
Review Essay

Bruno De Nicola, *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khātūns, 1206–1335*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. Paperback. vi + 288 pp. ISBN 9781474437356.

Anne F. Broadbridge, *Women and the Making of the Mongol Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Paperback. vii+ 341 pp. ISBN 9781108441001.

The recent studies of Anne F. Broadbridge and Bruno De Nicola are indispensable additions to Mongol history, as they explore the range of women's contributions to the empire as a whole. Their studies provide eye-opening rereadings of the extant sources, drawn from Arabic, Persian, Mongol, Chinese, Eastern Christian, and European traditions, to underscore women's integral engagement in the Mongol Empire and its successor states.

Organized into six chapters, De Nicola's overarching focus is on the non-static, transformative nature of women's experiences across the Mongol Empire, with an emphasis on the Ilkhanate in Iran between 1256 and 1335 and the lives of the *khātūns*, the higher class of women married into the Chinggisid family. De Nicola points to the various precedents of women's prominent roles in pre-Chinggisid Mongolia, which continued into the empire, leading to the rise of the empress regents of the mid-thirteenth century. These precedents are found in the Mongol foundation myth and in the early genealogical lineages of *The Secret History of the Mongols*. Historical precedents of female regency are also suggested to have been exported from the Qara-Khitai Empire in Central Asia, the eastern lands of Mongolia, where there was an established tradition of women's rule.

In the second chapter, De Nicola follows the political careers of Töregene Khatun, Oghul Qaimish, Sorghaghtani Beki, and Orghina Khatun in Central Asia. His study is an eye-opening revision of the general inattention towards the periods of interregnum between male rulers. De Nicola, in contrast, positions these women as key participants in the succession struggles and the tribal assemblies (*quriltais*), in which a ruler was elected. Töregene (d.1246), the widow of Ögetei Khan, for example, rose as regent, securing power for six years based on her complex use of diplomacy and reforms, in addition to the appointment of a woman, Fatima Khan, as her high counsellor (71).

De Nicola questions whether the tradition of female rule continued into the successor khanates. While noting patterns of continuity in the Chaghataid khanate in Central Asia, where Orghina Khatun reigned as regent from 1251–60, the situation in the Ilkhanate proved more complex. Female regency was not established in the central government, where the Mongols, a minority, gradually adapted to the customs of the sedentary population, undergoing acculturation, Islamization, and eventual centralization. The exception, the rule of Sati Beg (r.1339), is situated in the context of internal political strife, with no real power attached.

The context of the Ilkhanid provinces, in comparison, seems to have adhered to a greater acceptance of women's authority. De Nicola considers the cases of the Qutluq-khanids of Kerman, the Saljuqs of Rum, and the Salghurids of Fars, whose experiences varied under the rule of local dynasties of Turkic origin. The twenty-six year reign of Terken Qutluq Khatun (d.1282/3) of Kerman is contextualized as an extension of the dynasty's Qara-Khitai origins, whereas the Saljuq women of Anatolia are noted to have engaged in political decision-making, without holding official rule (105).

The last two chapters address the range of women's roles in the Mongol economy and religion. Central is the *ordos*, the royal encampments, which served as vital economic units for the accumulation of wealth, while serving as a space in which social, political, religious, and economic exchanges took place. De Nicola negates the perception that women were simply consumers of goods, discussing the various ways in which they dynamized the imperial economy, including trading ventures such as Sorghaghtani Beki's expedition to Siberia for silver (147). His study of the Ilkhanate highlights the transformative component of women's roles, as their economic power grew increasingly restricted, in the context of Ilkhan Ghazan's reforms to centralize power, which limited women's access to the allocation of taxes and the transmission of the *ordos*.

Religious activity was also extensive, based on the empire's contacts with various Eurasian religions, including Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Taoism. For the Ilkhanate, De Nicola provides an eye-opening discussion of how the process of Islamization and rapid spread of Sufism encouraged women's religious patronage in the Middle East, which bore similarities to the traditions of the Saljuq women. While details on the process of women's conversion to Islam remain unclear, with minimal evidence in the sources, women stayed highly active in religious affairs long after the fall of the Ilkhanate.

Complementing the comparative nature of De Nicola's study, focused on patterns of continuity and transformation, Broadbridge breaks down the specific roles to which women had access from the period between the 1160s and the Ilkhanate in Iran in the 1330s. The first of nine chapters is a thorough treatment of how marriage, childbirth, child rearing, daily work, and care of the *ordos* contributed to steppe society. This emphasis serves as a re-orientation from the traditional focus on the male-centered contributions to the formation of the empire.

Broadbridge further nuances our understanding of Chinggis Khan by looking at the logistical and economical support provided to him by the key women in his life. The second chapter is a critical reframing of his career, centered on the influence of his mother Hö'elün, who secured domestic stability in the face of harsh circumstances such as raids,

and his chief wife Börte, who was critical in giving her husband legitimacy and the ability to network through her respectable Qonggirat lineage (57).

While the secondary wives of Chinggis Khan are usually deemed even less important than Börte, Broadbridge examines their experiences to shed light on the nature of the Mongol conquests. More specifically, the junior wives, including the Kereit princess, Ibaqa, the Tatar sisters, Yisüi and Yisügen, and the Tangut princess, Chaqa, reveal the complex phenomenon of hostage-taking in steppe society, which, according to Broadbridge, proved much more difficult for women than men with access to military promotions. These wives remained hardly passive, developing multiple loyalties and engaging with networks of informants.

One of the most groundbreaking insights is found in the fourth chapter, which connects women's roles to the atomized army, succession, and imperial guard in charge of household and military duties. While scholars agree that Chinggis Khan made radical innovations to these systems, Broadbridge considers how marriages forged networks or confederations that directly impacted the composition of the army, determined who would be eligible to rule, and created a space for women to work with the newly formed imperial guard. Included are six tables with informative references on the commanders in the atomized army and nine family trees with the names from the tribes, such as the Ikires, Oirats, and Qonggirats, married into the Chinggisids (107).

Broadbridge further refines our knowledge of Mongol warfare by exploring the ways in which marriages integrated sons-in-laws into the military. The fifth chapter examines how the large-scale campaigns quickly incorporated the sons-in-laws, who were also expected to bring men with them. Campaigns against the Jin and Khwarzmshah Empires thus directly benefited from the large pool of fighters. The grand scale of the Mongol conquests also included the Chinggisid wives as critical advisors, informants, managers of the traveling camps, and even as combatants (137).

In a similar vein to De Nicola's analysis, the sixth and seventh chapters examine the prominent careers of Töregene, Sorghoghtani Beki, and Oghul-Qaimish. Broadbridge's treatment moves beyond their influence and resources to show how they were also instrumental in the division of the empire. The case of Sorghoghtani Beki, for example, reveals a mother's remarkable success of promoting her son Möngke as Great Khan, but which came at the devastating cost of purging their political rivals, including Oghul Qaimish.

In the eighth and ninth chapters, Broadbridge examines the growing dominance of the consort houses in the successor states, which resulted from the lack of imperial cohesion. She includes nineteen family trees on the leading members from the major and minor lines, such as the Qonggirats, Oirats, Kereits, and the newer consorts, the Jalayirids and Chobanids, which rose in power in the Ilkhanate. Patterns of consort behavior can be gleaned from her analysis of women, such as Chabi, the Qonggirat niece of Börte and wife of Qubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294), who advanced the interests of her consort house by securing offspring, developing close ties to Tibetan Buddhism, and lobbying her political interests (239).

Scholars and students alike will benefit from each work as they discuss women's fundamental contributions in the history of the Mongol Empire. Both studies do not

merely uncover a neglected history, but serve as a reorientation by looking beyond empire and conquest as exclusively male enterprises. Their questions also pave the way for future research, encouraging further discussions about the extent of women's cultural patronage in the Ilkhanate and the intersection of duties between wives and the imperial guard. ■

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