

## BOOK REVIEW

**Michal BIRAN, Jonathan BRACK and Francesca FIASCHETTI (eds.) 2020.**  
*Along the Silk Roads in Mongol Eurasia. Generals, Merchants, and Intellectuals.*  
Oakland, California: University of California Press. xv + 335 pp.

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The book under discussion is one of the major results of the ERC-funded project *Mobility, Empire and Cross-Cultural Contacts in Mongol Eurasia* conducted at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem between 2013 and 2017 and led by Michal Biran. Both of the other editors, i.e., Francesca Fiaschetti and Jonathan Brack, as well as most of the authors of the book, were researchers on or connected closely to this project that put Jerusalem on the map as one of the most important centres for the study of the Mongol Empire. The book's title suggests that this volume is situated at the intersection of two scholarly fields, both of which have witnessed fundamental development in recent decades, namely the history of the Mongol Empire and the study of the Silk Roads. The volume is already the second collection of biographical portraits published by this research group (Biran 2017), a genre familiar to and cherished by both fields (e.g. Rachewiltz et al. 1993, Whitfield 2015).<sup>1</sup> The book is addressed to two target groups, namely scholars and students, but admittedly designed to serve the appetite of the latter group (Biran 2018: 141). In accordance with this purpose, the system of transcription adopted aims to make reading easier. The volume includes an elaborate introduction and fifteen portraits of historical figures from the Mongol period belonging to three crucial and sometimes overlapping groups of agents: military commanders, merchants, and intellectuals. Two chapters (on Yang Tingbi by Mukai and Fiaschetti and on ʿĪsa Kelemechi by Kim Hodong) have been published earlier in Chinese and Korean respectively. Fifteen maps and numerous well-selected figures help to follow the various biographies, leading the reader to both well-known places and the most distant corners of Mongol Eurasia.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that, unlike the biographical collections concerning the Mongol period, the protagonists in Whitfield's book (which focuses on an earlier period of the Silk Roads, i.e., last quarter of the first millennium AD) are imaginary, but her narratives are based on real primary sources.

The fact that the emphasis of the book is rather on the Mongol Empire than on Silk Roads studies is clearly shown in the introduction. No separate sub-chapter is devoted to the Silk Roads and, aside from an opening summary of about two pages, we only find references to the Silk Roads in the Mongol period scattered across the introduction when required for a better understanding of the main topic, i.e. the Mongol Empire. In contrast to this, the Mongols and their empire are discussed in detail in two sub-chapters ('The united empire' and 'The Mongol commonwealth') over twelve pages. Considering the project's background and that of the authors, such a shift of emphasis is by no means surprising, but as the book is primarily aimed at student readers, a somewhat lengthier and more elaborate discussion of the history and evolution of the Silk Roads could have contributed to the otherwise very well structured introduction. The three editors give a comprehensive overview of how researchers see the Mongol Empire and its role in global history at the beginning of the 2020s. They introduce all the key topics (e.g., reasons for Mongol success, mobilization of resources, intercultural exchange, etc.) and concepts (e.g., *keshig*, *ortoq*, *yam*, *yasa* etc.) that are indispensable for understanding this historical period. Like all the book's chapters, the language of the introduction is lucid and readable. The authors neatly explain complex events and concepts, making the subject easily accessible for the readers.

Part one includes the biographies of six generals, a group that was obviously indispensable for the Mongol success and which played a preeminent role in Eurasian exchange. In the first chapter Florence Hodous introduces the family and career of the Chinese general Guo Kan, whose family were among the first to ally themselves with Chinggis Khan. Guo Kan himself was the third generation of his family in Mongol service. He had a preeminent role not only in the development of the Mongol warfare, through the involvement of artillery and siege warfare, but as a general in the western campaigns contributed significantly to the exchange of military technologies between East Asia and the Middle East. The biography of Baiju, Mongol conqueror of Anatolia, by Sara Nur Yıldız vividly illustrates the introduction of Mongol rule in the Middle East and the constant tension between Mongol military commanders and the civil administration during and right after the conquest period. It is also an excellent example of how dynastic struggles influenced the careers of individuals during the united empire era (ca. 1206–1260 AD). The first of the three female characters in the book – there is one in each section – is the Chinggisid Qutulun, daughter of Qaidu. Beside a reconstruction of the biography of the warrior princess, Biran offers an overview about Qutulun's 'afterlife': how her image influenced European culture in later centuries and her popularity in contemporary Mongolia. This study adds a new facet to our picture of the social roles of Mongol noblewomen. Aside from their participation in politics, trade or patronage of religious communities and artists, the chapter gives us an impression of how they could help the Mongols in war. Mukai and Fiaschetti's joint article about Yang Tingbi is one of two contributions to this volume where key stages are located along the maritime Silk Roads. The Chinese general and diplomat had a pioneering role in the Mongol exploration of maritime routes along the Southeast Asian coasts to India. Through his life, the authors demonstrate the complex process through which the Mongols built upon existing networks and technologies to exploit the lucrative long distance sea trade and how they connected their commercial interests tightly to their diplomatic endeavour. The biography of Sayf al-Dīn Qipchaq al-Manṣūrī brings the reader to the Mamluk-Ilkhanid frontier and conflict zone. Amir Mazor's essay gives examples of two common forms of military mobility in Mongol Eurasia: defection and captivity. Further, the author touches upon the intriguing question of ethnic identity and loyalty in the pre-modern Middle East. Vered Shurany depicts the biography of another Qipchaq general and his family in the service of the



Yuan dynasty. Their story highlights the role of the *semu* people and the significance of Qipchaq networks, first in the Yuan army and later in political life in China under Mongol rule.

The second part of the book includes four chapters about merchants and shows clearly how the Mongols capitalized on various talents of these most typical figures of the Silk Roads, employing them in various assignments alongside commercial agency. For example, Ja‘far Khwāja, one of the earliest Muslim supporters of Chinggis Khan, served the Mongols not only as a merchant, but also as envoy, spy, military commander, and administrator, playing a major role in the conquest of North China. John Giebfried tries to reconstruct the life and activity of Baldwin of Hainaut, a lesser-known actor of the early European sounding of the Mongols. Due to the scarce source basis about the life and his diplomatic mission to the Mongols of the once crusader Baldwin, the biography here is thinner and less detailed, instead accentuating the context, i.e., the evolution of the Black Sea trade and the revitalization of the steppe routes of the Silk Roads. The narrative of the second chapter on the maritime Silk Roads in the book goes in the opposite direction to Yang Tibi’s, namely from Mongol rule in the Middle East to China. As Matanya Gill shows, the Baghdadi merchant and entrepreneur Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ṭibī and his brother Taqī al-Dīn are excellent examples of the conventional picture of the so-called *ortoq* merchants, privileged business partners of the Mongol aristocracy. The article shows how they were able to use the opportunities raised by the unified imperial frameworks in Central and Eastern Eurasia, and how their success depended from the very beginning on ties to their patrons in the Ilkhanid elite. The last protagonist of the merchants’ section is Taydula, introduced by Szilvia Kovács. Taydula was the queen of the Jochid *ulus* and not a merchant *per se*. As Kovács outlines the contours of her life, however, it becomes clear just how she used her political influence and assets not only to support her Christian subjects and merchant partners but through direct investment in the Black Sea trade.

The third section deals with intellectuals and starts with probably the best-known personality discussed in the book, the historian, polymath and statesman of Ilkhanid Iran Rashīd al-Dīn. Alongside a brief biographical sketch, Jonathan Brack’s chapter concentrates on the presence of Buddhism in Iran under Mongol rule and Rashīd al-Dīn’s attitude towards its representatives and teachings. The author gives an insight into the cosmopolitan and competitive atmosphere of the Ilkhanid court, a vital stage in Buddhist-Muslim intercultural contacts and exchange. Yoichi Isahaya’s essay introduces the Daoist physician Fu Mengzhi, his mission in Mongol Iran and his ‘astronomical dialogue’ with the Muslim polymath Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī. The author shows how Mongol policies led to increasing knowledge about the others’ astral sciences in Mongol Iran and Yuan China, but how, nevertheless, the same elite’s attitude hindered the mixture or integration of the two traditions. Hodong Kim’s piece on the Christian ‘Īsa Kelemechi (‘Jesus the Interpreter’) illustrates how extraordinary language skills and knowledge in certain sciences (e.g., medicine and astrology) could provide prospects for an outstanding career in various positions (translator, diplomat or envoy) in Mongol service. ‘Īsa’s extraordinary life, from birth in the Middle East to geographical extremes in Europe and China, also demonstrates the unforeseen Eurasian mobility enjoyed by the agents of the Mongol ruling class. Bruno De Nicola introduces the biography of Pādshāh Khatun, a princess of the Qutlughkhanid dynasty (1222–1306) that ruled Kirmān in southern Iran. Like other women of the Mongol ruling class, she was deeply involved in the politics of the Middle East and actively supported Islamic scholars and institutions in Anatolia. What sets her apart from her contemporaries is that, according to the sources, she was herself a scholar and active as a poet. The last chapter of the book, by Or Amir, tells the story of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Akhawī, a Central Asian Sunni scholar who travelled for 25 years from Khujand through



Khawārazm and the Jochid *ulus* to Baghdad and Medina. Akhawī's biography gives the reader a unique insight into 14<sup>th</sup> century Islamic networks across Central and Western Asia and shows how new centres of Islamic learning emerged in the Chaghadaid Khanate and in the Volga region. Akhawī's life shows how overland trade routes contributed to the flow of people and learning in these networks, and Amir's essay sheds light on the content of Islamicate learning at that time.

A minor inaccuracy occurs in two separate parts of the book (p. 7 and p. 122), namely that Batu's great westward campaign is dated between 1237 and 1241, despite the standard dating of this being 1236 to 1242. Another point where a more precise framing would be desirable is in chapter eight under the title '*Shifting Silk Roads*' (pp. 165–166). As presented here, it appears there was no significant trade across the Pontic Steppe before the Mongol period, since they developed brand new routes in the Eurasian steppe region to the north of the conventional traces of the Silk Roads through Central Asia, Persia, and Mesopotamia to the Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, the so-called steppe roads from North China through the Inner Asian steppe zone to West Siberia predated the first blossoming of the commercial Silk Roads (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> cc. CE) with the spread of prestige goods granted through Xiongnu mediation (Honeychurch 2015). Later this steppe route (also called the 'Fur Road') did not cease to exist, but due to its distance from the sedentary civilizations remained less visible in the written sources (e.g. Kovalev 2005). Nevertheless, it seems certain that due to the development of infrastructure (such as the establishment of the postal system) and thanks to the framework of imperial rule, the significance of these exchange networks emerged in the Mongol period, especially at times when political conflicts in the Middle East hampered the trade along the so-called 'Oasis route'. Lastly, the inclusion of more original sources could further raise the value of the book. Apart from the edition and first English translation of Taydula's *yarligh* from 1354 (p. 204) the book only includes a short poem by Pādshāh Khatun (p. 282). Meeting the primary sources for the first time is a difficult, but vital, part of the university curriculum and as Kovács exemplifies here, a well-annotated translation of a primary source can add to the value of a biography.

Chronologically, the book as a whole covers the entire Mongol period (13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> cc.) and, geographically, almost every corner of the Empire, going even beyond that. In this respect chapters four and nine, focusing on the sea routes between East Asia and the Middle East, are especially causes for rejoicing, since the studies of overland and maritime Silk Roads are still mostly conducted separately. This comprehensive approach and the readability of the biographies makes the book as whole a valuable asset for teaching. As the experience of the author of this review has showed, single chapters can also be used to introduce important topics concerning Mongol Eurasia at seminars. This publication is not only a textbook for university students but also a contribution to research on the Mongol Empire. The new facets of female roles within the Mongol elite in chapters three, ten and fourteen add considerably to our knowledge, while strengthening researchers' earlier view that, in contrast to their male contemporaries, women in Mongol Eurasia had to be born into a noble family to pursue a glittering career. Most of the other protagonists of this book did not belong to the most prominent and well-known characters of the Mongol period but came from the second and third tiers of the elite, allowing the readers to gain a more nuanced understanding of the empire's diverse society. The fifteen chapters show how imperial frameworks enabled an unforeseen mobility in Eurasia in the Mongol period and outlines the patterns of this mobility. The three editors have achieved their aim, and their book will be of use to both scholars and university students. This publication will hopefully help to turn the attention of more colleagues and future colleagues to this developing field, where there nevertheless is still a lot to do.



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