the “tribe” discussion rather muddles up the story.

Chapter 9, the last one, is devoted to concluding remarks and to a brief description of the legacy of the Jalayirids, mostly in terms of art (arts of the book) and architecture; Wing has used poetry as a source earlier.

In all, this is a solid dynastic history, and as mentioned above, it fills an important gap in the history of medieval Iran. Wing makes good use of his sources in this endeavour, and he quotes research not only in English, but also in other European languages, and to a certain degree also in Persian and Turkish. The bibliography is very helpful for anyone who wants to embark on research on the period, and there is a (relatively short) index (p. 224-8).

On the other hand, there are a number of flaws. This review has attempted to show that historians should be careful in their use of terms they borrow from social anthropology, and that even an author who sets out to show how tribalism turns into dynastic rule and devotes considerable effort to the discussion of the term can fail in this attempt and on the contrary can contribute to the opposite argument: “tribe” and “tribalism” are largely useless

and even counter-productive concepts in writing the history of Mongol Iran.

Conceptualisations of regional rule remain conventional: the Shirvanshahs are called “semi-autonomous rulers”, “significant regional rulers” and “nominally a vassal of the Ilkhanate” (p. 112) within four lines, and one page later (p. 113) the term “provincial governors” seems to include them. “Nominal vassalage” is mentioned again in a Qara Qoyunlu context (p. 155), and we never learn what the author understands “vassalage” to mean and what could be “nominal” about it.

Thus, the book is useful as a dynastic history. Readers who look for a readable presentation of events and for information about persons are well served. On other levels, there remains much to do.

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