

Book Reviews

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Women in Mongol Iran: The Khātūns, 1206 – 1335
By Bruno De Nicola

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De Nicola's book, *Women in Mongol Iran: The Khātūns, 1206 – 1335*, provides a look into royal women (khātūns) in Mongol Iran. He seeks to understand the role of the khātūns from the pre-imperial period ca. 1200 CE until the demise of the Ilkhanate ca. 1350 CE. Khātūn is an honorific title given to the wives of high-ranking members of the Chinggisid family (khāns). Previous scholarship consists of mainly short articles and chapters discussing the Mongol rulers and adding in their wives as an aside. The study of women in the Mongol Empire began in the 1970s

with a discussion of women both in the Mongol Empire as well as pre-Mongol Iran. In the 1990s, a few articles were published on women in Mongol China and in the medieval Islamic world. However, most of these articles and chapters dealt with only one area of the empire or one aspect of women's agency (i.e. economic or political). In the 2000s, a few dissertations were written on specific aspects of the *khātūns* (local non-Chinggisid women), gender in nomadic societies in Central Asia, and marriage practices between the Mongol Empire and Yuan China. De Nicola's book is one of a few monographs discussing the role of women and bringing together historical sources and previous research.

De Nicola also incorporates various sources in his analysis: Persian official chronicles, genealogical trees, historical accounts of the empire, regional histories, and accounts of religious personalities; Mongol and Chinese historical sources; European travelers journals, and Christian chronicles; and Arabic historical and travel sources. The combination of the various textual sources gives a view of the Mongol Empire both external and internal during the time-span this book discusses. These sources mention the *khātūns*, but no sources are written by females or are specifically about them, rather they are mentioned in connection with their husbands or sons. De Nicola does not engage much with gender theory, rather placing himself in the more textual, socio-historical and contextual analysis of primary material. He states that the theoretical approaches to women in the Islamic Middle East cannot be extrapolated onto the women of the Mongol Empire. He does acknowledge the masculine bias in his sources (i.e. histories written by men about men), and therefore most of the sources give a male perception of women. De Nicola acknowledges this bias and discusses the characteristics of the text and the author's background when introducing the books.

The book consists of an introduction followed by six themed chapters: women and politics from the steppes to world empire; regents and empresses: women's rule in the Mongol's world empire; political involvement and women's rule in the Ilkhanate; women and the economy of the Mongol Empire; and Mongol women's encounters with Eurasian religions. The book also includes two maps, eight genealogical charts, and eight coloured illustrations. By arranging the chapters thematically, De

Nicola is able to compare various periods and khātūns to gain a deeper understanding of their changing roles, economics, and religion. The maps and charts are helpful in understanding the spatial distribution of the empire at various points in history and linking the khātūns with their husbands and in the overall lineage of the Mongol ruling elite.

Before the unification of the Mongol Empire under Chiggis Khan (Ghengis Khan), women's in the Mongolian nomadic society played a crucial role in the formation of the empire and this role continued throughout the development and rise of the empire. De Nicola analyzes the women's role in pre-Chiggisid Mongolia by looking at the biographies of female ancestors and the Mongolian origin myth, which showed that women had a role as advisors and they performed ceremonial duties. However, these women were not recognized as rulers in their own right, and so De Nicola traces the development of Mongol female regency to either an internal development, or possibly an external influence from the Liao culture of China (ca. 1125 CE).

By analyzing the positions of four ruling women, De Nicola analyzes the khātūn's role in the Mongol Empire. Töregene Khatun (r. 1241–1246 CE), Sorghaghtani Beki (r. 1233–1252 CE), Oghul Qaimish (r. 1248–1251 CE), and Orghina Khatun (r. 1251–1261 CE) are discussed in detail focusing on the difference between their reigns. All these women came to power after the death of their husbands and ruled as regent for their sons. They took an active role in ruling, from naming counselors to negotiating the political conflicts between tribes. De Nicola's discussion of Orghina Khatun, who was a ruler in Central Asia, shows that female rulers existed both within the Mongol Empire as well as beyond. The agency enacted by these women sets up De Nicola's discussion of the political involvement of women in the Ilkhanate.

The agency shown by the early khātūns did not translate to the Ilkhanate where women's agency was confined to behind the scenes of power. This chapter discusses the lives of Doqуз Khatun, Qutui Khatun, Oljei Khatun, and Bulughan Khatun. These women of the early Ilkhanate, even though not rulers in their own right like the early imperial women, exerted vast amounts of power on the throne and succession processes of the Mongols.

They were trusted advisors, were able to gather wealth, and became kingmakers, using their political power to enforce the succession of their sons. De Nicola attributes this change in women's status to the rise of Islam in the Mongol court, which he discusses further in Chapter Five. By the end of the Mongol period, women were hardly mentioned in the written sources. Women in the later periods were agents for transferring legitimacy through marriage to different political factions. The end of the chapter discusses the differences between the khātūns in Kerman and those in Fars, both located away from the main capitals of the Ilkhanate.

Women in Mongol society were able to take part in the imperial economy through the administration of the ordo. The ordo could include property, cattle, servants, administration, and military groups. Khātūns were in charge of their own ordos, and as such they had economic autonomy from their husbands and sons. Larger ordos gave women larger political power, and women usually gifted their ordos to other women when they died. Since the khātūns were economically autonomous this allowed for them to raise their political standing, either when their husbands died or in succession discussions.

The khātūns had various religions through time, and these religious beliefs helped to shape the empire. Doquz Khatun was a Nestorian Christian, and as such Christians were more open towards the Mongol leaders in the beginning. When Hülegü's khātūns were brought to Iran, they started to convert to Islam. The conversion of Islam reached its height under Ghazan Khan (1295 CE). Women in the Islamic Ilkhanate had less autonomous power than before, and were decreasingly mentioned in the textual sources. Instead of ruling as regents, women were unofficial advisors to the khans. However, during the Islamic Ilkhanate women used their economic autonomy and political leverage to perform pious acts such as founding mosques, religious endowments, convents, hospitals and schools. These were usually activities reserved for wealthy men in Islamic society. Interestingly one of the women's roles of pre-imperial Mongol tradition was as the leaders of certain types of ritual acts. This seems to continue even when the women converted to other religions.

The final chapter gives De Nicola's concluding thoughts. "From their starting point as advisors to male chiefs in the Steppe, Mongol women would become regents and rulers of the empire; from being in charge of flocks and herds in the absence of their husbands, they would become possessors of considerable wealth, enjoying the freedom to practice their own religious beliefs whilst contributing to the religious policies of the empire" (De Nicola: 248). His use of various sources from Persian historiographies to Mongol and Chinese sources form a broad base on which De Nicola forms his arguments. He delves deeper into the material than previous authors and discusses the agency of the women across the Mongol Empire both geographically and temporally. However, at times, De Nicola's conclusions seem to include all women during this time period. His case studies and information are about the *khātūns*, but his broader cultural implications are stretched to include the entire population. For example, in the chapter on political involvement in the Ilkhanate, he states: "As we will see, women in the Ilkhanate exercised 'power' in a variety of forms... (p.91)." It is assumed he is talking about the *khātūns* and noble women, but this is not explicit. As research grows on this topic, it will be interesting to see the division in roles of the *khātūns* and other women in the society. De Nicola's book gives an accessible introduction to the history of Mongol *khātūns*, and creates a starting point for further study on women in the Mongol empire.